



The Beautiful & Virtue

A Study of Six Platonic Dialogues

AN INTRODUCTION
by Thomas Jockin

Welcome to the introduction recording for our lecture series; The Beautiful and Virtue: A study of Six Platonic Dialogues. Before I begin with my prepared introduction essay, I want to thank you for your interest in considering beauty. There are many things you could be doing with your time — entertainment, hiking, time with loved ones, yet you choose to direct your attention to consider what at first seems obvious, but with deeper consideration, requires much more rigor. Something about this course resonated with you. I pray my forthcoming writings will be a fair exchange of your attention and time. Let us begin.

One morning not long ago, I had the urge to reread Thomas Aquinas. In particular, I read his account of honesty and was shocked at what I found. When I recall honesty as taught by my parents or use the term with my friends, the term seems synonymous with truth-telling. Yet, Aquinas had a



completely different understanding of honesty, described in four parts. First, honesty is placed under the virtue of temperance. This is unusual because temperance is a moral virtue and not an intellectual virtue. Second, honesty is convertible to virtue itself. Truth-telling is important but would not seem to encompass the entirety of virtue as a concept. Aquinas is directing readers to something radically different from just truth-telling. Third, honesty is not the same as the useful or the pleasant, but rather something good for its own sake — a statement only reserved for human happiness. Lastly, honesty is also convertible with beauty, not any beauty of appearances, but the spiritual beauty of true reality, A beauty of clarity and perfected existence. All at once, as I read Aquinas' account of honestum, I understood the power of Plato's work. Centuries later, the long shadow of Plato's writing on the beautiful has been cast on this 12th-century Dominican writing; A shadow that does not stop at Aquinas. When I read Heidegger's account of the authentic existence as Care, I continue to sense Plato's shadow continued to stretch over time into the 20th century.

In this lecture series, we are going to consider how, for Plato, beauty ascends the beloved from appearances to true realities. This is a shocking assertion because, since Kant, beauty has been treated as a personal preference on the same level as favorite ice cream flavor. How could a subjective preference move a pupil from appearances to true reality? When would a preference ever change a person's entire orientation to life? Consider



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how could a preference for ice cream flavor do such a thing? I think not. Instead, in this course, we return to the foundations of thought and see what other mode of beauty we could consider. Join me in this six-module seminar as a journey within the platonic dialogues to approach the Beautiful and virtue.

If this is the first time you have encountered me, My name is Thomas Jockin. I hold a BFA in communication design from the Parsons School of Design. Since 2015 I have worked with corporations such as Starbucks, Footlocker, Express, and Google on various design projects. Likewise, I have taught or guest lectured at education centers in New York City, such as SVA, Pratt Institute, Parsons, Fashion Institute of Technology, and The City University of New York. In 2021, I co-authored, with Javier Rivera and O.G. Rose, the book “A Philosophy of Glimpses” available on Amazon. I am thankful for the opportunity the Halkyon Guild has provided for me to speak with you. My time with design students focuses on drawing forth the beauty inside their sketches and prototypes. With my students we work with the first principles of art and design to draw out the hidden fulfillment lying dormant inside a pupil’s work. While such practical work is rewarding, because the first principle of design — beauty — is taken for granted, a different context of inquiry is required to think about such a first principle. Now with the Halkyon Guild, we will explore six platonic dialogues with a particular focus to



contemplate upon the beautiful and virtue. The six dialogues we will read together are:

1. Greater Hippias
2. Symposium
3. Phrades
4. Meno
5. Cratylus
6. Parmenides.

I have structured the course in such a manner so as we read these dialogues we will circumscribe the following considerations: We start with Greater Hippias with the typical elenchus method of knocking down the sophist Hippias's particular examples of the Beautiful and Socrates's hypothetical replies to what is the definition of the Beautiful. In fact, from the exchanges between Hippias and Socrates, the connection between predicates and their subjects begin to untether. From Symposium, we explore what love is as a predicate and how beauty interacts with love, in words spoken by Socrates, "to behold true realities which nourish true virtue." In Phaedrus, Plato presents two shocking notions. First, that predicates are a hierarchy of excessive desire. Second, the virtue of temperance is the acquired opinion to desire the best. Contending with Meno, we will attempt to thread the concepts of beauty, excellence, knowledge, and action into a woven whole. From Cratylus, revelations await us; Plato suggests the very instrument of



knowledge, names, is, in fact, images that are nothing like the realities they report to depict in transparent reality. If this is the case, the standard critique of image-makers by Plato in dialogues such as *The Republic* seem to extend even to words. How could we reconcile this apparent tension? We read together to find out. Lastly, we continue to circumscribe the path with *Parmenides*, one of the most enigmatic dialogues of Plato. After demolishing the character Socrates's notion of Forms, images and likeness are explored to point the way to a rehabilitated conception of the Beautiful.

When I introduce philosophy to design students, I begin with the topic of *arete*, which can be translated as excellence or virtue. Most of my students never heard the term in a design context — this was the case in my own education. The collapse of aesthetic deliberation into personal preference is my suggestion why excellence is never spoken of in the classroom. Instead, what if we reconsider virtue not as a cultural or subjective preference, but rather, as a beautiful activity? Then, we begin to see a vantage point of reality pregnant in both possibility and energy. As I tell my students, design is like writing — both prose and poetry, when done well, present to the viewer actual realities, albeit in different modes which complement one another. The question is not “does this artifact do a function,” that would be just engineering. In design, we instead ask, “does this artifact function with beauty.” The answer to such an inquiry is vastly different; not a formulaic dead repetition, but instead, a creative living dance.



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My own experience as a design student is an example. In my sophomore typography class, I was instructed by a typeface designer named Joshua Darden. I still recall, almost 20 years later, what I thought at the end of the first class with Darden; “I want a mind as beautiful as his.” I immediately recognized Joshua’s intellectual powers, perceptions, and considerations and fell in love with what I was beholding. I was Joshua’s apprentice for three years after his inaugural course. To think that one lecture directed my understanding of design and how my life has unfolded. At 19 years old, my entire orientation to life was reshaped by an encounter with the beautiful.

My life was shaped by that beauty that acted upon me and compelled me towards a beloved, A beloved not of a body but of an activity of the soul. This is one of the themes we’ll explore together; Plato demonstrates many beauties. The bodies of living things such as maidens or horses are beautiful. There is the beauty of activities of the soul, such as my master’s thought process in typography. But there is even more; there is the beauty of virtues, such as fortitude or charity; the beauty of laws and institutions, and even higher still, all which abide in some unity named The Beautiful.

I would like you to consider if the Beautiful we encounter in our lives is not a conceptual abstraction. Sunsets are not beautiful; this sunset you are beholding is beautiful. Maidens are not beautiful; this maiden before you is beautiful. This act of charity you witness is beautiful. This law enacted is beautiful. In all these examples, beauty seems to direct us to the *haecceity* or



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thingness of entities. Yet, beauty also points us to something universal beyond the individual present in front of us. The many and the One is expressed in the Beautiful. I ask you to join me in reading these six dialogues of Plato to find out the consequences of such a conception of beauty.

Our understanding of images and likeness also requires more profound thought if we want to grasp what Plato means by “beauty without figure or color” We need another look at the likeness. Likeness as mimicry is the standard explanation of beauty in the arts. The drawing of the person is beautiful when it best mimics the actual person. I suggest in this lecture series that mimicry of nature does not exhaust the beautiful. As Carl Jung states, quoting the Alchemists; “What Nature leaves imperfect, Art perfects.” Consider, how does a name mimic the thing named? In what manner is a written name, “dog,” composed of sounds and marks on a page, anything like the actual dog? We have to admit there is no likeness in sound or figure. Likeness as mimicry is lacking as an explanation.

Continuing my point, the convertibility of “Goodness” with “Beauty” is a puzzle we will attend to this seminar series. In one reading of these dialogues, you could conclude — as Tolstoy did — that Goodness and Beauty are one and the same concept collapsed into the notion of pleasure. But such a conclusion does not exhaust all possible answers. The phrase “Goodness is the same as Beauty” entails acknowledging some differences. The difference could be one of phonemes or the sounds that make up a name. “Beauty” and “جمال” posit the



same notion, but in different languages, depicted in other graphemes that map onto different phonemes. Or, the difference could be one of relation under a subject. A good chair is different from a good man sitting on a chair. Most enigmatic, the difference could be one of analogy. To explain what I mean, let me give an example; What exactly are we saying when we speak of “liquid capital” or “cash flow”? When we use the term “liquid,” we tend to think about entities such as water. Yet, capital is nothing like water. Capital is a promise imposed onto some material, be it paper with ink or zeros and ones on a computer. Water is a particular arrangement imposed onto hydrogen and oxygen atoms. In both form and material, capital and water are nothing alike. Yet the analogy of “liquid” posits a real and common reality to both entities. I mean actual reality and not figures of speech because economists deploy fluid dynamics, which describes water, to make falsifiable predictions related to finance and capital. Whether the difference between “Goodness” and “Beauty” is one of phonemes, relation to a subject, or analogy is something we will investigate together.

Much of our work together is to help uncover the deeper meaning of phrases and words that have been collapsed or buried over the development of philosophy. “Form” is such a word. What is translated to “form,” “figure,” or “pattern,” in fact, could refer to *Paradeigma*, *Eidos*, *Morphe*, *Schemata*, or *Taxis*. These are not the same idea but instead a hierarchy of reality. Aristotle uses *taxis* in Rhetoric to refer to the composition of unlike elements arranged



together to make the whole of a persuasive speech. Aristotle also uses *schemata* to reference the shape of unnatural kinds, whereas the term *Morphe* is used for natural types. *Eidos*, which may be translated as species, can, to our ear, be a semantic category, whereas, for the Greeks, *Eidos* was ontological rather than semantic. Within Sufi philosophy, the suggestion that there is a form of appearances and a form of reality corresponds to *Eidos* and *Morphe* distinction. Lastly, *Paradeigma* points to what later thinkers, such as Aquinas, would call the exemplar cause of a thing, the isolated entity, which illustrates the first principle within the mind of the maker. Where Aquinas states the exemplars are in mind, Plato saw *paradeigma* as the most authentic and singular reality outside of minds. A more rigorous understanding of these terms will likewise aid our understanding of The Beautiful for Plato.

The dichotomy between Aristotlean and Platonic thought is due for reconsideration. Rather than the top-down rationalist account of Plato, it is my hope, as we see in this reading of his dialogues, that the variable-making arts at a particular time play a large role in Plato's arguments. This is different from the single mildly hunting for the definition of concepts with ignorant interlocutors for some inert substance such as “what is piety?” Or “what is courage?” Indeed, seeing Plato arrange the dialogues in such a manner so as to esteem the making activities that bootstrap knowledge is a very different experience of dialectic — much more “inductive” — than the top-down rationalist depiction of Plato would permit. If Plato is truly such a top-down



thinker, then why does Plato's character Socrates repeatedly cite the work of doctors, craftsmen, and gymnasts to refute the claims of his speaking partners. Something is going on here to counter the stereotype.

To summarize this section, our inquiry into the Beautiful will instruct us in four major topics: First is motivation of pupils under the topic of desire. Second, pedagogy under the topic of rhetoric. Followed by epistemology under the topic of love. Lastly, the nature of reality is to be studied under the topic of images and resemblances.

This course is for several kinds of learners. First, this course is for those who come from artistic practice with the wish to explore philosophy. By reconsidering what is beauty, artists may deepen their practice. Philosophy can be daunting, especially if you attempt to read contemporary thinkers. The terms are technical and different from the common meanings in the dictionary. But, by starting with Plato under The Beautiful and Virtue, you will have a gateway to connect and enliven your professional practice with the methods and language of philosophy. The second kind of learner in this course are those who wish for a steady footing to an authentic life. As I spoke with Johannes in a discussion you can find on Youtube, we cannot simply read the past and copy/paste their ways of thinking to today. Our world is different from theirs. Our constraints, our dangers, and our opportunities are not alike. Instead, we need to reach not for the duplication or mimicry of the past but rather to bring forth a new image of how to live well. The Beautiful is how I



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believe we can begin to achieve the authentic life of true happiness. If you are such a learner, join me at the Halkyon Guild, meditate on the following questions:

1. What is the Beautiful?
2. Who understands and enacts beauty?
3. When does beauty shape the soul?
4. How do we come to know and love beauty in the world?
5. Where does a love for virtue come from?

I look forward to our approach toward the mysteries that surround both the Beautiful and virtue. I am confident you will be delighted by what springs forth in yourself by a sincere inquiry into what is The Beautiful. We begin our inquiry with the dialogue Greater Hippias — where our common suggestions of what is beauty is to be reconsidered.