THE MESSAGE OF BEAUTY

[Our old and esteemed friend, **Dr. Alexander F. Skutch**, is often moved by his close study of nature to cogent philosophical reflections. In this long essay the presence of Beauty in our world suggests to him some important thoughts about the relation of man to his environment. There is profound truth in the observation that of a beautiful thing we demand nothing except that it shall be itself. The true response to Beauty is instinctively selfless; a voluptuous, possessive response implies a certain blindness.

We print below the first part of the essay; the concluding part will appear next month.—Ed.]

I

As we travel through the wilder parts of the earth, far from the crowded centres of men, we detect beauty and grandeur in a hundred situations where we could survive only precariously or not at all, in a thousand objects which are of no practical use to us, which might injure or destroy us if we came too close. In the frozen arctic wastes as in the hottest forests of the tropics, where we can exist only with great difficulty and at the price of enduring many hardships, we meet beauty on every side: in the gleaming snow and spectacular atmospheric phenomena of the polar regions; in the forms and colours of plants, birds, insects, and other animals of the tropical sylva. We gaze into the uttermost depths of space through powerful telescopes and discover beauties which the starry heavens withhold from our unaided vision. Through a microscope we examine the contents of a drop of water, or the tissues of a plant, and here, too, marvellously beautiful patterns greet our delighted gaze. Even the bright colours wherewith certain animals, such as the coral snake, warn us that they will hurt or destroy us if we touch them, attract us by their beauty. The congeniality of the world considered aesthetically contrasts strongly with its frequent indifference or hostility to our practical interests. Our aesthetic adaptation to our environment is far superior to our biological and social adaptation; it is the most perfect that we have achieved.

What are the reasons for this? Indeed, why should we be sensitive to beauty at all? This is a problem which presents great difficulties to the evolutionist. Aesthetic sensibility may be an incidental result of the organization of a nervous system which evolved primarily for such practical ends as finding food and shelter, escaping enemies, and the like. Given such sensibility, however it arose, natural selection would, I believe, promote its positive response to certain objects and situations to which the animal was constantly exposed. If the blue of the sky and the green of the earth were as depressing to an animal as certain colours

can be to us, its vital processes and its will to live might be adversely affected, so that in the struggle for existence it would be less successful than some related animal which, instead of being depressed, was pleasantly excited by these wide-spread colours. It seems obvious that, in animals which choose their sexual partners by visual characters, an individual will be more likely to win a mate and reproduce if potential partners are attracted rather than repelled by its appearance. Darwin's theory of sexual selection accounts for many of the more striking adornments of animals by just this consideration. Thus widely accepted biological principles seem adequate to account for the beauty which we, and doubtless other animals with well-developed vision, find in the blue sky with its white clouds, in the green and flowery earth, and in members of the same species, especially those of the opposite sex when in their prime.

I doubt, however, that considerations such as the foregoing can adequately account for the whole range of our aesthetic responses. They seem especially inadequate in the case of music, which poses one of the most difficult problems to any theory of aesthetics. Why should a complex train of atmospheric vibrations, which conveys no welcome information and contributes nothing to our survival, delight us so strongly as music can do? I believe that we can account for this only on the fundamental principle that harmony is the source of all joy and happiness, not only in ourselves but doubtless also in every conscious being. Harmony arises whenever a number of diverse parts are unified in a coherent pattern; the harmonious object is simultaneously one and many. In the case of music, the component parts are notes of diverse intensities and pitches, conjoined in a coherent pattern which we call a melody. In a painting or a landscape, the components are coloured forms, which must be combined with a certain coherence and balance to appear beautiful to us. Hardly anything is more essential to our felicity than health, which we enjoy when all the organs and functions of our body so support each other that they form one harmonious, organic whole. But above all, happiness requires the harmonious integration of our mental life in all its aspects, and the regulation of our activities in conformity with our ideals, aspirations, or principles of conduct. One might adduce many other examples of the general law that we experience pleasure or happiness when the objects or situations which affect us form harmonious patterns; and, when these patterns are perceived by means of our external senses, we call the resulting pleasure aesthetic and say that we behold beauty.

Since to form a harmonious pattern is the condition of beauty, and organisms can hardly survive unless they are harmoniously integrated, it is not surprising that beauty should be wide-spread in the living world.

Yet this consideration alone will hardly explain why we find beauty in so many objects and situations which contribute nothing material to our welfare and may even be hostile to us. May not the reason be that we demand nothing of the beautiful thing, except that it be itself? Being itself, it is beautiful; and being beautiful, it cheers us and helps to "bind us to the earth," as Keats said. In most other relationships with things that somehow reward us, we make far greater demands on them. To serve us, they must deviate from their usual course, make an effort, or relinquish something, perhaps their lives, as often happens when we use them for food, clothing, or the construction of our houses. But everything, especially every living thing, exists primarily for its own sake rather than for another's. If an animal, it may resist, by means of fangs, horns, or other weapons, our efforts to exploit it; if a plant, it may cover itself with thorns or stinging hairs, or impregnate its tissues with distasteful or poisonous substances to make itself inedible. But, when anything can enhance our lives simply by being itself and following its own course, it has no reason to withhold this boon. When we demand of the beautiful object only that it be itself, we find beauty everywhere.

This fact should regulate our treatment of beautiful things. When we are young and foolish, we naturally wish to seize and retain whatever delights us, so that, as we fondly suppose, we may enjoy it for ever. Many, unfortunately, never outgrow this childish attitude. Others finally realize that the proper treatment of a thing that rewards us simply by being itself is to permit it to remain itself, interfering with it as little as possible. Since it is wrong to claim for oneself alone that which is freely offered to all, we should protect the beautiful object without seeking exclusive possession of it. In a society which was not, like ours, tainted to the roots by the poison of commercialism, no one would sell or buy things which are cherished for their beauty alone. The artist would create them for the joy of creation and place them where they would be most appreciated.

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(To be concluded)