Why is Beauty Form? Plotinus' Theory of Beauty in Phenomenological Perspective

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For Plotinus, the ascent of the soul from sense to intellect to the One begins with our response to the beauty of the sensible world, and the entire ascent is a pursuit of ever more genuine beauty (e.g., V.9.2.1–10). As is well known, according to Plotinus beauty in general is form, and the beauty of sensible things is their share in form, which is pleasing to soul because it is "akin" (συγγενές) to it.[1] If such a "metaphysics of beauty" (as it is sometimes dismissively called)[2] seems to have little urgency for contemporary thought, it is largely because this common account leaves the actual meaning of the metaphor of "kinship," and indeed of "form" itself, unexplained. To be sure, soul and the form in the sensible thing are "akin" in that both are "descended" from a common "ancestor," intellect.[3] But this remains metaphorical. What is "form," such that it is akin to the soul? What exactly is the "kinship" of soul and form? And why does this "kinship" render form pleasing to the soul? Reflection on these questions opens a new way of reading Plotinus' theory of beauty, which brings to light its philosophical foundations and deeper significance. Form, it will emerge, is pleasing to soul as what is in the phenomenological sense "given" to it, as what "fills" and thus satisfies the intentional gaze of consciousness. As form, as intelligible, as given, being is not merely present but intrinsically delightful to consciousness. Plotinus' doctrine of beauty as form is thus fundamentally an expression of the intelligibility of being, which is why the ascent from the sensible to the purely intelligible, and ultimately to the One as the principle of intelligibility and therefore of being, is a pursuit of beauty. And this in turn implies that the

1. For a good summary account of Plotinus' theory of beauty, see Dominic O'Meara, "Textes de Plotin sur la beauté: initiation et remarques," in *Art et vérité*, ed. I. Schüssler, R. Célis, and A. Schild (Lausanne, 1996) 59–68.

2. E.g., Jonathan Scott Lee, "… if one had the power to look at the god in oneself," from "Metaphysics as Hermeneutics in the Aesthetics of Plotinus," in *Neoplatonic Aesthetics*, ed. Liana de Girolami Cheney and John Hendrix (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 86.

3. Thus O'Meara refers to "la parenté ontologique liant l'âme à l'intelligible" ("Textes," 60).

Dionysius, Vol. XXV, Dec. 2007, 115–28.

recognition that being as such is beautiful plays an essential role in overcoming the nihilistic denial that being is intelligible.[4]

In *Ennead* I.6, when Plotinus sets out to investigate what the beauty of bodies is, his first step is to reformulate the question in terms of the effect of the beautiful body on us. "What then is this [i.e., beauty], which is present in bodies? We ought to consider this first. What then is this, that moves the visions of the beholders and turns and draws them to itself and makes them enjoy the sight?" (I.6.1.17–19).[5] The question "What is beauty?" thus becomes the question, "What is it about a sensible thing such that, when perceived, it arouses delight and attraction in the perceiver?" From the outset, then, Plotinus interprets beauty as a feature of bodies in their relation to consciousness. This, indeed, is simply common sense: whatever beauty may be, it clearly has something to do with perception. To say that a thing is beautiful is to say something about how it is experienced, how it affects a perceiver. A non-phenomenal beauty would be a contradiction in terms. Although Plotinus speaks of "invisible" beauties (ἀφανεῖς, I.6.3.29; μὴ ὁρώμενα, I.6.4.19), in the sense of beauties which are perceptible by thought rather than sense, it would be meaningless to speak of a beauty which is "invisible" absolutely, not given to awareness in any mode at all. This is not to say that beauty is subjective in the modern sense, but only that it is a feature of a being *in relation to* awareness, not by itself, in isolation from any consciousness. In this sense, therefore, Plotinus' treatment of beauty is phenomenological from the outset.

Plotinus then presents and critiques the standard definition of beauty as "good proportion of the parts to each other and to the whole, with the addition of good color" (I.6.1.21–22). He does not, indeed, reject the idea that proportional structure can contribute to making bodies beautiful,[6] but rather points out that this account of beauty is insufficiently universal: it does not cover the beauty of simple things, such as that of light, color, and tone.[7] We may also observe, what is implicit in Plotinus' critique, that the standard definition itself is lacking in unity: it merely juxtaposes proportion and color as contributors to beauty, without explaining what they have in

4. For the claim that nihilism consists fundamentally in such a denial, see Vittorio Possenti, *Terza navigatione: nichilismo e metafisica* (Rome: Armando Editore, 1998) 28.

5. All quotations of Plotinus are from *Plotinus*, 7 vols., ed. and trans. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1966–1988), with emendations to the translation where needed for the sake of clarity or precision.

6. See A.H. Armstrong, "Beauty and the Discovery of Divinity in the Thought of Plotinus," in *Kephalaion: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy Offered to C.J. de Vogel* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1975) 160, and Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 213.

7. Cf. Oiva Kuisma, *Art or Experience: A Study on Plotinus' Aesthetics* (Helsinki: Societas Scientarum Fennica, 2003) 71–72, 164.

common such that both render a body pleasing to perception, and thus fails to identify the essence of beauty.[8] When Plotinus then addresses the question of what beauty universally is and begins to present his own account of it, he does so, once again, in phenomenological terms, referring to the effect of the beautiful body on the consciousness that intends it: "So let us go back to the beginning and state what the primary beauty in bodies really is. It is something which we become aware of even at the first glance [βολῇ]; the soul speaks of it as if it understood it, recognizes and welcomes it and as it were adapts itself to it. But when it encounters the ugly it shrinks back and rejects it and turns away from it and is out of tune and alienated from it" (I.6.2.1–8). It is this "recognizing and welcoming" that Plotinus explains in terms of the metaphor of kinship: "Our explanation of this is that the soul, since it is by nature what it is and is related to the higher reality in beings, when it sees [ἴδῃ] something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers itself and what belong to itself" (I.6.2.8–11). The "higher reality" to which the soul is related is, of course, intellect or the forms, and the trace of this in the sensible body is its share of form: "But how are both the things there [i.e., intelligibles] and these things [i.e., sensibles] beautiful? We maintain that these things are beautiful by participating in form" (I.6.2.13). With this we come to the question: How exactly is the sensible form "akin" to the soul, and why does this "kinship" render it pleasing to the soul which it enters by perception?

To answer these questions, we must consider what "form" is. The word εἶδος is related to ἰδεῖν, to see, and means most basically "that which is seen," "look," "appearance." The very word εἶδος thus expresses a relation to consciousness. Form is what is seen, what appears, what is given to consciousness as intentional "looking" (βολή). In Plotinus, just as in Plato, the identification of being, τὸ ὄν, as form, εἶδος, is itself a phenomenological move. To say that being is form is to say that being is phenomenon, what appears to and in consciousness.[9] The Platonic doctrine of being as form thus expresses the intrinsic togetherness of thought and being. Thought is a seeing (ἰδεῖν), a beholding, an intentional gaze that reaches out to being, and being is the look, the appearance, the phenomenon, that is given to thought.[10] Outside

8. Cf. O'Meara's remark that the explanation of beauty in terms of symmetry, "tout en décrivant … un aspect de ce qu'est la beauté sensible, n'identifie pas ce qui la *fait*" ("Textes," 60).

9. Thus Plato's accounts of form as being, as the really real, as that which purely or completely is, are invariably paired with descriptions of its relation to thought, as that which is intelligible or knowable (e.g., *Phaedrus* 247c6–8; *Republic* 477a3; *Timaeus* 27d6–28a2). Form is "really real reality" precisely in that it is what is "most true" (*Phaedo* 65e2), what is intelligible, what is given to thought.

10. The "ocular" model for cognition, far from implying, as is often said, a distancing or separation between subject and object, in fact signifies, for Plato and Plotinus, exactly the

of this togetherness, there is neither thought, for there is nothing for it to intend, to be "of," nor being, for there is nothing given to thought.

For Plotinus, the highest level of this togetherness is the unity-in-duality of intellect and the forms. Intellect is pure, perfect, and paradigmatic consciousness precisely as the perfect intuition or "seeing" of being, which leaves nothing of what it sees outside itself and thus is one with what it sees. The forms are pure, perfect, and paradigmatic being precisely as purely intelligible, perfectly "evident" in the phenomenological sense,[11] perfectly given in intuition and thus one with the thinking that sees them.[12] Thus Plotinus argues that if the forms themselves were not given to and present in intellect, neither being nor intellect would exist: "One must not, then, look for the intelligibles outside [of intellect] … or by depriving it of truth make the intelligibles unknowable and non-existent and finally abolish intellect itself. But, since one must bring in knowledge and truth and watchfully preserve the beings and the knowledge of what each thing is," and if intellect did not have the intelligibles as its content we would "not possess and be with and be fused with the realities themselves, all things must be given to the true intellect" (V.5.2.1–9).

This togetherness, which is the very essence at once of consciousness and of being, is weaker at lower levels, which are lower precisely in that they involve some degree of separation between consciousness and its object. The different levels of consciousness and being, from intellect and the forms down to sensation and bodies, thus represent higher and lower degrees of this togetherness.

> But, as contemplation ascends from nature to soul, and soul to intellect, and the contemplations become always more intimate and united to the contemplators, and in the good soul the objects known tend to become identical with the knowing subject, since they are pressing on towards intellect, it is clear that in intellect both are one, not by becoming akin, as in the best soul, but substantially, and in that "thinking and being are the same." (III.8.8.1–8)

opposite: the union, the being-together, of thought and being. Seeing is *with* that which is seen, and that which is seen is *in* the seeing.

11. Edmund Husserl, *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, ed. Walter Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958) II, 28: "This givenness, which excludes any meaningful doubt, a simple and immediate beholding [*Schauen*] and grasping [*Fassen*] of the intended objectivity itself and as it is, constitutes the precise concept of evidence, understood indeed as immediate evidence."

12. For a full treatment of Plotinus' doctrine on this point see Eric D. Perl, "The Togetherness of Thought and Being: A Phenomenological Reading of Plotinus' Doctrine 'That the Intelligibles Are Not outside the Intellect'," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2006): 1–26.

Therefore, as Plotinus says, intellect and sense are higher and lower modes of the same activity: the apprehension of being. "And for this reason this man here [i.e., man as soul-body composite] has sense-perception, because he has a lesser apprehension of lesser things, images of those [intelligible realities], so that these sense-perceptions here are dim intellections, but the intellections there are clear sense-perceptions" (VI.7.7.28–32). By the same token, sensible things, in that they are given to consciousness at all, are lesser or "dimmer" forms:

> All that is here below [i.e., at the level of sense] comes from there [i.e., intellect], and exists in greater beauty there: for here it is mixed [i.e., with non-being] but there it is not mixed. All this universe is held fast by forms from beginning to end: matter first of all by the forms of the elements, and then other forms upon these, and then again others …. Then matter, too, is a certain last form; so this universe is all form, and all the things in it are forms …. (V.8.7.17–24)

Being at any level, then, as what is seen, what appears to and in consciousness, is form, εἶδος, phenomenon, in higher and lower ways. Whatever is given to consciousness in any mode is form, at one level or another. This is why, when Plotinus asks in his discussion of beauty, "But how are both the things there [i.e., intelligibles] and these things [i.e., sensibles] beautiful?" he answers in terms of form: to be form, to be phenomenal, is what is common to the intelligible and the sensible. And as the reference to matter as a "last form" implies, matter does not constitute an exception to this principle, a being which is not form, not phenomenal. Insofar as matter is at all, i.e., insofar as it is available for thought, it is form; and conversely, insofar as matter is not given, not available for thought, it is *ipso facto* non-being (see, e.g., I.8.5.10–13; III.6.7.20–21).

The intrinsic togetherness of consciousness and being, then, is what Plotinus means by the "kinship" between soul and the sensible form, which explains why the latter is pleasing to soul.[13] Soul, as a mode of consciousness, is "descended" from intellect in that it is a lesser, dimmer mode of intellection, and the sensible form is "descended" from intellect in that it is a lesser, dimmer mode of intelligibility. A body is beautiful, that is, delightful and attractive to soul, in that it displays some form, something that is not alien or inaccessible but is rather phenomenal, given to consciousness. As Plotinus says, "It is further evidence [that beauty is form] that we do not yet see [εἴδομεν] a thing while it is outside us, but when it comes within,

13. Jean-Marc Narbonne, "Action, Contemplation and Interiority in the Thinking of Beauty in Plotinus," in *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics*, ed. Aphrodite Alexandrakis (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002) 4, describes this kinship as "an original belonging to one another" between the soul and the beautiful; but this is based on the more fundamental "belonging to one another" of consciousness and being.

it influences us. But it comes in through the eyes as form [εἶδος] alone" (V.8.2.24–27). Only that which enters into consciousness can affect us, and what enters consciousness at any level is, by definition, form. The soul experiences satisfaction in beholding the thing insofar as it finds something there *for* the intentional gaze, something to rest on and take in, insofar as, in intending the thing, consciousness does not find itself in the dark, at a loss, gazing into the abyss. This is why, for Plotinus, the beautiful is not merely *a* phenomenon, *a* form, but rather phenomenon-as-such, form in general.[14] Being is delightful and attractive to soul precisely as form, as what is given to consciousness. Nothing, therefore, is absolutely ugly. Although some sensible things are less beautiful than others, and thus comparatively ugly, any being at all is more attractive than absolute non-being.[15] Whatever consciousness can take in is to some degree satisfying to it, relatively pleasing in comparison to the horror of nothingness, of darkness, "the growing terror of nothing to think about."[16]

Indeed, it is precisely this understanding of beauty as form, in the sense of whatever is given to consciousness in any mode, that enables Plotinus to account for the beauty of light and color. "And the simple beauty of color comes about by shape and the mastery of the darkness in matter by the presence of light which is incorporeal and formative power and form [λόγου καὶ εἴδους]" (I.6.3.17–19). Why does Plotinus say here that light is form? Since vision, like any sense, is low-level or "dim" intellection, it follows that light, as the universal condition of visibility, is low-level or dim intelligibility. Light, we may say, is visibility-as-such: for a body to be illuminated is for it to be available, to be given, to sight. Light, therefore, is phenomenality with regard to the sense of sight, and hence the soul is pleased by its presence. Every color, in turn, as a differentiated mode of light, is therefore *a* form, and as such beautiful. Plotinus continues, "This is why fire itself is more beautiful than all other bodies, because it has the rank of form in relation to

14. Cf. O'Meara: "Il n'y pas d'Idée de la beauté chez Plotin: toute Idée est beauté, et tout sensible est beau en ayant part à l'intelligible" ("Textes," 61). For a thorough refutation of the claim that for Plotinus there is a particular form of the beautiful, see Suzanne Stern-Gillet, "Le Principe du Beau Chez Plotin: Réflexions sur *Enneas* VI.7.32 et 33," *Phronesis* 45 (2000): 38–63.

15. Thus, as Stern-Gillet, "Le Principe du Beau" observes, Plotinus does not offer an "aesthetics" in the sense of a set of criteria that would distinguish those things that are beautiful from those that are not. His philosophy is a form of "pankallism" the doctrine that all things are in some way and to some degree beautiful (63). (See Robert E. Wood, *Placing Aesthetics: Reflections on the Philosophic Tradition* [Athens, Ohio: Ohio U Press, 1999] 104. Wood associates this concept with Pseudo-Dionysius, but by his own account it is already present in Plotinus.) Hence Plotinus' theory of beauty should perhaps be termed a "kallistics" rather than an "aesthetics."

16. T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *Four Quartets* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace, 1943) l. 121.

the other elements …. [I]t has color primarily and all other things take the form of color from it. So it shines and glitters as if it were form" (I.6.3.19–21, 24–25). Just as whatever is thought, or given to intellection, is some form, so whatever is seen, or given to sight, is, first and most universally, some color. The understanding of beauty as form thus embraces both structure and color, which are two distinct kinds of form, and thus have in common that they are given, and hence satisfying, to consciousness.[17]

Conversely, the ugly, which Plotinus identifies with matter (e.g., I.8.5.24; II.4.16.24), is the opposite of the beautiful, that is, is displeasing and repellent to soul, precisely as not form, not anything for consciousness and thus not any being. A sensible thing, Plotinus says, is ugly insofar as it is deficient in form: "[F]or every shapeless thing which is naturally capable of receiving shape and form is ugly and outside the divine formative power as long as it has no share in formative power and form. This is absolute ugliness. But a thing is also ugly when it is not completely dominated by shape and formative power, since its matter has not submitted to be completely shaped according to the form" (I.6.2.14–18). But matter, as Plotinus explains elsewhere, is not a positive reality other than form, but is rather sheer privation or absence of form. Matter "is" only in the sense in which we can say that "there is a deficiency," in that sensible things are less than perfectly intelligible. "Therefore, though [matter] is not, it is in this way, and is the same as privation, if privation is opposition to the things that exist in rational form" (II.4.16.3–5; cf. I.8.11.1–2). We can attempt to arrive at a conception of matter, therefore, only by stripping away form, by removing all that is given to awareness in a thing. "But how do we know what has absolutely no part in form? By absolutely taking away all form, we call that in which there is no form matter; in the process of taking away all form we apprehend formlessness in ourselves, if we propose to look at matter" (I.8.9.15–19). But therefore, this supposed conception of matter is not a thought at all, but rather an absence of thought, because it has nothing to think, nothing to intend:

> [T]hat which wants to be a thought about it will not be a thought but a sort of thoughtlessness [οἷον ἄνοια] …. [A]s with the eye we see darkness,… so too, the soul, when it has taken away everything which corresponds to light in the objects of sense, being no longer able to define what is left, is made like sight in darkness, having become then somehow the same as what it, so to speak, sees. But does it really see? Only as if it were seeing absence of shape and absence of color, and something lightless, and without size as well. If it does not see in this way, it will already be giving matter a form. (II.4.10.7–8, 14–20)

17. Plotinus' position in this regard is closely paralleled by Aquinas' inclusion of *claritas*, brightness, as well as *integritas* and *harmonia*, as one of the factors of beauty (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q. 39, art. 8, resp.). Aquinas' entire account of beauty as "based on form" and of the beautiful as "that which pleases when seen [*quod visu placet*]" (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q. 5, art. 4, ad 1) is strikingly similar to that of Plotinus.

We "think matter" only in the sense in which we "see darkness:" by not seeing, not thinking, because matter is nothing to see, nothing to think.

> So this which sees matter is another intellect which is not intellect, since it presumes to see what is not its own. As an eye withdraws itself from the light so that it may see the darkness and not see it—leaving the light is so that it may see the darkness, since with the light it cannot see it; but without something it cannot see, but only not see—that it may be able to see in the way it is possible to see darkness …. (I.8.9.19–23)

Matter is, precisely, non-phenomenon, the failure of evidence and therefore of being. But for this reason, in encountering matter—or rather, in failing to encounter it, because it is nothing to encounter—the soul is pained by this failure.[18]

> And since matter itself does not remain shapeless, but is shaped in things, the soul, too, immediately intends [ἐπέβαλε] the form of the things on it because the indefinite is distressing to it, as if it were in fear of being outside of beings and could not endure to stay for long in non-being. (II.4.10.32–36)

This distress is the experience of ugliness, a violation of the intentional nature of consciousness because it finds nothing to intend. Thus Plotinus speaks of the "alienation" of the soul from ugliness, or matter, as opposed to its "kinship" with beauty, or form.

At the level of sense-perception, of course, beauty is always mixed with ugliness, form with matter, being with non-being. This dilution consists precisely in the incomplete evidence, the imperfect togetherness, between the seeing and the seen that constitutes sense as a less-than-perfect level of "seeing," of intuition, and the sensible as a less-than-perfect level of being. This partial externality between consciousness and being is what Plotinus characterizes as the "dimness," the partial darkness, of both at this level. Thus a soul which is "living a life which consists of bodily sensations" is "living a dim life and diluted with a great deal of death, no longer seeing what a soul ought to see, no longer left in peace with itself because it keeps on being dragged out, and down, and to the dark" (I.6.5.30–31, 36–39). Precisely because beauty is phenomenality, the togetherness of being with consciousness, beauty is pure only at the level of intellection, where this togetherness is perfect and there is no externality. The purely intelligible is the genuinely beautiful precisely as perfectly evident, perfectly given to intuition. "For it is 'the easy life' there, and truth is their mother and nurse and being and food—and they see all things … for all things there are transparent [διαφανῆ], and there is nothing

18. Cf. Narbonne: "[T]he soul cannot endure the spectacle as if it was facing nothingness, emptiness, an abyss devoid of the least trace of intelligibility from which it must protect itself" ("Action," 4).

dark or resistant, but everything and all things are manifest [φανερὸς] to the inward part to everything …" (V.8.4.1–7).

Hence Plotinus describes our ascent from sense to intellect as a turning from partially external and therefore imperfect beauties to the perfect beauty that is found within the self, as intellect. "Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendors which he saw before" (I.6.8.4–6). This inward turn, far from being a self-closing, an isolation of the self from reality, is on the contrary an overcoming of the partial separation between the self and being that belongs to the level of sense:

> [T]hose who are altogether, we may say, drunk and filled with the nectar, since the beauty has penetrated through the whole of their soul, are not simply spectators. For there is no longer one thing outside and another outside which is looking at it, but the keen sighted has what is seen within...But one must transport what one sees into oneself, and look at it as one and look at it as oneself. (V.8.10.33–42.)

The inward turn is thus an opening of the self, as consciousness, to embrace the whole of reality-in-its-intelligibility. A person who makes this turn

> comes to unity with himself, and, making no more separation, is one and all together with that god … he hastens inward and has everything, and leaves sensation behind in his fear of being different, and is one there; and if he wants to see by being different, he puts himself outside …. How then can anyone be in beauty without seeing it? If he sees it as something different, he is not yet in beauty, but he is in it most perfectly when he becomes it. If therefore sight is of something external we must not have sight, or only that which is identical with the seen. (V.8.11.6–23)

"Sight which is identical with the seen" is, of course, intellect, where the seen is completely within and hence one with the seeing. Thus the ascent to intellect is, for Plotinus, a pursuit of beauty, because it is a quest for perfect togetherness between self and being.

The beautiful, then, is being as phenomenon, being-in-its-givenness; and beauty itself, as that in virtue of which a thing is delightful and attractive to consciousness, is the very givenness, the phenomenality, of being, its belonging to or togetherness with consciousness. This is why, for Plotinus, consciousness is never "neutral:" being as such is pleasing to consciousness, and consciousness is pleased by being, because they intrinsically belong together, because being is *for* consciousness and consciousness is *of* being.[19]

19. Plotinus' doctrine on this point is thus comparable to Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.1, 980a1–3: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves …." On the Aristotelian dimension of Plotinus' theory of beauty as form see O'Meara, "Textes," 67 n. 6.

Plotinus' metaphor of "kinship" between soul and form is an expression of this principle. Hence Plotinus says of intelligible reality, "it is this which first presents itself to beholding [θέαν] by being form and what is beheld [θέαμα] which is also delightful to be seen [ἀγαστὸν ὀφθῆναι]" (V.8.8.6-8).[20] Again, this is the very meaning of the Platonic identification of being as form. Thus, as Plotinus says, "[B]eing is longed for because it is the same as beauty, and beauty is lovable because it is being. But why should we enquire which is the cause of the other when both are one nature?" (V.8.9.41–44). Being and beauty are identical because both are form, or phenomenon. It is in this sense that form is what is common, analogously, to the intelligible and the sensible, and hence is beauty at both levels.

But the pursuit of beauty does not end with being in its togetherness with intellect. As Plotinus says, "[W]e must not remain always in that manifold beauty but go on still darting upwards, leaving even this behind … in our wondering who generated it and how" (VI.7.16.1–4). The One or Good, for Plotinus, is "generative" of being, not, strictly speaking, as a "cause" or "producer," which would make it into merely another being, but rather as the universal condition of intelligibility, or, in other words, phenomenality.[21] Anything can be given to awareness only under the condition of unity, as in some way one. Every form, therefore, is a mode of unity, and is beautiful precisely as a mode of unity:[22]

> The form, then, approaches and composes that which is to come into being from many parts into a single ordered whole; it brings it into a completed unity and makes it one by agreement of its parts; for since it is one itself, that which is shaped by it must also be one as far as a thing can be which is composed of many parts. So beauty rests upon it when it has been brought into unity …. (I.6.2.18–23)

The One, then, is the enabling condition of evidence, i.e., at once of thinking and of being-thought, and therefore, since being is that which is given to thought, the source of being: "The nature of the Good, which is cause of

20. We may note that this last phrase is almost precisely matched by Aquinas' definition of the beautiful as *quod visu placet*; see above, n. 17.

21. Cf. Reiner Schürmann, "L'hénologie comme dépassement de la métaphysique," *Les études philosophiques* 3 (1982): 333: Plotinus "a vu … la différence entre une *cause* entitative et représentable, et une *condition* non entitative et non représentable." And again: "Plotin, et après lui Heidegger, font un pas en arrière de cette différence métaphysique entre la substantialité et les choses, un pas qui conduit vers l' "Un" ou vers l' "être." Leur recul n'est certes comparable que formellement (prétendre que ces deux auteurs parlent de la même chose serait absurde), mais leur démarche met en évidence ce qu'on peut appeler la différence phénoménologique. Celle-ci ne garantit aucun fondement transcendant suprêmement réel, elle n'est qu'une condition transcendantale de l'apparaître des phénomènes" (335).

22. Cf. Kuisma, *Art or Experience*, 71–72.

being and intellect, and is light, according to the analogy, to the things seen there and to the seer, is neither the beings nor intellect, but cause of these, providing by its own light thinking and being thought to the beings and to intellect" (VI.7.16.27–32). The One as "cause," therefore, is not any being, nothing phenomenal, nothing given to consciousness in any mode, but rather an expression of the givenness of being in virtue of which it is being. "For to say that [the One] is the cause is not to predicate something accidental of it but of us, because we have something from it, while that is in itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say 'that' or 'is' …" (VI.9.3.49–53). Thus, as Plotinus so often says, the One is "not any thing, but the power of all things," (e.g., with variations in wording, III.8.9.55–10.1; V.1.7.10; V.3.15.33; V.4.1.36; V.4.2.39; VI.7.32.31), the condition by which all things at every level are forms, are phenomena, and thus are beings.

Since being, as phenomenon, is what is beautiful, and the One is not any being, it follows that the One is not beautiful, but, as Plotinus says, "too great to be beauty [μείζων ἢ κατὰ κάλλος]" (V.8.13.11–12). Indeed, Plotinus describes the soul's fear in approaching the One in terms remarkably similar to those in which he describes its fear of the ugly, or matter: "But insofar as the soul goes towards the formless, since it is utterly unable to comprehend it because it is not delimited and, so to speak, stamped by a richly varied stamp, it slides away and is afraid that it may have nothing [φοβεῖται μὴ οὐδὲν ἔχῃ]" (VI.9.3.4–7). The soul undergoes this fear because the One, like matter, is no form, nothing phenomenal, nothing for consciousness at all. Here again the soul faces nothing, the abyss, the passing beyond any definite, intelligible content. Thus Plotinus' insistence that the One is not beautiful is not only a formal consequence of his identification of the beautiful with being-as-form, but also a phenomenological account of how the ascent beyond being is actually experienced. The ascent to the One is *unheimlich* to the soul, because it means that consciousness is going outside of what is proper to it, the place where it belongs, where it is at home: being, as what is given, as form, as phenomenon. On the other hand, the One can be called Beauty,[23] not in the sense of that-which-is-beautiful, but in the sense of the principle, the condition by which being is phenomenal and therefore beautiful. "Therefore the power of all is the flower of beauty, a beautifying beauty [κάλλος καλλοποιόν]. For it generates it and makes it more beautiful by the excess [περιουσίᾳ] of beauty from it, so that it is the principle and limit of beauty. For being the principle of beauty it makes that beautiful of which it is the principle …" (VI.7.32.31–35). Since beauty is phenomenality, the pursuit of beauty leads the soul ultimately to direct its gaze, in fear and trembling

23. On the One as Beauty see Stern-Gillet, "Le Principe du Beau," 57–60.

but also in adoration and love,[24] beyond being, beyond what appears, to "the power of all things," the One as the condition of phenomenality and therefore at once of being and of being beautiful.

For this reason, one of Plotinus' favorite ways of attempting to indicate the One is the analogy of light. For just as, with regard to sight, light is the condition for evidence, for the togetherness of vision and the visible, so the One is the condition for evidence in general, for the togetherness of being with consciousness, the togetherness which is beauty. "For just as with bodies, though light is mixed into them, all the same there is need of another light for the light, the color, in them to appear [φανείη], so with the things there [i.e., in the intelligible], though they possess much light, there is need of another greater light that they may be seen both by themselves and by another" (VI.7.21.13–17). The One is "light" as that by which the forms are intelligible, are given to thought. In fact, since visibility is simply a lesser mode of intelligibility, the One, as the universal condition of evidence, is the "light" that unites being and consciousness at all levels and thus enables them to be. "He is greater than reason and intellect and sensation, providing these, but not himself being these" (V.3.14.19–20). To track down the togetherness which is beauty, therefore, is to turn from the things seen, at any level of consciousness, to the "light" by which they are seen: "When [intellect] attends to the nature of the things illuminated, it sees the light less; but if it abandons the things seen and looks toward that by which it sees, it looks at light and the principle of light" (V.5.7.18–21). Or again, "It is there that one lets all study go; up to a point one has been led along and settled firmly in the beautiful … but is carried out of it by the surge of the wave of intellect … and sees suddenly, not seeing how, but the vision fills his eyes with light and does not make him see something else by it, but the light itself is what is seen" (VI.7.36.15–21). The bedazzlement or even blinding that this implies—eyes filled with pure, undifferentiated light are blinded—again suggests the fear that accompanies the turn from being to the One, as a transgression of the limits of cognitive experience.

Thus Plotinus explains that even the beauty of the forms is pleasing and attractive to the soul only in or by the light of the One. In describing the One as the "light" that enables the forms to be seen, he remarks:

> But there comes to be the intense kind of love for [the forms] not when they are what they are but when, being already what they are, they receive something else from there beyond ….When anyone, therefore, sees this light, then truly he is also moved to the forms, and longs for the light which plays upon them and delights in it …. For each is

24. See, e.g., V.5.3.9–15, where Plotinus compares the One to "the great king" before whom "the people pray and prostrate themselves [εὔχονται καὶ προσκυνοῦσιν]."

> what it is in itself; but it becomes desirable when the Good colors it, giving a kind of grace to them and love to the desirers. Then the soul, receiving into itself an outflow from thence, is moved and dances wildly and is all stung with longing and becomes love. Before this it is not moved even towards intellect, for all its beauty; its beauty is inactive till it catches a light from the Good, and the soul by itself … is completely inactive and, though intellect is present, is unenthusiastic about it. (VI.7.21.12–13, 22.1–14)

This passage has occasioned much discussion[25] because it seems to say that the "light" which the forms receive from the Good and which renders them attractive is something additional to their being, when in fact, of course, the forms are and are intelligible only by this light, and, *qua* intelligible and being, are intrinsically attractive. The passage must be interpreted, as Armstrong suggests, not as a statement that the forms can be without this light, but rather as an account of different ways in which they can be considered.[26] If we regard them not as phenomena, as what appears, but simply as objects, as "what is there," abstracting from or neglecting their givenness, then we fail to see them *as* beautiful. Being is pleasing and attractive, rather than neutrally, dully "present," only when it is looked at *in light of* the One, in its belonging-together-with thinking, only when considered in its givenness, with a view not merely to itself as present, but to what we might call its "presencing," its arrival, its coming to phenomenal presence.

Phenomenology is largely aimed at overcoming the modern dualism between being as "object" and consciousness as "subject." This dualism is fundamentally a denial of the intelligibility of being, a denial that reality itself is given to thought, and thus leads to the denial that there is such a thing as reality. What Plotinus' account of beauty brings to light is that this nihilistic objectification of being and subjectification of consciousness is one with the characteristically modern assumption than beauty is unreal. Subject-object dualism ignores or denies the *givenness* of being, regarding it instead as "object," extrinsic to or over against consciousness, and the *intentionality* of consciousness, regarding it instead as "subject," a self-contained sphere over against being.[27] But beauty, as we have seen, pertains to reality as experienced, as given to consciousness. When being is objectified as extrinsic to conscious-

25. See, e.g., Armstrong, "Beauty and the Discovery of Divinity," 160–62, and Stern-Gillet, "Le Principe du Beau," 59.

26. Armstrong, "Beauty and the Discovery of Divinity": "… Plotinus must … be talking about varying attitudes of our selves to intelligible beauty rather than giving variant objective accounts of that beauty itself and its relation to the Good. Intellect in all the glory of its beauty must always stand next to the Good and be our way to the Good, and receive its glory eternally and unchangingly from the Good. But we, it seems … can adopt various deviant and unsatisfactory attitudes to beauty …" (162).

27. See Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2000) 9–15.

ness, therefore, beauty cannot be regarded as real, as an actual characteristic of being itself. Being as object cannot be beautiful. Consequently, since beauty necessarily involves a presence to consciousness, beauty is inevitably dismissed as subjective, unreal, "in the eye of the beholder." Conversely, the denial of beauty already implies the subject-object duality, for to disregard beauty is to consider being in abstraction from its givenness, and thus to objectify it. *Qua* given, *qua* beautiful, being is not an object, something to be, in Descartes' phrase, "mastered and possessed." We can objectify being, render it manageable, manipulable, only by stripping away from it the "unmanageable beauty [κάλλος ἀμήχανον]" (I.6.8.2, referring to Plato, *Symposium* 218e2 and esp. *Republic* 509a6), the dazzling excess (περιουσία, VI.7.32.33) of givenness in virtue of which being is being.

The modern dogma that beauty has no reality and reality has no beauty is thus an expression of the objectification of being and subjectification of consciousness. Thought and being cannot meet, cannot be together, without the light that permeates and transcends both. If the beauty whereby being is delightful and attractive is unreal, then being itself is neutral, valueless, and therefore unintelligible, meaningless, inaccessible to understanding. Plotinus' doctrine of beauty thus provides a philosophical foundation for the famous words from Dostoevsky, "Beauty will save the world."[28] An overcoming of the nihilistic divorce between thought and being must involve a recovery of the Neoplatonic understanding of beauty as, in scholastic terms, a transcendental, as indicating being itself as that which, *qua* intelligible, satisfies the intentional gaze of consciousness, *quod visu placet*. Plotinus' understanding of beauty as form means that beauty is the intelligibility of being, which bears witness to its arrival from the transcendent Good.

28. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knopf, 2001) 382.