

# BY WAY OF MORAL BEAUTY

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THREE INCIDENTS LIE behind this article. The first two I recount below. The third, prompted by these events, was a reading of *Via Pulchritudinis* (The Way of Beauty) published by the Pontifical Council on Culture in 2006. In the light of these, I would like to offer some reflections. They converge in the experience of moral beauty.

## *Softly Subversive*

Thomas Buergenthal is an American judge at the International Court of Justice in the Hague. In his memoir *A Lucky Child*, he tells of his childhood spent in the Polish ghetto, a labour camp and then in Auschwitz as a ten year old. He recounts one of the events that still haunt him. A group of Czechs trying to escape are caught and, once in the hands of the Gestapo, sentenced to death. The gallows are set up in front of the barracks and the Germans force the prisoners to act as hangmen. Reviewing the book, Jason Steger captures the incident with one prisoner who

...finds his hands shaking so much he can't handle the rope; the condemned man turns to him kisses his hand and eases his head into the noose. It outrages the Gestapo officer, who boots away the chair on which the wretched man stands. But it is an act that gives the prisoners a sense, however small, of putting one over their captors.<sup>1</sup>

The courageous yet gentle sensitivity of the man in the face of death towards the distraught 'executioner' is both moving and admirable. The scene's resonance, its example, the mystery behind the prisoners' courage—all affected Buergenthal profoundly. What stood out, in retrospect, was its subversive nature. He points out:

The dignity and humanity the young prisoner

demonstrated moments before his death—and the disdainful refusal of the other condemned men to plead for their lives—no doubt served over time to reinforce my conviction that moral resistance in the face of evil is no less courageous than physical resistance, a point that has unfortunately been frequently lost in the debate over the lack of greater Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

## *Hope in Horror*

The second incident occurred in Perth in June 2010. A friend sent this email. I quote it as written, to capture best its immediate impact on the audience.

Last night, my sister-in law rang and asked me to accompany her to Immaculée Ilibagiza's address, the woman who survived the Rwanda massacre by spending three months in a shut toilet room (3 feet by four) with eight other women—while she overheard her tribe being hacked to death.

The University of Notre Dame hall (where she spoke) was packed to overflowing (over a thousand people came). People even sat outside in the cold to listen.

She was riveting. In a humble heavily accented voice, she told us how she taught herself to speak English while trapped in the toilet so that she could tell the world what God said to her if she were to survive. 'I asked God to show himself whether he existed.'

God did—by way of the soldiers who hunted to kill her not opening the most obviously closed door in the house -where they were hiding!

God is real. He hears me when I speak. He answers me. I am not special. I am no different than you. I could not stop hating the rebels, but I surrendered to God and God showed me how to love them. I saw that they were my friends

and they didn't know what they were doing.

God asked me to forgive the killers (they killed her family and every single person in the village and destroyed her home, so her whole life was annihilated) and tell people we are here for a short time to love and forgive.

She went back to her village with joy and hugged the man who had killed her brother. She was shy but full of strength in what she had to say and had a great sense of humour about God's ways.

She communicated her suffering with extraordinary articulateness. At times, she may as well have been reading from a textbook on a pattern of call to mission.

During her ordeal, she understood what the words the apparition of Mary of Kibeho meant, she argued with God, she suffered a kind of melt-down, she was restored by slowly reciting the Rosary in her heart twenty-seven times a day, she prayed the Lord's prayer slowly omitting 'forgive our trespassers' so that she would not lie to God as she felt God was closer to her than to herself. Her main request was asking God to kill her enemies- until she came to a state of surrender, then God began to act in her.

The few people whom I've spoken to about her address expressed what I felt—she spoke for two hours but it flew by and it was as if she'd only just begun and we wanted to hear more, much more...<sup>2</sup>

### *Moved by What Matters to Us*

In using these stories in a seminar for school staff, over two hundred were engrossed in the hearing as I was in the telling. Why is that? We are drawn into them because they are human interest stories. Moreover, they tell of ordinary people doing extraordinary things faced by the most degrading and repellent settings of evil. Despite differences in taste and temperament, what binds us together emotionally as we hear, tell or read these incidents? We are *moved* by them. They are stories not only about goodness but about something



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beautiful.

Charles Taylor reminds us that it is through our emotions that we become attached to those great goods that inspire our lives. We accept such overarching values because we are affected or moved by them. The moral quest begins here—being drawn to value certain goods and states. Taylor suggests that, without emotions, we 'become incapable of understanding any moral argument at all.'<sup>3</sup> Von Balthasar brings a further perspective to this. It is beauty that preserves the connection between truth and goodness. It is beauty that ensures the attractiveness, the desirability of the good that moves us and hence our moral response is awakened.

In hearing or reading these two stories, there is aroused, as with a work of art or the experience of creation, an interior emotion which 'silently arouses astonishment and leads to an "exit from the self", an ecstasy.'<sup>4</sup> Authentic beauty tends to lift us out of ourselves, to touch us in such a way that we are moved from ordinary, routine existence (time flies, time stops, we want to hear more) towards something that is more than oneself. It is a moment of self-transcendence. But, I would suggest, in these instances, it is a movement of *moral* self-transcendence. How is that so?

### *Moral Beauty*

Psychological research indicates that moral beauty has the unique capacity to arouse the moral emotion of *elevation*. When human beings are observed demonstrating moral virtues

in their behaviour there is triggered

A distinctive feeling in the chest of warmth and expansion; it causes a desire to become a better person oneself; it seems to open one's heart, not only to the person who triggered the feeling but also to other people.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, there is gratitude—and more. Moral beauty is about goodness precisely as luminous, attractive and resonant. It brings an increased openness towards life and towards others, the urge to follow the example of the 'moral exemplar.' Umberto Eco echoes this, but in the broader context of the history of beauty, when he notes

...when we consider a virtuous deed to be good, we should like to have done it ourselves, or we determine to do something just as meritorious, spurred on by the example of what we consider to be good.<sup>6</sup>

Susan Ross sees beauty's expansiveness in terms of its 'intrinsic generosity.' With a de-centring of the self is the link between goodness (virtue) and beauty in that 'the ability to appreciate beauty comes from a generous heart; indeed beauty itself enlarges the heart.'<sup>7</sup> There is an accompanying humility. We cease to be the centre of attention. Through the beautiful thing we encounter 'our own vision is expanded.'<sup>8</sup> Again, Ross reminds us that neither creation nor the perception of beauty is extrinsic to human good and its authentic realisation. With insight, she speaks of the depths of beauty.

Real beauty does not exclude; rather, it invites. Real beauty does not 'count up,' but rather flings its gifts to anyone who asks. Real beauty invites exploration and depth; it does not shut the door prematurely to the questioner. Beauty is always ready to give more.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to our two stories, we can detect three things in how we are affected by them: a 'being held' by their momentum and emotional intensity; an identification with the 'actors' in the stories; a movement beyond the self that is transforming—in reverberations for the listeners, in our imaginations and in how we perceive and respond to the world.

These three qualities suggest another consideration. Such events resemble miniaturized forms of the dramatic process, condensed realisations of the emotional dynamism inherent in a good play or film. Through identifying with the characters and participating in their world, dramatic catharsis involves a recognition of who we are that marks a transforming moment of self-knowledge. Aristotle argued that recognition and self-recognition characterize the spectator's engagement in all art and not just tragedy. Von Balthasar notes that drama responds to one's need to see oneself within something that 'transcends and gives meaning to the limited horizon of everyday life.'<sup>10</sup>

I suggest that these life stories are distilled 'dramas' of human goodness, permeated with feelings of pity and terror but also hope since the actors, in some way, rise above their tragic circumstances. Hearing the story, like watching a play, has a similar dynamic and outcome. Through an experience of participation (of being 'caught up'), the reader or listener is transfixed, self-transcending and transformed. We feel 'elevated', better people in meeting Thomas Buergenthal or Immaculée Ilibagiza and sharing their stories. We have had an experience of moral beauty.

### *Primordial Moral Awareness*

Such incidents disclose another aspect. Given our human situation, it is not possible to recover primordial moral consciousness in a pure state. In other words, to know what it feels like to have the basic sense of right and wrong detached from the cultural and historical overlays that are part of human existence.

However, perhaps we get a glimpse of it in specific events as with Thomas Buergenthal or Immaculée Ilibagiza. At such times, moral sensitivities are repelled by evil done to human beings, even though, it may be difficult to explain or justify our instinctive response. Or it may be revealed in one individual's courageous dignity in confronting evil and suffer-

ing. It prompts a moment of self-transcendence—in the person and the observer.

Helpful here is the discussion of the foundations of conscience in *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II speaks of it as ‘the primordial insight about good and evil, that reflection of God’s creative wisdom which, like an imperishable spark, shines in the heart of every man’ (59). Behind this notion of basic moral awareness as a participation in divine wisdom, the (then) Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger points to the Platonic notion of *anamnesis* (with its biblical overtones) which expresses itself in a moment of *recognition* of the truest self. The Platonic (and biblical) notion of *anamnesis* is captured in the

...spark of love...that something like an original memory of the good and the true (both are identical) has been implanted in us... (which)... is not a conceptually articulated knowing, a store of retrievable contents. It is so to speak an inner sense, a capacity to recall, so that the one whom it addresses, if he is not turned in on himself, hears its echo from within. He sees: that’s it! That is what my nature points to and seeks.<sup>11</sup>

The shared experience of moral beauty brings a recognition of who we are called to be. It also points to our common bonds in responding to those in whom authentic humanity is revealed at its very best. *Via Puchritudinis* reminds us that beauty is a transcendental, like truth and goodness. It characteristically opens our hearts from the particular to the universal and ultimately to God.

### *A Common Humanity*

Such moments, then, are about recognition but also about *revelation*. They tell us the truth about our common humanity. They can point to the possibility of altruistic love. Yes, the man about to die on the scaffold at Auschwitz kissing the trembling hand of another prisoner, or Immaculée Ilibagiza able to forgive those who had slaughtered her family. But there is an even deeper mystery. It is captured in the actions of someone such as solicitor Brendan

Keilar in 2007. A father of three, he was shot dead and a backpacker was seriously injured when they rushed to help Kaera Douglas, who was being dragged from a taxi in William Street in Melbourne during the morning peak hour.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer pondered such phenomena in a paper *The Foundations of Morality*. ‘How is it that a human being can so participate in the danger of another, that forgetting his own self-protection, he moves spontaneously to the other’s rescue?’ Schopenhauer’s reply is that this instinctive response wells up from the very core of our being. ‘It is a metaphysical impulse that is deeper than the experience of separateness. You realize you and the other are *one*.’<sup>12</sup> This is at the heart of Aboriginal cultures. Bernard Lonergan would say it is the mystery of inter-subjectivity. Or as Ruth says to Harry in the drama *Spooks*, ‘Yes, “all men are equal”—that’s why we shed tears for people we don’t know’

### *Jesus—the Beauty of God*

The other revelatory aspect concerns divine Revelation. It has a bearing on the specific instances we have discussed of moral beauty, firstly, in how they mediate the divine glory and secondly, in their universal implications.

First, our Christian faith tells us that truth, goodness and beauty are embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. For von Balthasar, the point on the horizon towards which truth, goodness and beauty can only direct our gaze, is made visible in Jesus. Nevertheless (and relevant to the moral dramas that anchor our discussion), he considers there are forms of worldly beauty which radiate the divine presence, which reflect the glory of God. A principal instance of this is the ‘human neighbour.’ For von Balthasar, this is one of those forms that ‘elicit a moral response.’<sup>13</sup>

Second, for both William Spohn and von Balthasar, Jesus is the ‘concrete universal of

Christian ethics', the one whose person blends the highly general and the highly particular. Spohn's concern is to probe how, through faithful imagination, Jesus' story becomes paradigmatic for our moral perceptions, dispositions and identity.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, we are called to be gradually transformed into the image of Christ in his beauty.

Von Balthasar has a complementary approach that has direct bearing on the two incidents as distilled forms of the dramatic process. For him, Christ as the concrete universal is the tragic figure who does what Greek tragedy could not have done—overcomes the divide between the realms of the philosophic and the tragic, between the universal and the contingent. He is the one in whom the stage is open for the human person as a finite, historical creature to have his finitude 'granted eternal (absolute) meaning.' The radiant beauty of the crucified and risen Lord is redemptive precisely in that, in Him, is manifested meaning's ultimate horizon, namely, 'God's all embracing trinitarian love.'<sup>15</sup> As a motto from the *Life's Healing Journey* retreat puts it 'Where He is most disfigured, there He is most glorified.'

### *By Way of Moral Beauty*

In conclusion, it is timely to recall Aquinas' comment: all that is true and good, whatever its source, comes from the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> These reflections have shown how appropriately this can be applied to beauty.

There are those who come to God, not by the road to Jerusalem nor the way to Athens, but at the point where they meet. They can encounter the hidden God at the intersection of the sacred and secular, where grace has a luminous presence and radiates life in moments of moral beauty. For those who are attentive and follow the call of conscience, there is a de-centring of the self. Being touched by moral beauty brings a renewed admiration and inspiration about our best selves, about what is authentically human. Those who seek what is true, good and beautiful in sincerity of heart may, as Lonergan suggests, 'love God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads.'<sup>17</sup>

From the angle of faith, such points of disclosure are traces of the Crucified and Risen Jesus present and working through his Spirit. This is the suffering Servant, the One whose disfigured features cause astonishment, the one who will be lifted up and exalted. In Him, evil's ugliness is set against a broader canvas, its disharmonies resolved in a higher register. Moral beauty is both subverted and disrupted by absorbing and transforming evil through the embrace of divine love. We are called, in the Risen victim, to be transfixed, transcendent and transformed. We can leave the final word to Gerard Manly Hopkins in 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire'

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's  
faces.

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## THE POOR'S SPECIAL CLAIM TO BEAUTY

*The two creation accounts of Genesis 1-2 present beauty as a universal vocation and right. In these stories every human has a calling and a right to share in the beauty of creation's bounty. But in Exodus God sends Moses to bring the beauty of the Sabbath and the Promised Land to the poor, landless, and enslaved Hebrews. In Scripture the poor have a special claim on beauty because they have been robbed of their 'fair' share of creation's fat bounty.*

*The poor have a special claim on beauty for two reasons: because they are mired in so much unjust ugliness and because they have created so much of the world's beauty. Their first claim to beauty comes from the fact that they have been robbed of their fair share of creation's beauty and forced to live and work in the ugliness created and deepened by this theft. Their second claim arises from the fact that their sweat and sacrifice have created so much of the very beauty from which they are excluded.*

—McCormick, Patrick T. 'A Right to Beauty: a Fair Share of Milk and Honey for the Poor.' *Theological Studies* 71.3 (2010): pp.14-15.