

## THE BEAUTY OF ENCOUNTER

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Very good morning. Thank you, first of all, for the invitation. Thanks to the Cathedra Palau, for the invitation, for this opportunity to reflect on a topic that I think is extremely interesting for everyone. I am going to try to explore philosophically and theologically what the beauty of encounter means. The beauty of encounter between people. This is the idea.

This is the goal. This is the purpose of this presentation that will end with some questions or issues to be reflected upon afterwards. I will start with the concept of beauty. You already know that a branch of philosophy that is aesthetics has as its objective, as a formal object of study, beauty and ugliness.

What do we talk about when we talk of a beautiful work, a beautiful landscape, a beautiful person, even a beautiful soul, as the romantic poets would say? And what do we talk about when we speak of ugliness, the horrible, what really disgusts us. Concept of beauty and the concept of ugliness is not a concept that generates unanimity, quite the contrary.

There is a great polysemy regarding this concept. From Plato to Bertrand Russell, to cite two of the great philosophers of the entire Western tradition, from the fifth century before Christ to the twentieth century, we find a great multiplicity of ideas like; what is beauty, what is goodness, what is ugliness and what is evil.

This gives proof of the plurality of approaches, and also of the infinite richness of human thought that is expressed in so many different ways throughout the Western tradition. If, in addition, we were to explore other traditions, the Eastern tradition or the African oral philosophical traditions, we would realize that the mosaic of ideas of beauty still widens and expands even more. For this reason, the first thing in a presentation of this nature, whose objective is precisely to deal with the beauty of the relationship and of the encounter, is to clarify the term, logically, what we are talking about when we speak of beauty. And that's what I propose to deal now.

When the medieval thought began to discuss in the university through the so-called *quaestio disputata* (*disputed questions*), they always began the discussion with the *declaratio terminis* (*declaration of terms*), that is, the terminological clarification, because we often use words in an inappropriate or imprecise way or use them in a way that we believe that *our receiver*, you who are listening to me, use them in the same way. However, many times we use the term beauty, dignity, happiness, freedom, but the meaning, that is, the semantic content of such terms, varies in one person, in one group or another.

That is why it seems to me that to facilitate understanding and also to encourage subsequent discussion, whether in groups or individual reflection, it is essential to clarify the term, logically, what are we talking about when we speak of beauty?

From my point of view, what exists today is a very banal (mundane) and superficial understanding of beauty, especially related to physical bodies and objects, especially bodies, that adapt to a certain model, to a certain pattern. We say, for example, that a man is beautiful or that a woman is beautiful, when his body, the measurements and the features of his body adapt to the established ideal pattern, to what we would say the archetype, the model. And we say that a person, that a woman, that a man is ugly or not beautiful, when he/she is far from that pattern, when his/her body measurements, when his/her facial expression, when his/her facial angles, when his/her waist, when his/her legs, disagree with that pattern. Therefore, beauty, as we handle it in everyday language, has to do with adaptation to an established pattern that has been significantly modified throughout history. Aesthetic archetypes, feminine beauty or masculine beauty have been gradually transformed throughout history. And a reflection of that is the history of pictorial art or sculptural art, for example.

However, I propose, following Plato and following Dickenstein, to transcend this very corporeal idea of beauty, so related to an object, to measures and only to an exteriority. And I propose to return to the idea of beauty that transcends the corporeal, that transcends the material and that has to do with the interior, has to do with interiority. We can speak of a beautiful body, but as the German romantics say, also of a beautiful soul "*schöne Seele*". Here we refer when we speak of a beautiful soul, a beautiful person, a beautiful action. We no longer speak of a body, nor do we speak of a figure that adapts to an aesthetic pattern, we speak of a way of being. This is the question, beauty is a way of being, a way of acting. In the world there are beautiful actions and ugly actions. There are beautiful souls and there are souls shadowed by evil, by pettiness. There are noble souls and there are souls overshadowed by narcissism or self-centeredness.

Therefore, the first thing I propose is to transcend this corporeal, material notion of beauty, which from my point of view is a significant reductionism. Who helps us transcend this idea of beauty? Great philosophers who, from Plato to Wittgenstein, passing through Saint Augustine or Saint Thomas Aquinas, open up a much broader vision of beauty, which does not have to do only with the tactile or with the measurements of a body or with the weight of that body.

On the other hand, this very corporeal and trivialized notion of beauty has its effects on people, generating what I like to call a kind of totalitarianism of the body, a kind of tyranny of the body. Since the model is in the goal, one has to adapt, strive, sacrifice even with great pain to reach that goal and thus be recognized, accepted and applauded socially. This way of proceeding, in my opinion, breaks plurality, breaks with the diversity of bodies, of forms of life and establishes a kind of highway where all human beings have to obey a pattern and become clones of an aesthetic archetype or of an archetype or aesthetic reference that we see through television screens, that we see in the *influencers*, in the *youtubers*, in the actresses, in the actors, in the models, in

the catwalks that daily, repeatedly present a certain body shape with a dictatorship being established.

It seems to me that we have to claim another form of beauty and free ourselves from this understanding of beauty that is so highly imposed and that generates all kinds of frustrations, discomforts, guilt, to the extent that one does not adjust perfectly to that established model. We focus there.

What are we talking about beauty? Some relate to unity, others to the word goodness, others to the word truth, others to the word harmony, proportionality, and symmetry. If I were to make a conceptual map with the word beauty in the center, we would see that it is related to these words, beyond a certain physical form. The word goodness, truth, unity, harmony, symmetry, are heavy words, they are words with great philosophical density.

I am going to underline an element especially that which is in Plato and which Ludwig Wittgenstein later recover in their own way. The thesis that I am going to defend and that I will later apply to the field of interpersonal relationships, of interpersonal encounters, is the following: Beauty and goodness are exactly the same. Either beauty or goodness is one and the same, or to put it still another way, the beautiful soul is the good soul, and the good soul is the beautiful soul. And whoever has a beautiful soul is a good person, and whoever has a good soul is a beautiful and a good person. This is the underlying thesis: the correspondence between Kindness and beauty. We find this very distant thesis in Plato in the *Hípias Minor*, a very interesting dialogue by Plato, V<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, not as long as La Republic nor as well known as El Banquete (the banquet), nor as El Timeo. But the *Hípias Minor*, Socrates the protagonist, reflects together with his interlocutors on what do we talk about when we talk about beauty? What is its nature?

But later, another author from the 20<sup>th</sup> century recovers it. In a phrase that for me is very inspiring and that I am going to underline to try to explain what I will say next. From a phrase by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the author of the *Tractatus Lógico Filosófico* of 1921, a work that is over a hundred years old, and where he explains in a very simple sentence the following, ethics and aesthetics are one, or ethics and aesthetics are the same. The German expression for this phrase is also very easy to remember: “*Ethik und Ästhetik sind eins*”. They are one and the same, Interesting! Because ethics deals with goodness, aesthetics deals with beauty, but if goodness and beauty are the same, ethics and aesthetics also deal with the same thing.

That is, what is beauty, what is goodness. Therefore, we make a leap and go from formal beauty, physical body, to inner beauty understood as goodness.

Now we will ask another question: If beauty is kindness, what is a beautiful relationship? Which is the same as asking ourselves, what is a good relationship? What is a good encounter between human beings?

Let's look into that. But first, I invite you to reflect on the term "encounter". This term, above all, has been the object of a great development in the twentieth century by the so-called personalist philosophy. Both francophone personalism, of Emmanuel Mounier, of Jean Lacroix, of Marcel Levaux, of Gabriel Marcel, where the encounter is, the relationship occupies the central focus of the personalist philosophy of the twentieth century.

But also in the German-speaking world, think of Martin Buber and his great work, *I and You*, *Ich und Du*, a German title that was published in 1923. Very soon we will celebrate the centenary of this very short work, but of an enormous spiritual, ethical, even mystical density.

I and you. Either Rosensweig's work or Eisner's work. What am I saying? For these philosophers it is essential to reflect on the nature of the encounter, because each human being is the result of multiple encounters. Our identity, what we are cannot be separated, cannot be separated from the multiple encounters that we have had throughout our life trajectory.

And those encounters build us, configure us, define us as we are. However, there are encounters of one nature and encounters of another nature. And here what it is about thinking is about the beauty of the encounter and of the relationship. The encounter, what is it in the strict sense? The encounter is the relationship between *I and you* that interacts, in such a way that both are transformed as a consequence of that interaction. One thing is an epidermal encounter that practically only skims the surface of the subject. Another thing is an encounter that transforms, that changes, that modifies our way of thinking, of acting, of wanting, of understanding reality, of understanding ourselves. There are encounters on the surface; there are encounters in the depths. There are encounters that are simply epidermal friction and there are encounters that define us and open us up. I give an example; it is very likely that among you there are teachers who have many students or some students regularly in front of them. There are encounters between teacher and student, between educator and learner that can be profoundly transformative. Socrates met people in the Athenian Agora and talked with them, but that meeting had a purpose: to give birth to a truth, for the learner to find himself to try to answer the question: Who am I? *Ergo sum*, as Saint Augustine would say in the *Soliloquies*. Who I am. Therefore, the encounter is that event through which *I and you* interrelate, transform, modify each other as a consequence of the interaction. For an encounter to take place, this is developed very thoroughly by Emmanuel Mounier, a great French philosopher, father of communitarian personalism, co-director of *Esprit magazine* with Jean Lacroix, for this encounter to take place a series of conditions are essential. Let's see them, because many times these conditions fail or do not occur in their fullness. And the final consequence is that the encounter has been a fictitious encounter, a simulation, a peripheral encounter, but not a transforming encounter. The first condition for the encounter is to go out of oneself, the exteriorization to meet the other. It is essential to get out of oneself, what we could call the ecstatic movement. It consists of going out, emitting a message, a

thought, an emotion through words, through gestures, through networks, through gestural language, verbal language, which is in any case, going out of oneself. There is no encounter if *I and you* are hermetically sealed in their capsules and do not externalize what lives inside them.

Socrates came out of himself; Jesus came out of himself. Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the Church is called to *go forth* to meet others, with those who do not know the Gospel, with those who ignore it, with those who are indifferent or with those who simply despise it. But in any case, it is called to come out of one-self.

First condition of the encounter: the ecstatic movement. But there is a second requirement or a second basic condition for the meeting, which is receptivity. For there to be an encounter between *the I and the you*, I must give, but the I must receive also and then exchange those roles, if not, there is no encounter.

This requires a receptivity, the ability to make oneself available empty-handed, to take the form of the recipient, to practice hospitality in order to receive that message that the other has externalized with the resources they have and through the channels they dominate. A child will scream, cry because he still does not know how to speak, the adolescent will already speak, he will even be able to write what they have inside and others will do it through a gestural language due to their phonic disability. The point is that there has to go out something from oneself.

Yet another basic element for there to be an interpersonal encounter, which is fundamental: the ability to free oneself from prejudices, from clichés, from all those stereotyped visions of the other that many times deprive us of listening, of attending, of receiving. It is like a kind of wall, with a kind of surface that covers the subject and makes it impossible for me to listen to the other because I label her before she has sent a message and that makes the encounter impossible.

Prejudice is often an unfounded advance judgment on the other, without giving him the possibility of expressing himself, I qualify him, label him, even stigmatize him because of who he is, what he looks like, how he dresses, the colour of his skin, his height, physical form, smell, clothing. Therefore, the third requirement is *freedom from prejudice*. What fascinates me about a character like Jesus; it is this freedom from prejudice. He not only met the priests, the scribes, those who represented the wealthy classes of society, but he also met the humiliated, the offended, those with a bad reputation, the sick, the infected, children, women, the poor, immigrants, all types of people of the world. And that is only possible if there is *freedom from prejudices*.

One comes out of himself and listens to what the other communicates to him. Then there is encounter. But it is only possible, if the fourth condition and last requirement is met which is humility, the mother of virtues, said Saint Augustine.

Why should I come out of myself? Why should I receive the other, if not the idea that I do not know everything? If part of the false idea that he knows everything that he has the truth. Why should I receive the other in the first place? Arrogance, pride, the first

deadly sin, is a fundamental obstacle to reception. Only the one who recognizes that he does not know or that he does not know everything or that he knows very little and that the other can teach him, whoever the other is, listens. On the other hand, the arrogant, the petulant, the arrogant closes in his EGO as if it were an airtight capsule, what do you have to tell me that I don't know! What are you going to tell me that I haven't thought of? Therefore, *pride greatly hinders* the process of receptivity, which is a fundamental condition of the encounter. But also it is way of coming out of oneself. Why should I come out of myself if I already know everything, I already dominate everything? Why should I waste my time explaining what I know to someone else? The proud don't know about themselves either. He shuts himself away, he doesn't spend energy, he doesn't spend time to express what he already knows. Therefore, humility is a *sine qua non* condition of the encounter. And on the other hand, the great obstacle is the ego: where there is an I that idolizes HIS EGO and a **You**, that also idolizes HIS EGO, the encounter is impossible.

What is there is an ego logical struggle for land, for power, for knowledge or for taking over all of reality. But encounter with other presupposes going forth, receptivity, freedom from prejudice and humility, a fundamental virtue, although it does not count among the cardinal virtues, nor among the theological virtues. But it is the mother of all those virtues.

If there is no humility, there is no hope, there is no charity. There is of course no faith. If there is no humility, there is no prudence, there is no strength, there is no justice, there is no temperance. It is the mother of all those other so-called cardinal and theological virtues.

Good! We know what beauty is identified with goodness and we know what the encounter is and the conditions of that encounter, we go to the last point.

What is the beauty of the encounter? When can the encounter between people, between groups, between generations, between cultures, between members of different religions, between believers and non-believers, be described as beautiful or good? Well, I usually give four ideas, naturally this would give much more, but four ideas to talk about the beauty of the encounter or the quality of the encounter in a more psychological and functional language.

The first characteristic of the beauty of the encounter is the *self-giving*. There is beauty in an encounter when there is self-giving, mutual giving. When there is calculation, when there is calculation of consequences, calculation of efforts, rational calculation to possess it for myself, beauty disappears. Calculation is incompatible with beauty. Beauty is closely related to the gift. The gift of self. I give an example, in an encounter where two people help each other; this is beautiful, the beauty is there, where one contributes to the other what he knows, what he masters what he has learned and the other gives to the first, also his learning, the heritage of his life.

This relationship of mutual donation is what Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics called friendship. And friendship is an encounter characterized by its beauty. Donation

without limits, donation without calculation, you give time to the friend, you give advice to the friend, you give resources to the friend, you give hope to the friend, you give consolation to the friend. A beautiful relationship is a relationship founded on the practice of the gift and a generous gift and a gratuitous gift.

When there is calculation, when I interact with you to achieve something that I couldn't do alone. When I relate to you to have more money to be more known, to have more power, to promote myself to a higher workplace, we speak of the instrumental encounter of a useful friendship, said Aristotle. And while it is useful, it cannot be described as a perfect friendship or a beautiful friendship.

The concept of *Caros*, beautiful in Greek, has to do with gratuitousness. It has to do with self-giving and it has to do with the difficult. In the *Hippias Minor*, Plato relates it to the difficult. Beauty is difficult. If a beautiful, sculptural, pictorial, architectural work is difficult... Pasting and cutting is easy. Reproduce, plagiarize, it's easy. But making a beautiful work is difficult, at a political level, at a philosophical level, at a pictorial level, it is difficult. It is a fight against the Limits. A beautiful encounter is not easy because there are resistances from the ego, convenience, comfort, the temptation to treat the other as an object. There is temptation to treat the other as an instrument at my service. We need to be always on the lookout.

But we have the first characteristic: When do you live in a relationship in an encounter? When there is donation and that invites us to examine ourselves in my habitual relationships, in my family relationships, in my professional relationships, in my social, friendly, neighbourhood relationships. Is this element there? When I interact with my peers, do I think of giving myself? In self-donation? Or do I think Machiavellian about how I can manage them so that they are beneficial to me for my causes, for my objectives and for my purposes? The question is different.

Second, when there is a beautiful relationship? When can the meeting be described as beautiful between two people, Father and son? When there is truth. When the truth is in the first place. The lie is ugly. The falsehood, the simulation, the deceit, the double life. This is ugliness. Hypocrisy. I don't say what I think and I rarely mean what I say. I say the opposite of what I think, I tell you one thing and when I'm with others I say the opposite of what I had told you. This is ugliness. Beauty is related to kindness. We have seen. Both are transcendental according to the medieval: *pulchrum*, *bonus*, but also with *veritas*, truth. And what does a truthful relationship mean? Where one is authentic. He doesn't mask himself; he doesn't paint digital makeup; he expresses himself as he is and says what he feels in his heart and sometimes the truth is difficult to say and digest. But we have already said that beauty is difficult (Plato) and sometimes telling the truth to a friend, a husband, a partner, a son, a father, a student... It is difficult. But resorting to lying, even if it were pious, even if it were benevolent, is to succumb to ugliness in the relationship; therefore, a beautiful relationship is a relationship where the truth presides, although sometimes authenticity hurts. But it is essential to maintain that relationship and generate credibility. It generates the feeling of being in front of someone who is trustworthy.

When the friend tells you the truth and does not flatter you and tells you the truth, it can hurt, but in the end, it is what gives credibility to the friend. Aristotle says, also in the *Nicomachean ethics* that many flatter, but with the interest of taking advantage. They flatter the king, they flatter the bishop, they flatter the professor, they flatter the president in order to capture his benevolence and win some favour.

Therefore, it means obeying the instrumental relationship, the useful view that Aristotle said. However, when one really has a beautiful or good relationship with others, one does not deceive, does not hide, does not falsify things and finds the right words and the right time to say them, which is called *Kairos* in Greek, the right time to say them.

Therefore, we have three features: a beautiful relationship is a relationship where the self-gift is fundamental; it is a relationship where the truth is fundamental. And here comes the third, the unity, the third transcendental character, *unitas*, one, the unity. A unity that does not dissolve me and you into a whole uniformity. The beauty of a relationship is that each one can be what they are, but that between the two there is a unity that transcends opinions, the ups and downs of life and that unity sustains that community of people in difficult moments of life. It is a united family, we say. It is a united community, it is a united group, it is a united people. What do we say, when we say that? That everyone is the same? No, that's uniformity. Pope Francis invites us a lot to distinguish between community and uniformity in the community. The I and the you can subsist as I and you, they do not dissolve into a whole, they do not lose their singularity.

The son has his peculiarities and the father has his. But between them there is unity, acceptance, empathy, fusion in a love that transcends differences, but not dissolution of each of their traits, of their particularities. Of course, to achieve this unity it is essential to see what unites us in a community of faith. In a scientific community, knowledge unites research; in a community of brothers it unites the ties of fraternity, of consanguinity between them.

What unites us? The essential thing in a relationship is to see what unites, but not to pursue, not to crush those differences that make each human being unique; because when that happens, wealth of personalities in the world is lost and that singularity that is each person is lost. As Kierkegaard says: *"A unique and singular individual in history, unique and singular individual in front of God"*.

Therefore, we already have three, where there is beauty in the relationship there is a gift, a generous gift, a gratuitous gift, there is truthfulness and there is, as I said, also unity.

But there is one last feature and with that I would finish to give rise to the questions. And the last feature is the following: it is the experience of compassion or charity, in a traditional Christian language; of compassion, in a language that refers us more to Buddhism, not being indifferent to the suffering of others. On the contrary, to

participate, to experience the suffering of others firsthand. To say it with Pope Francis, where there is indifference, there is a loss of humanity.

What we suffer today is also a pandemic of indifference on multiple levels. Indifference towards the poor, indifference towards nature, indifference towards the excluded, indifference towards God. A kind of Globalization of indifferences in its own terminology. Where there is indifference, there is no beauty.

Precisely, beauty is deference, it is attention, it is inclination for the other; receptivity to the other. That means that a relationship has beauty when there is attention to the suffering of others, to the pain of others, to the different types of suffering that a human being can suffer, from bodily pain, toothache, to the spiritual suffering of a deep crisis of meaning, or existential frustration or vital anguish or simply disenchantment or tiredness of living. Forms of suffering that are very common in the so-called First World. So, an encounter has beauty, when in that encounter there is deference, just the opposite, *of indifference*: being deferential to the other. And this means being aware of their convulsions, their heartbeats, their pains, their moans, some very quiet, others very loud. But, in any case, not to be indifferent to that reality that moves us.

Finally, that requires us to audit ourselves, explore ourselves. I invite everyone if that is the model of a beautiful encounter and those are the characteristics, the requirements, the model of what a beautiful encounter would be, or a good encounter between human beings. Now we have to examine ourselves individually regarding the quality of our usual links in our ordinary life, in our private, discreet life, that we establish links with different people for different reasons.

But we could ask ourselves what quality, what beauty these encounters have as they transform us. How do we change that encounter into an opportunity? In a *kairos* to grow, develop our potentialities, get to know each other better, accept each other better... And also, how we take advantage of that encounter to make the other grow, develop their potentialities, that they know each other better, that they accept each other better, that they have, deep down, a level of happiness higher than the one he had before that encounter.

I am going to formulate it with two questions to provoke this dialogue in groups, in communities or individually.

**First question:**

What luminous elements, what valuable elements do I identify in my regular encounters with other human beings? First question.

**Second:**

What transformations should I make or should we make collectively in order to turn our usual encounters into luminous encounters, into encounters that can be described

as beautiful? Two parallel reflections with one purpose: to stimulate that beautiful encounter.

Because in the end the most important thing, as the personalist philosophers say, is not how long you are in the world, it is not how many hours, how many days, how many months, but the *quality of the encounters* that you establish throughout this trip. The journey may be shorter, longer, nobody knows, it is uncertain, but the quality of our existence depends a lot on the quality of our encounters.

The beauty of our existence depends a lot on the beauty of the encounters we have with others, and that depends largely on us. The days we are going to live do not depend on us. It is not in our hand. It is what Hartmut Rosa would say “the unavailable”. But yes, the way I relate to my daughter, with my wife, with a student, with a neighbour, with a friend, that depends on me. And I can carve out a luminous encounter, an encounter that leaves a groove, an encounter that is fruitful, beautiful, and good for its truthfulness, for its compassion, for its duration. But it could also generate unruly encounters, difficult encounters or purely banal and epidermal encounters.

Therefore, two questions I encourage you to reflect.

Thank you, infinitely, thank you for your attention and I hope to be able to say hello on another occasion. A very sincere embrace to all of you. Thank you.