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An Explanation of Beauty

Nishida Kitarō's *Bi no Setsumei*

by STEVE ODIN

NISHIDA KITARŌ 西田幾多郎, 1870–1945, widely recognized as Japan's foremost modern philosopher, wrote *Bi no Setsumei* 美の説明, 'An Explanation of Beauty', in 1900, eleven years before publishing his first major work, *Zen no Kenkyū* 善の研究, 'A Study of Good'.¹ As one of his first original essays, *Bi no Setsumei* presents an initial formulation of certain ideas and themes characteristic of what has since become known as *Nishida tetsugaku* 西田哲学, or 'Nishida philosophy'.

Bi no Setsumei holds additional interest for scholars insofar as it fills a gap in our knowledge of Nishida's early intellectual development. As Valdo H. Viglielmo notes, although Nishida regularly kept a personal diary as well as correspondence with close friends, rather mysteriously there are no journal or letters for the entire year of 1900.² His journal breaks off abruptly on 3 October 1899 and is not resumed until 1 January 1901. Furthermore, aside from *Bi no Setsumei*, Nishida produced no other philosophical works during this period. Hence the significance of *Bi no Setsumei* is further increased in that it is the only surviving document from this hiatus in the otherwise carefully recorded life and thought of Nishida's early years.

At the philosophical level of discourse, *Bi no Setsumei* represents an original essay on the nature of beauty that synthesizes principles derived from both Western and Japanese aesthetics. Nishida begins the essay with an effort to formulate an adequate definition of 'beauty', or *bi*. First he directs his critical remarks against the identification of the 'sense of beauty' with a merely hedonic kind of 'pleasure' (*kairaku* 快楽), arguing that there are many

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¹ The brief essay is found in *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* 西田幾多郎, Iwanami, 19 vols., 2nd ed., 1965, 13, pp. 78–80 (it is also found in *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū*, Iwanami, 18 vols., 1947–1953, 14, pp. 52–54).

The essay originally appeared in *Hoku-*

shinkai Zasshi 北辰会雑誌, 26 (1900).

² Valdo H. Viglielmo, 'Nishida Kitarō: The Early Years', in Donald H. Shively, ed., *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, Princeton U.P., 1971, p. 554.

In this article, Viglielmo refers, for the first time in English, to the existence of *Bi no Setsumei*, and provides a brief summary of its contents, pp. 554–56.

worldly pleasures that cannot be described as beautiful or aesthetic. He then considers a more sophisticated theory of beauty as pleasure elaborated by the American psychologist H. R. Marshall. As Nishida points out, for Marshall the differentia of aesthetic experience lies in the relative permanence of pleasure both in impression and in memory. According to this criterion of beauty, sense pleasures elicited merely by gratification of appetite are not aesthetic, since they quickly pass over into satiety when the physiological conditions of appetite are removed. For this reason, Marshall argues that 'stable pleasure' is the special pleasure provided by art and known to us as beauty.

Although Nishida agrees that there is at least a partial truth to Marshall's definition of beauty as stable pleasure, he cannot accept it as a complete explanation of the aesthetic experience. In this context, Nishida asks: What is the special kind of pleasure characteristic of the sense of pleasure? At this point he turns to the explanation developed by the tradition of German Idealist aesthetics inspired by Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*, wherein the sense of beauty was defined as consisting in a purely 'disinterested pleasure', that is, 'a pleasure of the moment, when one forgets one's own interest such as advantage and disadvantage, gain and loss.'³

From the standpoint of East-West comparative aesthetics, however, Nishida's most valuable contribution in this essay is the manner in which he then proceeds to reformulate the Kantian sense of beauty as disinterested pleasure or artistic detachment in terms of the key philosophical notion of Japanese Zen, namely, *muga* 無我 (Sk. *anātman*), which can be translated in this context as either 'no-self' or 'ecstasy'. Indeed, Nishida's explicit definition of beauty as *muga* is not only innovative; it at once illuminates the traditional Japanese sense of beauty influenced by fundamental Zen principles. As we know from Nishida's journals and correspondence, *Bi no Setsumei* was written during that period of his early years, extending from around 1896 to 1902, when he was most actively engaged in the intensive practice of Zen meditation and discipline.⁴ On this basis, we can assume that although he makes no direct reference to Zen in this essay, his use of the term *muga* is nonetheless laden with traditional Zen meanings and associations.

It may be further noted that Nishida's application of the term *muga*, or no-self, to define beauty throughout this essay clearly anticipates his Jamesian notion of a 'pure experience' (*junsui keiken* 純粹經驗) devoid of any subject/object or self/other distinction as later articulated in his *Zen no Kenkyū*, as well as his more explicitly Zen concept of *zettai mu* 絶対無, or 'absolute nothingness', developed in the more mature phases of his philosophical career.

After defining the sense of beauty as *muga* in its meaning as no-self or

³ *Isshin no rigai tokushitsu o wasuretaru toki no kairaku* 一身の利害得失を忘れたる時の快楽.

⁴ For a detailed account of Nishida's prac-

tice of Zen meditation from about 1896 to 1902 as recorded in his diary and correspondence, see Viglielmo, esp. pp. 535-60.

ecstasy, Nishida then argues that beauty is identical with truth. He further emphasizes that beauty understood as *muga* is identical only with 'intuitive truth' (*chokkakuteki no shinri* 直覚的の真理), and not with intellectual truth obtained by the faculty of discriminative thought (*shikōryoku ni yotte etaru shinri* 思考力によって得たる真理). Here he criticizes those who value only 'logical truth' (*ronriteki shinri* 論理的真理) and reject intuitive truth as 'the mere fancy of poets' (*shijin no kūsō* 詩人の空想). According to Nishida, the intuitive truth of poets is that wherein we have 'separated from the self and become one with things'⁵, such that it is a 'truth seen with the eyes of God'⁶. Indeed, Nishida identifies this intuitive truth of beauty with the 'open secret' or 'open mystery' (*offenes Geheimnis*) of Nature revealed to the poet as described by Goethe.

While Nishida's essay begins with an effort to define beauty, it ends by attempting to clarify the interrelationships between art (*bijutsu*), religion (*shūkyō*), and morality (*dōtoku*). Here Nishida argues that since beauty is rooted in the experience of *muga* as no-self or ecstasy, it is ultimately of the same kind as religion. However, while the *muga* of beauty is 'the *muga* of the moment' (*ichiji no muga*), the *muga* of religion is 'eternal *muga*' (*eikyū no muga*). He then asserts that morality also originally derives from the experience of *muga*. This is indeed appropriate, since another standard dictionary definition of *muga* is 'altruism', which is simply the moral implication of the term in its usual sense as 'no-self', 'non-ego', 'selflessness', or 'self-effacement'.

Nishida further argues that although morality originates in the same realm as beauty and religion, it still belongs to 'the world of discrimination' (*sabetsukai*), since the idea of duty that is essential to morality is built upon the distinction between self and other as well as good and evil. Thus, morality is still not equal to the sublime realms of religion and art wherein the world of discrimination is fully transcended. Yet, he concludes, when morality advances to its highest degree, there is no difference between religion and morality.

Nishida later developed the basic themes of *Bi no Setsumei* in his more complex work titled *Geijutsu to Dōtoku* 芸術と道徳, 'Art and Morality', 1923. Throughout this work, he continues his polemic against the uncritical identification of beauty with mere pleasure. He again cites with approval Kant's theory of aesthetics: 'Goethe stated that we delight in the splendor of the stars in the firmament but we do not desire them.'⁷ Similarly, since the time of Kant, beauty has been thought of as "disinterested" [*interesselos*]. . . .⁸ Then, in a chapter titled *Shinzembi no Gōitsuten* 真善美の合一点, 'The Union Point of

⁵ *Onore o hanare yoku mono to itchi-shite* 己を離れ能く物と一致して. } *freut sich ihrer Prachte.*

⁶ *Kami no me o motte mitaru shinri* 神の眼を以て見たる真理. } ⁸ *Zenshū*, 3, p. 274. A translation is given in David A. Dilworth & Valdo H. Viglielmo, tr., *Art and Morality*, University Press of Hawaii, 1973, p. 28.

⁷ *Die Sterne, die begehrt man nicht, man*

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty', Nishida emphasizes that the fusion point for both art and morality is the ecstatic experience of self-effacement arising at the standpoint of religious intuition. Indeed, even in his penultimate essay, *Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan* 場所的論理と宗教的世界観, 'The Logic of Place and a Religious Worldview', 1945, Nishida argues that although art, religion, and morality are wholly distinct and irreducible standpoints of experience that move in completely different directions, they are all rooted in the kenotic act of self-emptying or self-negation.

In the final analysis, the basic insight of Nishida's *Bi no Setsumei* is that while the spheres of art, religion, and morality differ in extent as well as in depth, thereby establishing a hierarchy of values, they all ultimately originate from the same fundamental experience of *muga* in its Zen meaning of no-self or ecstasy.

An Explanation of Beauty

Bi no Setsumei

By NISHIDA KITARŌ

WHAT is beauty? If we inquire into it from the emotional aspect, the sense of beauty is nothing other than a kind of pleasure. Mainly since Burke,⁹ British psychologists have emphasized that beauty is something that gives a sense of pleasure, and that the sense of beauty is identical with selfish pleasure. Although this explanation is also true to a certain extent, as a definition of beauty it is still not adequate. The sense of beauty is pleasure, but the reverse is not always true. Everyone would agree that no matter how much pleasure things such as fame, wealth, food and drink give us, we do not at all consider them aesthetic pleasures. Recently a man named Marshall has written a book titled *Pain, Pleasure and Aesthetics*, which explains in detail the sense of beauty as a kind of pleasure.¹⁰ According to Marshall's argument, aesthetic pleasure is not limited only to the moment when it is felt, but is enjoyed in the same way when recalled later on. In a word, it is *stable* pleasure. Although I can agree that Marshall's explanation accords with the facts to a considerable extent, fundamentally it is no different from the previous explanations. I still cannot accept as a complete explanation the theory that the special characteristic of beauty is found simply in stable pleasure, or that this theory can fully explain the nature of beauty.

⁹ Edmund Burke wrote his influential treatise of aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, in 1735.

¹⁰ Henry Rutgers Marshall developed his hedonic theory of beauty as 'stable pleasure' in *Pain, Pleasure and Aesthetics*, Macmillan, London, 1895. He followed this with *Aesthetic Principles*, Macmillan, 1895, and *The Beautiful*, Macmillan, 1924.

Nishida here refers to the first of these three books, wherein Marshall wrote, p. 10:

'Those pleasures are judged to be aesthetic which (relatively speaking) are permanently pleasurable in memory.'

Thus, while ordinary sense pleasures quickly pass over into satiety when the physiological conditions of appetite are re-

moved, the beauty of art produces relatively permanent or stable pleasure that does not pass over into satiety and is not diminished as it is gratified.

As Marshall elsewhere writes: 'Beauty is relatively stable, or real pleasure. . . . We call an object beautiful which seems always to yield pleasure in impression, or contemplative revival.' *The Beautiful*, p. 78.

It is significant that in Chapter 5, 'Beauty and Pleasure', of the same work, Marshall clearly distinguishes his own view from the theory developed by Grant Allen in *Physiological Aesthetics*, 1877, which simply identifies beauty with sensuous pleasure. Hence, Marshall emphasizes that beauty of a *special kind* of pleasure, a pleasure that is relatively stable.

Then what are the characteristics of the type of pleasure that makes up the sense of beauty? What is the special characteristic of the sense of beauty? According to the explanation of German Idealism since Kant, the sense of beauty is pleasure detached from the ego.¹¹ It is a pleasure of the moment, when one forgets one's own interest such as advantage and disadvantage, gain and loss. Only this *muga* is the essential element of beauty; when this is lacking, no matter what kind of pleasure you feel, it cannot give rise to the sense of beauty. Long ago someone expressed the desire 'to see the moon of exile, although guilty of no crime,'¹² and this remark illustrates the matter very well. Even if a man is an artist of outstanding genius, no one who is mean of heart has ever become a great master. In contrast, however, when we are not in the least restricted by thought of self, not only does pleasure give rise to a sense of beauty, but everything that was originally unpleasant undergoes a complete change and provides aesthetic pleasure. That we deeply feel more and more aesthetic pleasure when we read a sad poem, experiencing more and more hatred or sorrow at what is hateful or sad, is mainly due to the above reason. A great man who is not only aloof from external matters but is also completely divorced from any thought of self-interest, reaches the point where everything in life gives a sense of beauty. 'The place where a man of great virtue goes is always enjoyed.'¹³ Therefore, if you want to obtain an authentic sense of beauty, you must confront things in the state of pure *muga*. The sense of beauty arises through this essential condition, known as 'divine inspiration' of art.

If the sense of beauty is as I have described above, what kind of thing produces it? In other words, what kind of thing do we call beauty? Everyone agrees that beauty is truth, that it is something that comes into existence in an ideal reality. However, as has been proposed by Baumgarten¹⁴ of the Leibnizian school, the truth and ideals that form the foundation of beauty should not be viewed as identical with logical truth and ideals. If you say that they are identical, then an anatomy chart would occupy the highest level of art, and this is quite ridiculous. The truth underlying beauty is not obtained by the

¹¹ Kant made famous the notion that all aesthetic judgments regarding the beautiful in matters of taste lie in their 'disinterested' attitude.

'Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful.'

Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, First Division, First Book, Analytic of the Beautiful, Section 5.

¹² A statement made by Minamoto Akimoto 源顯基, 1000-1047, and quoted by

Kenkō 兼好 in his classic *Tsurezuregusa* 徒然草, written between 1330 and 1332.

'Akimoto, the middle counselor, once spoke of wishing "to see the moon of exile though guilty of no crime".'

Donald Keene, tr., *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, Columbia U.P., 1967, p. 6.

¹³ The origin of this statement is unknown.

¹⁴ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, 1714-1762, first coined the term 'aesthetics' for a special branch of philosophical inquiry in his *Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus*, 1735.

faculty of thought, it is intuitive truth. As I noted above about the world of *muga*, it is a kind of truth that comes as a sudden stimulus from the depths of the heart. The reason why we somehow feel a kind of truth and we sympathize more and more strongly when we read Hamlet's soliloquy, is not because Hamlet's words accord with psychological theories. It is because something touches our heart strings. This kind of truth cannot be expressed in words. Indeed, this is the so-called 'open secret' (*offenes Geheimnis*) of Goethe.¹⁵

Occasionally people vainly esteem logical truth and reject intuitive truth as being the mere fancy of poets. However, in my opinion, this intuitive truth is attained when we have separated from the self and become one with things. In other words, it is a truth seen with the eyes of God. Since this kind of intuitive truth penetrates into the profound secrets of the universe, it is far deeper and greater than the logical truth obtained through ordinary thought and discrimination. Even if someday the time should come when scholars no longer pay any attention to the great philosophies of Kant and Hegel, will not the works of Goethe and Shakespeare continue to be transmitted for countless generations as mirrors of the human heart?

If I may summarize what has been said above, the feeling of beauty is the feeling of *muga*. Beauty that evokes this feeling of *muga* is intuitive truth that transcends intellectual discrimination. This is why beauty is sublime. As regards this point, beauty can be explained as the discarding of the world of discrimination and the being one with the Great Way of *muga*; it therefore is really of the same kind as religion. They only differ in the sense of deep and shallow, great and small. The *muga* of beauty is the *muga* of the moment, whereas the *muga* of religion is eternal *muga*. Although morality also originally derives from the Great Way of *muga*, it still belongs to the world of discrimination, because the idea of duty that is the essential condition of morality is built on the distinction between self and other, good and evil. It does not yet reach the sublime realms of religion and art. However, when you devotedly practice morality over many years, you finally reach the level that Confucius described as 'to go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and then to go home chanting poetry.'¹⁶ In other words, when morality advances and enters into religion, there is no difference between morality and religion.

¹⁵ The German concept of *offenes Geheimnis* ('open secret' or 'open mystery') is clearly expressed by Goethe as follows:

'He to whom Nature begins to unveil her open secret feels an irresistible longing for her worthiest interpreter, art.'

Quoted in Karl Vietor, *Goethe, The Thinker*, Harvard U.P., 1950, p. 179.

¹⁶ 'In the late spring, after the spring clothes have been newly made, I should like,

together with five or six adults and six or seven boys, to go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and then to go home chanting poetry.'

D. C. Lau, tr., *Confucius: The Analects*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1979, p. 111.

This verse illustrates the spiritual freedom and happiness enjoyed by the Confucian sage who follows the way of moral virtue.