

Dorthe Jørgensen: *Skønhed – En engel gik forbi* (Beauty – An Angel Passed By)

Published by Aarhus University Press in 2006. 230 pages and 24 color illustrations. Bestseller 2006-2007.

ABSTRACT

Why waste time on beauty in a world full of problems? With this provocative question philosopher and historian of ideas Dorthe Jørgensen introduces her study of what beauty is, and how it can help us in our quest for the good life. She not only explains what artists and thinkers understand by beauty, but also investigates the apprehensions of beauty that are to be found, for example, within politics, the natural and health sciences, theories of organization, theology, pedagogy, and marketing. Dorthe Jørgensen's argument is that beauty is much more than we normally imagine it to be. Experiences of beauty are not just sensory perceptions of delicious forms. They can open up the world in such a way that we notice dimensions ordinarily left unnoticed. The philosophy of beauty puts our understanding of ourselves and the world in perspective. It gives us food for thought as to whether we are living in a manner best for ourselves, and thinking as well as we can.

In her book Dorthe Jørgensen argues that beauty is an experience with a *surplus of meaning*. It is an experience of there being something that is valuable in itself; an experience of transcendence that is accompanied by a feeling of coherence and meaning. The experience of beauty does not reveal, however, *what* the meaning is. It does not deliver any ready-made truths, but offers the *probability* of the likelihood of an experience of meaning. This philosophical understanding of beauty is not compatible with the materialistic understanding of beauty that many people have today. For the majority, beauty consists in nothing but the ideal that is pursued with the help of cosmetics and cosmetic surgery. Dorthe Jørgensen therefore introduces her book with a chapter on the ideals of beauty. She not only examines the current beauty ideal in the West, but also the numerous ideals that have prevailed during the course of history, and in different parts of the world.

The beauty ideals' notion of beauty is however not enough. Therefore, in the next chapters of the book Dorthe Jørgensen continues in favor of a contemplation of the beautiful form, the idea of beauty, the experience of beauty, and the metamorphosis of beauty. In these chapters, which together constitute the first of the book's three sections, she provides a broad ideahistorical and philosophical introduction to beauty, explaining how it appears to the person experiencing it, and how it has been interpreted in art and thinking throughout the centuries. In the course of history,

especially two understandings of beauty have existed: an arttheoretical one that defines beauty as *harmonic proportionality*, and a metaphysical one that deals with the beautiful as an *idea*. But modern artists and authors such as Charles Baudelaire have also shown an interest in a modern kind of beauty that is characterized by *disharmony*, while modern philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger deviate from tradition by understanding beauty as an *experience* or an *event* [Ereignis].

In the book's second part, the point of departure is a chapter on the modern distinction between the beauty of nature and the beauty of the arts. These chapters deal with the apprehensions of beauty that can be identified within a number of different areas in which one might not otherwise expect an interest in beauty, for example, the natural and health sciences, pedagogy, politics, and theories of organization. In this part of the book, which ends with a chapter on the appearance of beauty [das schöne Schein], it becomes clear that both the arttheoretical and the metaphysical understanding of beauty are still alive today, but where least expected. For example, many theoretical physicists praise scientific theories of a beauty they determine as formal symmetry and simplicity, while other natural scientists are interested in the beautiful as an idea or as an experience that is of an existential and meaning-forming significance. The latter can also be found in the kind of organization aesthetics that, inspired by Kant and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, among others, is concerned with the beauty of organizations interpreted as their metaphysical dimension.

In the book's third section, the philosophical understanding of beauty comes to the foreground, but mainly in its modern form where beauty is identical with the *experience* of beauty, rather than in its traditional form where it concerns the beautiful as an *idea*. Nevertheless, because experience is difficult to interpret without reference to any idea, the idea is indeed nearby, but the relation is now reversed. Traditionally the experience of beauty was measured on the idea of the beautiful; here the idea originates from experience. In addition to a chapter on beauty in the Jewish-Christian and Greco-Roman cultures, respectively, this part of the book contains chapters on beauty as an event; the relation between beauty and divinity; and the beauty of thought. Dorthe Jørgensen has throughout the years developed an independent philosophical position called *metaphysics of experience*, which in this book is expressed especially in its latter part. It is a non-essentialist metaphysics rooted in the experience of modern people, and it is inspired, among others, by Walter Benjamin and hermeneutic phenomenology.

The book is written after two of Dorthe Jørgensen's major works: *Skønhedens metamorfose: De æstetiske idéers historie* (The Metamorphosis of Beauty: History of Aesthetic Ideas, 2001) and

Historien som værk: Værkets historie (History as a Work: The Work's History, 2006). It is, however, an independent work that can be read without any previous acquaintance with those books. Never before has anybody undertaken such an all-embracing systematic study of beauty as presented in this book, and its experience-metaphysical perspective is also unique. The book is written in an essayistic style in which the author, drawing as she does on her own experiences, does not attempt to 'conceal' herself as a narrator. The intention is to disseminate complex philosophical material to as many people as possible without compromising its content. Even though the book is the result of many years of research in philosophical aesthetics, it will not only appeal to fellow scholars, but also to others interested in this absorbing and fascinating subject.

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THE CRITICS WROTE

Ellen Lind Jensen, the Danish libraries:

"[...] can be read by the 'beauty' interested reader, but extracts can also be used in teaching at both upper secondary school level and at folk high schools. Its catching form is really a success [...]."

Viggo Bjerring, the journal *Standart*:

"Philosophical aesthetics is for Dorthe Jørgensen the aesthetic experience's epistemology, and she creates with her thought a contemporary and philosophically qualified language which reflects the experience of beauty in a way that provides modern people the opportunity of rediscovering themselves."

FagBogInfo (TextbookInfo):

"[...] provides a broad ideahistorical and philosophical introduction to beauty, both as it appears to the person experiencing it, and as it was historically interpreted in art and thought."

Eva Pohl, the Daily Newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*:

"Dorthe Jørgensen [...] is capable of giving 'body' to philosophical matters. In her precise and clearheaded book [...] she asks whether beauty and sensoriness can be separated, and she answers that they are each other's prerequisites. She elegantly broadens the viewpoint on beauty [...]. In her

important book Dorthe Jørgensen moves with agility between art, philosophy, and everyday experience – from Plato to piercing [Five stars].”

Peter Skov-Jakobsen, the Web Newspaper *Folkekirken i København*:

“This is not just a book on beauty. It is beauty practiced in the world. Devoid of superficiality, attentive, arresting, and thought provoking, Dorthe Jørgensen leads her reader on the way towards greater insight all the time. The most difficult thoughts are laid forth in a simple manner. [...] When one sets the book aside, one has not only become wiser on the concepts of beauty; but it was really as though an angel passed by, enabling one to see the world, eternity, greatness, and deepness. Dorthe Jørgensen has written a book that ought to be on the present-list of those who have everything! Here is a book which makes one feel that one has become wiser about a lot of things and that the world is really blended together, but in challenging and splendid confusion. This is also the book for those who have nothing and who have come to a halt! Each sentence expresses a longing and respect for beauty, and one recognizes that what is sought is not the decorative and the pretty, but truth. [...] All of it presented in simple, beautiful, and sonorous Danish [...].”

Lasse Horne Kjøeldgaard, the Daily Newspaper *Politiken*:

“*Skønhed – En engel gik forbi* is a commendable effort to build bridges [...]. Dorthe Jørgensen [...] reaches a far greater part of beauty’s spectrum in her book than there has been a tradition for in philosophical aesthetics, but at the same time she upholds dialogue with tradition. [...] Jørgensen’s book is a delight. It is written in a relaxed and essayistic style and draws on an enormous professional capacity [...].”

Gitte Tofterup, the journal *Slagmark*:

“The book meets the objective of the book series UNIVERSE to disseminate research in an accessible and captivating form, but if you think that it is ‘Jørgensen light’, you are wrong. [...] Jørgensen’s collection of essays [...] is a thinking, the pulse of which is initiated by her lifeblood, and this makes it excellent. [...] The book provides [...] a philosophically reasoned answer to the question of what is history of ideas, and its reasoning is [...] naturally entwined with its differentiation of the concept of beauty. [...] Jørgensen’s lifeblood is of such a high temperature that fortunately it characterizes her thought [...] but she will always agree with Hegel that *die Wärme des*

Bluts machts nicht allein. There is full philosophical justification for every drop. It remains only to say: Read the book – it is a must have for all seekers of wisdom!”