

***Beauty* as seen by Plato and Aurelius Augustine and the Arts of the 20th Century - A Hermeneutic Approach**

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From Pythagoras's perspective, the greatest wisdom of all is the number and, in the second place, the one who gave names to all things. Thus, starting from the Pythagorean philosophy and his concept of beauty as proportion (*symmetria*) and measure (*metristes*), the first part of this study focuses on Plato's concept of beauty, who for example in his dialogue *Philebus* declares that "keeping measure and proportion is always a thing of beauty". Likewise, there shall also be revealed Aurelius Augustine's concept of beauty, as it is coming out of his vast work, since his writing *De pulchro et apto* has been lost. The last part of the study refers to the abstract art of the 20th century and I shall follow the configuration of the concept of beauty, decrypting the influence of the antiquity and the elements of originality.

From the Pythagorean perspective, the world is mathematically built and harmony is an attribute of the universe, a mathematical, numeric disposition, depending on number, measure and proportion. Harmony and the right proportion (*symmetria*) are seen as an objective attribute of things. The mathematic principles are those of the entire being, the numbers are the elements of all things and the whole universe is narrowing down to number and harmony. Harmony is the unity of multiplicity and confusion and the consensus of diversity, and order and measure are beautiful and useful, while disorder and disproportion are ugly and harmful. Order, regularity and the finite (the finite character) corresponded to the rational (the intelligible), the good and the beautiful.

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The Pythagoreans also created the concept of contemplation, which refers both to beauty and truth. According to Diogenes Laertius (VIII, 8), Pythagoras compares life to a festive gathering where some come to take part in the competition, some to sell goods, but the greatest men are spectators, “the same in life, some men have a slavish disposition and are born hunters after glory and fortune, while philosophers are the seekers after the truth” (ibid: 8).

In Plato’s philosophy, this Pythagorean doctrine of measure and proportion appears rather late. In the dialogue *Philebus*, Plato asserts that measure (*metriotes*) and symmetry (*symmetria*) “are beauty and virtue all the world over”. The essence of beauty is order (*taxis*), measure and proportion, consonance and harmony. In other words, we distinguish a Pythagorean concept of beauty and, on the other side, Plato’s own concept of beauty. This should be connected to the theory of ideas, of souls and of the ideal state. In the dialogue *Symposium*, Plato considers that “*Only in the contemplation of beauty is human life worth living!*” Plato discovers his originality in the concept of beauty, by placing it on a transcendental level, the idea of beauty is greater than any power of comprehension. He praises the everlasting beauty which encompasses the attributes of Parmenides’ being. It is neither born, nor dying; it does neither grow nor is it partially beautiful or partially ugly; it is absolute, singular in itself, unique, everlasting, all beautiful things partaking of it” (210 e – 211 d).

The idea (perfect) of beauty that we have contemplated at a certain moment, knowledge being an act of remembering (*anamnesis*), is carried in our souls and it is the measure of the beauty of things. Plato places the beauty on the same level with other supreme values, such as the truth and the good. In his vision, divinity has the attribute of beauty. “*Godliness is beautiful, wise and good in all its appearances*”.

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Following in the steps of Plato, Augustine focuses on the notion of divine beauty. On the one side, there is an ephemeral and relative beauty, and on the other side, there is the supreme beauty which is absolute and everlasting, that is to say, the perfect, supersensitive beauty. Beauty itself is the name of God, a supreme beauty that transcends the beauty of the world.

Augustine is also influenced by Pythagoras' concept of beauty, by the correlation of three ideas: measure (*modus*), form (*species*) and order (*ordo*). His aesthetics is based on the idea of number and especially, of rhythm, which for Augustine is first rank, he widens its meaning. Rhythm is conceived as the source of all beauty. There are different types of rhythm: visual, corporeal, spiritual, of memory, of phenomena, as well as the everlasting rhythm of nature. Beauty is related both to equality and to contrast, this way Augustine approaches Heraclites' perspective. The beauty of the world consists of the opposition of contrasts. The beauty of all things considered as a whole is made of antitheses, namely, of contrasts. Likewise, Augustine distinguishes between the beautiful and the proper (*aptum, decorum*).

The idea of rhythm also exists in the experience of beauty, Augustine distinguishing between five types of rhythm: the rhythm of sound, of perception, of memory, of actions and of intellect. The contemplator must rise to the level of the contemplated object. Besides the innate inclination to beauty, he must detach from the sphere of the useful, for things to reveal their beauty.

In conclusion, we may say that Augustine was overwhelmed and fascinated his entire life by the beauty and the greatness of the universe and especially by the divine beauty.

The last part of the study refers to the abstract art of the 20th century. The Cubism is an important early 20th century artistic movement, which

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develops in the spirit of the cult of form and introduces mathematical principles, cumulating efforts of methodical knowledge of the visible world. Picasso's 1907 work *The Young Ladies of Avignon* is considered the first cubist painting. According to Gleizes, painter and theoretician of the movement, "Everywhere Cubism strips forms of their transient reality, of the picturesque and puts them in their geometric purity, equilibrates them in their mathematical truth". With the representatives of Synthetic Cubism we can notice the strictly geometric compositions, the loss of the connection with reality; they are aspiring to the essence of things.

In 1911, Wassily Kandinsky formulates in his work *The Spiritual in Art* the basic principles of abstract art, based on some background considerations: "The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. The lower the segment the greater it is in breadth, depth, and area". In his vision, the artist is a priest of beauty. "(...) nevertheless, this beauty is to be sought only according to the principle of the inner need, and can be measured only according to the size and intensity of that need. That is beautiful which is produced by the inner need, which springs from the soul". Beauty is understood, even in its most intangible form, as everything that refines and enriches the spirit. Kandinsky gives an example from painting. Every colour has an inner beauty, because every colour produces a corresponding spiritual vibration and every vibration enriches the soul.

Cézanne, the representative of the first Cubist phase (1907 – 1909), considers that in nature everything is shaped after three fundamental forms: the sphere, the cone and the cylinder. Here, at this point, he "meets" the Pythagorean philosophers for whom the contemplation of geometric numbers helps the purification of the souls. Which leads us to the conclusion that Pythagoras, Plato and Augustine are more current than ever.