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Avicenna on Beauty

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to study the philosophy of Avicenna (980-1073), in order to identify his thoughts and reflections regarding aesthetics. We will try to analyze several texts in which he treated the notion of beauty. This analysis will allow us to compare the aesthetics of Avicenna with its main origins, namely Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism. Then, the detailed presentation of his aesthetic reflections will show us that his contributions to subjects relating to beauty, perfection, and aesthetic delight bear some originality which, despite the determining influence of Neoplatonism, has its own independent voice. The latter is the case, since these originalities are the results of a hybridization of two great philosophical schools, namely Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism.

Keywords. Avicenna, beauty, perfection, Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study concerns the philosophy of Ibn Sinâ, one of the philosophers, perhaps even the greatest philosopher in the history of Islamic civilization. Ibn Sinâ, known in the West by his Latinized name Avicenna, is the reference figure of Islamic philosophy. His work, translated into most Western languages, was the inexhaustible source for many centuries in both the Muslim and Christian West. Needless to say once more that scholastic thought was largely inspired by Avicenna's philosophy (see: Goichon [1979]).

The main question of this study concerns how ancient aesthetics have been transformed into a new conceptual configuration that is Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*). This question leads to another one, which is no less important: what are the modalities and the consequences of this transformation? In spite of the irrefutable convergences between Hellenic thought and Islamic philosophy, the thesis that we will support here will be to demonstrate that the latter has been able to create new conceptions which will continue to exist until the medieval philosophy.

In an exciting passage in his *Logique des Orientaux*, Christian Jambet remarks how Avicenna has played a role in the founding

and formation of philosophy both in the East and in the West: «Avicenna can be considered as the common origin of Western philosophy (where the subject of science is based) and Eastern philosophy (where it is the One as the subject triumphs). [...] He is the creator of a *total* thought, but divided, to the point that for the first time the foundations of *Western* philosophy appear, and those of *Eastern* philosophy» (Jambet [1983]: 72-73; highlighted by author)¹.

The movement of translation, which made available much of the Hellenic thought to the hands of Muslim thinkers, will introduce a number of notions today called “aesthetic” in the Hellenized Islamic philosophy. Here again the role of the philosopher is to adapt these notions to monotheism, and here we can see the “transplantation” of aesthetic conceptions of Greek origin into another land. Thus, for example, the Absolute Platonic Beauty is transformed into the Beauty of the Supreme Being and He diffuses it in the entire universe through a hierarchical emanation. This is how monotheism joins Neoplatonism.

This is why Oliver Leaman rightly recalls that «Neoplatonism had a lasting influence on Islamic aesthetics during the classical period» (Leaman [2007]: 7). It is indeed Leaman who reaffirms this contextual reality in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, where he indicates that «a great deal of Islamic aesthetics, like Islamic philosophy as a whole, is profoundly Neoplatonic» (Leaman [2005]: 446). This profound influence can be remarked from Al-Kindi, the philosopher of Baghdad in the 9th century, to Šadr al-Din Šîrâzî, an Iranian philosopher of the 17th century. It is obvious, however, that these neoplatonistic philosophies have developed in a land deeply imbued by the dogmas of Islam, whose first principle is the uniqueness of God (*tawhîd*). Any philosophy that claims to be “Islamic” is incorporated in one way or another into the inescapable principle of dogma.

2. AESTHETICS IN THE ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

There is a tendency according to which philosophy in the Islamic civilization was only a reduced copy of the Greek philosophy. Is this true when it comes to beauty? This is true to the extent that Islamic philosophy has largely been inspired by Greek philosophy. There are remarkable studies concerning the relations between Neoplatonism and Islamic philosophy. The originality of the present research could be the analysis of aesthetic thoughts of Avicenna, who was, it must be said, the heir of a neoplatonized Aristotle.

One of the main sources of Islamic philosophy is the pseudo-theology of Aristotle, a paraphrased translation of Plotinus’ *Enneads* IV-VI. Neoplatonic thought is not only highly rich in terms of beauty but also evocative of “aesthetic” problems. This is not a surprising fact, however, since Plotinus fits well into the tradition of Hellenistic authors, a tradition by which all philosophical thought begins with respect to the beautiful and its characteristics. This tradition influenced Islamic thought through the translation of *Enneads*.

Firstly, it must be remarked that one can not speak correctly of “the aesthetics of Avicenna”. Nowhere in his writings does he present a systematic theory on this theme or engage in an in-depth discussion of the beautiful. His work contains only scattered remarks on the subject. They concern above all beauty in its metaphysical sense. The definitions of beauty in Avicenna’s work testify to his interest in both transcendently intelligible beauty and sensible beauty. However, this division is not found as such in his writings. It is true that divine beauty is at the center of all his aesthetic conceptions. Avicenna always draws on the indivisibility of beauty and the good. When it comes to the Divine, Avicenna always claims beauty and the good to be indivisible. In view of his ideas, it seems necessary to contextualize Avicennian thought in order to avoid the anachronism that threatens this kind of research. It must therefore be known that the Necessary Being and its attributes form the foundation of Avicennian aesthetic conceptions.

¹ All the translation from Arabic and French are mine otherwise cited.

This is the reason why we will continue by examining the divine beauty, then we will try to illustrate the definition that Avicenna provides concerning beauty in general. But in order to have a sufficient knowledge of the genesis of the Avicennian aesthetics, we will have to evoke the philosophical origins in which his thought in general and his aesthetics in particular are rooted. Aristotelian and Plotinian theories of beauty are among the most important possible sources of Avicenna's theory of beauty. Finally, we will analyze Avicenna's own theory and show that these two great theories of antiquity could be summed up in form of a new individual theory in the Avicennian one.

3. AVICENNA AND THE QUESTION OF BEAUTY

Avicenna considers perfection as the principle of all being, including man. To be beautiful in this way is to be perfect. In order to apprehend the genealogy of the juxtaposition of beauty-perfection, we need to search for its roots: first, in Plotinian metaphysics, where they characterize the structure of the universe in a twofold movement, namely procession (*Enneads*, V, 2, 2) and conversion (*Enneads*, V, 2, 1); second, in Aristotelian thought concerning "accomplishment" in all beings and the role of the final cause as the most important cause among the three other Aristotelian causes (formal, material, motor) (*Metaphysics*, 1021b12; 1050a7-9).

These two approaches lead us to a double interpretation of the Avicennian aesthetic: on the one hand, the transcendental dimension of the beauty-perfection couple, which will be examined in terms of the movements of the procession and conversion; on the other hand, the immanent aspect of beauty-perfection as it was presented by Aristotle².

We will see that Avicenna provides a kind of hybridization between these two perspectives of the thought of antiquity.

It is first in chapter VII of the 8th book of the metaphysics of *Al-Šifâ'* (*The Book of Healing*) that we find the main elements of what we may call the "aesthetics of Being", the one that is formulated in a Neoplatonic perspective. Avicenna uses the same terminology in the 17th chapter of the second book of metaphysics of *Al-Nağat* (*The Book of Salvation*), as well as in the 12th chapter of his *Book of Genesis and Return*. We will first quote the text of *Al-Šifâ'* at length, then that of *Al-Nağat* and finally we will finish with the *Book of Genesis and Return*:

There can be no greater beauty or majesty than [the fact] that the quiddity (mahiyya) is purely intelligible and purely good, free from any deficiency (naqs), whether it be one (wâhida) according to all aspects. The necessarily existent therefore has pure beauty and brilliance and is the principle of the beauty of all things and the glow of all things. And [this] brilliance of all things is to be according to what they must be. What then of the beauty of what must be in the necessarily existing? (Avicenna [1978]: 106)

There can be no beauty or magnificence superior to that of a quiddity (mahiyya) purely intelligible and purely good, free from all aspects of imperfection (naqs), unique (wâhida) in all respects. The Necessary Being possesses Beauty and Pure Splendor (al-ğmâl wa-l-bahâ' al-mahd) and is the origin of all harmony, since all harmony occurs in the multiplicity of a composition (tarkîb) or a mixture and, thus, he created the unity (wahda) in its multiplicity. He is the principle of the beauty of all things and the magnificence of all things. The beauty of everything lies in being what it should be. What about the beauty of the One who is what he must be in the Necessary Being! (Avicenna [1985]: 281)

² According to Aristotle, beauty will also designate fulfillment or, to use a proper Aristotelian term, it will mean the "entelechy" of a being. From this point of view, a being which has not reached its end, its essential form, is therefore in a state of imperfection in relation to what it

can be. Finality, perfection and beauty will then be synonymous; in a passage of the *Parts of Animals*, it is clearly stated: «absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature's works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful» (645a25-26).

It is not possible for there to be any beauty or splendor superior to the fact, for a quiddity, of being purely intellectual, purely good, exempt from each of the modes of deficiency, one in every aspect. The necessary existence is therefore beauty, pure splendor, and it is the principle of all equilibrium. Every equilibrium is established in a multiplicity consisting of a composition or a complexion; he brings about unity in multiplicity. The beauty of everything and its splendor is for it to be such that it must necessarily be. How, then, will the beauty of what is such as it must necessarily be, in the necessary existence? (Avicenna [2002]: 16)

After this identification between the beautiful and the perfect, the basic idea of which is found among Neoplatonic philosophers, Avicenna strives to fill the gap that separates the absolute beauty from the beauty found here and now in the world of generation and corruption. The question of beauty, as it has been evoked in Avicennian metaphysics, is primarily a question arisen within the framework of the analysis of the beauty of the Necessary Being; a beauty that by definition is beyond all kinds of imperfections, since only He is what He must be. Otherwise put, it is a question about a “substantial” beauty where the being, the essence, the good and the beautiful overlap: His beauty is neither accidental nor the result of any harmony, convenience, clarity etc. for in Him being and essence are not divided. The Necessary Being is therefore a *perfectum esse*. The Supreme Being, in fact, is eternally beautiful, while the beauty of earthly things is mutable and corruptible. The divine beauty neither increases nor decreases.

4. AVICENNA’S AESTHETIC TERMINOLOGY

The aesthetic reflections of different philosophers, from Plato to our time, gave rise to an universe of terms and expressions forming what we call today the “aesthetic discourse”. As mentioned before, being influenced by both Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism Avicenna’s aesthetic terminology could be viewed as a link between the West-

ern aesthetic discourse and the ancient thought. Nevertheless, it is a terminology reworked and transplanted into a new intellectual context of which Avicenna was one of the founders. This terminology has deeply influenced Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologica*, I, 39, 8) and we can trace its presence up to to the early modern reflections on aesthetics.

In the previously quoted excerpts from Avicenna’s various works, in which he attempts to present his thought with regard to Divine Beauty, we have seen the frequent occurrence of certain terms that might be considered “aesthetic”: the terms *i’tidâl*, *bahâ’* and *ḥayr* of Neoplatonic origin and, as we shall see shortly, *tartîb* and *nîzâm* of Aristotelian origin (*Metaphysics*, 1078a36). The first three terms will exist in one way or another in medieval Western thought, especially in Thomas Aquinas. Obviously, beauty in Avicenna or Thomas Aquinas has an inseparable connection with luminous phenomena (*Summa theologica*, I, 39, 8), a connection that has resulted in a kind of aesthetics of light that takes root in the depth of human thought for which the metaphysics of Plato is the most remarkable example.

I’tidâl

The notion of equilibrium (*al-i’tidâl*), close to that of ‘μέσος’ among the Greeks and Aristotle in particular, is undoubtedly one of the key concepts of the philosophical thought of several Muslim philosophers. With regard to ethics and politics, this evidence is quite visible. The wise man, in fact, defines himself as someone who respects the balance and the happy medium in all circumstances. Avicenna has always insisted on the need for balance in all human action. At the end of the metaphysics of *Al-Šifa’* he devotes a chapter to this subject. He states that justice is a “happy medium” and that the virtues are:

of three kinds: the disposition of [right] middle (al-tawasut) for the concupiscible, as the pleasure of marriage, of food, of the garment of rest as well as other sensible or imaginative pleasures. The middle

disposition in all irascibles like fear, anger, oppression, pride, hatred, jealousy; and the middle disposition in the prudential [virtues]. At the head of these virtues are temperance, wisdom, and courage; together they are justice (al-'idâlat). (Avicenna [1978]: 188-189)

In addition, balance and harmony are repeatedly considered as the constituent elements of beauty, either in music or in poetry. What is the origin of this conception and towards which goal is it oriented? One of the most widely used terms in Islamic thought to describe the noblest virtue is undoubtedly the word “*i'tidal*”, which is translated into balance, moderation, temperance, middle ground and so on. The root “*a.d.l*” means righteousness, honesty, and the verb “*adala*” to adjust, balance, equate, hence “*adâlat*”, justice. The happy medium is indeed a divine gift to those who have submitted themselves to the divine order and the Truth. The equilibrium for Avicenna does not result from a resemblance to any idea, it is rather immanent in what is equilibrium. In other words, equilibrium occurs “in” (*fi*) the multiplicity (*katrah*) and not imposed from the outside to a composition. Being beautiful as a composition is therefore a self-sufficient structure that produces its own balance and stands on its own. Hence, the aesthetic pleasure occurs through the proportion and balance inherent in an object. Thomas Aquinas said it well: «sense takes pleasure in properly proportioned things» (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1, 5, 4, ad. I).

The notion of proportionality in medieval thought has a conceptual familiarity with that of Muslim thinkers. This notion, moreover, «is the most widespread aesthetic notion in all antiquity and during the Middle Ages» (Eco [1956]: 89). But beyond this undeniable aesthetic significance, Umberto Eco rightly asserts that this notion was above all a «metaphysical principle» (*ibidem*) and that Plato and Aristotle give it a vast and universal scope. This is the reason why Eco specifies that «the *proportio* is presented to us, in the first place, as ontologically constitutive of existing things, and it is therefore in these strictly objective manifestations that we must first identify it» (*ivi*, 100). Pro-

portion is a transcendental principle, insofar as what exists, by the very fact of having existence, is proportionate.

Bahâ'

One of the most common terms in the Arabic language for the beauty or essential qualities of beauty is probably the word *bahâ'*. It could be translated as: beauty, splendor, glow, magnificence, resplendissement, etc. In the Neoplatonic terminology, the word “*baha'*” will come closer to the brightness and the luminous effects, whether divine, intellectual or physical.

This idea of clarity and splendor exists in the Qur'an, light being quoted many times, and even the Book has been described as light (64: 8). And it is in the Book that God presents himself as “*Nûrun 'alâ Nûr*”, “Light on Light” (24: 35). Scholastic philosophy, on the other hand, bears the sign of the thought of Pseudo-Denys when it comes to glow and its relation to Beauty. In his *De Divinis Nominibus*, he associates the Light, the Beauty and the Truth with the names of God, because it is He who confers beauty to all things, it is He who offers them harmony and clarity (*De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. IV).

Hayr

When the author of *Al-Nağat* connects the absolute good (*hayr mahd*) with that which is “devoid of any kind of imperfection”, he associates the good with the perfect. In fact the good-beautiful-perfect triad is pivotal to the Avicennian conception of beauty. Thus everything is “good” as far as everything is perfect. The perfection of a thing is realized by its form. Hence the inclination towards form is the inclination towards the end. Avicenna envisages a rather synthetic conception in which the good and the beautiful are identified in the actualization of a being by its form. It could be therefore possible to deduce that the ultimate perfection of each being will only be attained by the identification of the beautiful and the good.

Tartīb, Niẓâm, I'tidâl

Aristotle explains that order, symmetry, and limit are the most essential elements of beauty, and since they are impeccably found in mathematics, then the beautiful *par excellence* will be the mathematical beautiful. This consideration was taken up in the metaphysics of *Al-Šifâ'*, where Avicenna declares that «mathematical objects are not separate from the good and that, because in themselves they possess a large part of organization (*tartīb*), order (*niẓâm*) and harmony (*i'tidâl*). Each of them is according to what it must be and that is the good of all things (*ḥayr kull šay'*)» (Avicenna [1978]: vol. II, 68). The first part of this quotation clearly shows the influence of Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 1078a36); but what interests us more is the last sentence, which shows that Avicenna is trying to build his own theory of beauty and perfection.

If we compare these remarks with the passages already quoted above from the metaphysics of *Al-Šifâ'* (VIII, 7) and *Al-Nağât* (II, 17), we find that Avicenna always tries to remain faithful to his conception of perfection as being *a priori* for all beauty. It is a conception, once again, that we do not find as such either in Aristotle or in Plotinus, because it particularly pertains to Avicenna's definition of the beauty. Furthermore, this terminology shows that he has changed the terms used by Aristotle in *Metaphysics*.

“Organization” (*tartīb*), which can also be translated as “arrangement”, and “harmony” or “equilibrium” (*i'tidâl*) are new terms that Avicenna uses instead of Aristotelian “συμμετρία” (*symmetria*) and “ὠρισμένον” (*horismenon*), but he keeps “τάξις” (*taxis*) translated as *al-niẓâm*. Furthermore, he says that a thing is good when it is according to what it should be. It is here that the thought of Aristotle, seen through a Neoplatonic perspective, is clearly presented. For in the relevant passage of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1078a36), the philosopher does not demand that something must become something else to accomplish beauty. Mathematical beings are beautiful because they are supposed to have the main criteria of beauty,

namely “συμμετρία”, “ὠρισμένον” and “τάξις” (*Metaphysics*, 1078a36).

It is, therefore, an Avicennian hybridization of the theory of Aristotelian actualization and the doctrine of the double movement of procession-conversion of Plotinian origin. For Avicenna, in fact, perfection is in a way the *a priori* of the definition of beauty. It is an original definition and yet it fits into the tradition of Aristotle's Neoplatonic commentaries. It is a conception of beauty that is not found *as such* neither in Aristotle nor in Plotinus' *Enneads*.

5. THE DEFINITION OF BEAUTY

The first definition appearing in *Al-Šifâ'* is limited to the attributes of the Necessary Being, while the second, that of *Al-Nağât*, is addressed to all kinds of beauty. Thus far we have seen that for Avicenna the question of beauty arises first and foremost in his discourse on the attributes of the Necessary Being, which is the most beautiful and the most brilliant of all beings. Following this analysis, he is interested in beauty in general but always in correlation with the Beauty of Being. This interest manifests itself both in *Al-Šifâ'* and in *Al-Nağât*. We will see how he evokes the question of the beautiful to testify to the originality of his aesthetic thought.

Avicenna seems profoundly influenced by the aesthetic thought of Al-Fârâbî (*On the Perfect State*, II), for whom the beauty, glow and magnificence in each existent consist in its existence in the best way and in reaching its last perfection. This “perfectionist” conception remains at the heart of the Avicennian aesthetics and thus forms a hybridization between Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism. But before turning to Avicenna's thought about beauty, we need to understand what he means by perfection. It is in the metaphysics *Al-Šifâ'* that one should seek the answer: «perfection (*al-tamam*) is harmony, determination (*al-tahdîd*), and order» (Avicenna [1978]: Vol. II, 47).

It is in order to explain the properties of mathematical questions that Avicenna proposes this

definition of perfection because, having these three qualities, they will serve as examples of perfection. But the idea comes from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which, as we have seen, the philosopher uses these three properties to present the parameters of the beautiful. But in order to better understand Avicenna's aesthetics and his viewpoints about the beautiful, we need to go back to Greek philosophy to discover the common thread that connects the Avicennian philosophy to antiquity. As we have already pointed out, Avicenna's explanation is a part of his debate on transcendental beauty and through which he proposes a rather surprising definition of beauty as we shall shortly find out why.

In *Al-Nağāt* Avicenna states that «the beauty (*ğamāl*) and magnificence (*bahâ'*) of everything lies in being as they should be» (Avicenna [1985]: 281-282). It could also be translated as: «the beauty (*ğamāl*) and magnificence (*bahâ'*) of everything is to be according to what they must be» or «beauty (*ğamāl*) and glow (*bahâ'*) of everything is that everything is as it should be». But, precisely, how is it that one thing is what it must be? Alas! Avicenna does not specify it. This lack of precision has allowed us to endeavor to reconstruct what he might possibly intend from this definition. It is interesting to note that, according to Umberto Eco, Thomas Aquinas also believes that

the beauty of a thing is identified with its perfection, with the fullness of its being. The coefficient of perfection is the transcendental norm of proportion, which makes the thing a structured organism following an order. In its purely formal aspect, the perfect thing is complete and proportionate: it needs nothing more. (Eco [1956]: 133)

It seems that Avicenna, as a peripatetic philosopher, does not have a real interest in Plato's "idealism" of the beautiful. Thus he always tries to stay within the framework of a Neoplatonized Aristotelianism. This is precisely the originality of his doctrine of the beautiful, since it is based on the Aristotelian theory of the accomplishment of being, but at the same time it combines it with Neoplatonic notions, in order to harmonize the

two great "idealist" and "realistic" approaches to Hellenic thought.

This is a theory that appropriates the Aristotelian idea of perfection, but at the same time applies it on a completely different ground. Aristotle, as we have just seen, does not directly evoke the link between the beautiful and the perfect. Avicenna is moving towards a perspective in which one can witness the interweaving of two streams of Hellenic thought. On the one hand Aristotelism, on the other hand Neoplatonism. It would seem possible to interpret Avicenna's view on the beautiful through two different approaches, those that were in the time of Avicenna largely crossed through the neoplatonic comments of Aristotle.

Could there be any affinity between Plotinian theory of beauty and the Avicennian definition of beauty? The quick answer would be affirmative, but with some reservations. Firstly, this affinity only manifests itself in the description of the One (Plotinus) and the Necessary Being (Avicenna). In other words, the unicity (*wahda*) is at the center of both the Avicennian conception of the Necessary Being and the Plotinian metaphysics of the Beautiful. Secondly, Avicenna, unlike Plotinus, never evokes the notion of imitation or mimesis of the Form of the Beauty. In order to grasp the originality of the Avicennian definition of beauty, we will deepen the notion of perfection and we will try to show that this notion has two different origins, namely Aristotelian accomplishment and the Plotinian procession-conversion.

The general ground on which Avicenna develops his aesthetic is to frame the beautiful in the principle of actualization. Therefore, what is in a state of power always has the possibility of moving towards its accomplishment, its actuality. The system is not closed and each being has the possibility of perfecting his true being, either of his interior or *ab extra*. But the beautiful as an accident of the being of things is realized all the better in a movement towards perfection. In short, from this point of view, becoming *beautiful* is becoming *actual*.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF AVICENNA'S DEFINITION OF THE BEAUTIFUL

Having studied the Avicennian conception of beauty in its metaphysical context, we will try to examine some results that can be drawn from it. Primarily, we should recall once again that according to Avicenna the beauty of all things lies in *being as they should be*. This definition, which is specific to Avicenna, shows that beauty depends on *becoming*: in other words, for there to be beauty, the object must become what it must become.

From this point of view, the beautiful is not an immutable and fixed property, as it is always a quality to reach. Since Avicenna affirms that the beauty of everything lies in an accomplishment, he suggests that beauty is a property that belongs to every thing, the idea that we could call the "relativity of beauty". This relativity naturally requires a perfection which, in turn, occurs in a temporal process. At this point we should analyze the direct and implicit consequences of these two characters of the beautiful.

7. THE RELATIVITY OF THE BEAUTIFUL

Unlike Plato, who defended the unchangeable and unchanging idea of the beautiful³, Avicenna discards any idea of a beautiful unique for everything. The beautiful thus becomes a property relative to each entity in the world. There would not be a unique and yet sharable beauty for any object. Beauty for a marble block has nothing to do with beauty for a tulip or a poem. Everything has its own beauty and this is the point at which Avicenna's Neoplatonism manifests itself, this beauty will be attained in a conversion to the ultimate perfection.

But how is it that we realize that something has become what it should become? In other words, according to what criteria are we able

³ «First of all, it is ever-existent, and neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes [...] it grows neither greater nor less, and is affected by nothing» (*Symposium*, 211a-b).

to say that something has reached its ultimate perfection? It seems Avicenna accepts what in today's language of philosophy may be called a sort of "subjectivism"⁴. For to designate a thing as being beautiful, there must be a thinking subject capable firstly of discerning the perfection from imperfection and, secondly, of appreciating the degree of attainment of perfection, which is, after all, the very beauty of the thing. It is obvious that beauty is above all a human issue. This does not mean that without man there can not be beauty, but the idea is that the beautiful is a human "invention" for discerning, distinguishing, separating, in short categorizing certain things in a "highly valuable" category. Thomas Aquinas who, in his *Summa theologica* (I, 91, 3), supports the fact that the beautiful belongs to man and that other living beings have no understanding of the beautiful: «*Solus homo delectatur in ipsa pulchritudine sensibilium secundum seipsam*» (only man is able to delight the sensible beauty in itself).

The originality of the Avicennian conception of the beautiful remains in the fact that it leaves open, even implicitly, the way of individual appreciation of the beautiful. It is obvious that for him it is in relation to the distance between the thing and its Good that one distinguishes and appreciates the beautiful. It is a question of a ladder – to return to Plato's *Symposium* – which has several stages starting from evil (pure material without form and ugly) to the Good (the ultimate perfection, Beauty). Each level has an ontological value specific for it, a value determined in relation to the Good, the latter being the first / last link of the hierarchies of beings.

Man therefore always evaluates beauty in relation to the thing concerned, to the perfection it can acquire, to the distance that separates the thing from its Good. This is how beauty is defined *in relation to* something other than itself. The appreciation of beauty is therefore relative to the image that each individual has of perfection which is the ultimate goal of all beauty.

⁴ That is the beauty is not an objective quality but, as it were, it is in the eye of the beholder.

Even ontologically, the perfect precedes the beautiful. That is why perfection is even more universal than beauty. However, at this stage a question emerges: does perfection bring beauty? Conversely, does beauty require perfection? To avoid the trap of the vicious circle, perhaps it is better not to integrate them into a succession scheme. The overlap of the perfect and the beautiful would be the successful representation of this interaction between the perfect and the beautiful. The perfect and the beautiful can be ontologically one and the same, while the distinction between them is an epistemological necessity. Beauty is the affair of the senses, of sensibility; the perfect, on the other hand, is connected with knowledge. But there is yet another element in the “perfectionist” conception of beauty to consider, namely time. For the process of accomplishing beauty to take place, it takes time.

8. THE TEMPORALITY OF THE BEAUTIFUL

When the beautiful and the perfect are apprehended as two aspects of the same reality, a third element is essential, namely time. Time is the link that connects, in a way, beauty and perfection. In other words, the beauty of a being is realized in the horizon of time, it is therefore temporal. The beautiful as a metaphysical concept is timeless, while the perfection constitutes temporally a way of which one of the hoped ends is the beauty.

In order to achieve a transcendence from the physical to the metaphysical and vice versa, we need an intermediary, a relay that approaches these two dimensions of human thought. This link that facilitates this approach is time. *Movement*, as the most essential element of the physical world, and the concept as the foundation of all metaphysical thought are jointed through time. The metaphysical concept of the beautiful, or what one would call after Plato the Idea, the Form of the Beautiful, is universal and timeless. This concept, however, manifests itself one way or another in order to make itself known. This making-knowing of the Idea of Beauty is realized, among other ways, in the work of art. This realization (we could

think of the etymology of this word: *res* in Latin) occurs in the physical world; then it would be the *temporalization of the beautiful*.

Perfection then understood as a process of accomplishment passes through several relays. There is not a sudden, total improvement; there is only a development towards perfection. But the beauty that comes with every stage of perfection is different from another stage. Thus the conception of beauty is relative to perfection. But this reciprocal relationship does not stop there. The perfect to be known needs an ostensible sign recognizable by everything and for all. It is for the same reason that in most religions the gods have been imagined as both the most perfect and, therefore, the most beautiful. They needed a sign, a mark, a simple, universal index and, paradoxically, to be profoundly human to address mortals quickly and easily. And what is more powerful and more enduring than beauty? So the medium itself becomes a message.

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