

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY FOR
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A FIRST
PHILOSOPHY OF OBJECTS

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Objects

‘Weeds too, he favoured, as most men don’t favour
men.’

John Berryman Dream Song 18: A Strut for
Roethke

Changes of mentality still happen very slowly in a fast world. The history of ideas is still examining what the Enlightenment first queried over two centuries ago, namely, what to preserve and what to discard of the consequences of a Christian belief in God. The Age of Reason made it hard to believe in God as a transcendent entity with material power over human lives. Nevertheless the question arose what habits of mind, and what needs, which had previously manifested themselves in the context of faith, were of such human value that they should be carried over into a new spirituality. Among those habits of mind was the cultivation of beauty in art and the love of beauty in nature. It is quite remarkable how around the middle of the eighteenth century philosophy was discovering ‘aesthetics’ just as it was losing God. Aesthetics, which analysed sensual responses and human psychology, at the same time as it considered the qualities of beautiful objects, moved feelings and responses that had hitherto been caught up in religious worship, and

which had been hitherto explained in terms of God's creativity, into a new secular domain. It wanted to know about a certain kind of happiness which, as it outgrew the domain of aesthetics through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, left philosophers on the idealistic fringe of the discipline, and many independent writers and thinkers in addition, considering 'experiences of significance'.¹ Something about the human situation in a material world seemed to require, almost as a new start, an inspired philosophy of objects.

The strand of modern philosophy I want to trace here began by being interested in sensual delight and in spiritual imagination in the context of beauty in art. It found a connection between happiness and the perception of 'purposeless purpose'. Objects which suggested an intrinsic purposiveness within themselves gave rise to experiences of significance, all the more as this purposiveness could not be scientifically understood, only somehow joyously imagined. It was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who, keen to understand what else there was in the human mind beside the capacity to rationalize and to recognize ethical imperatives, first wrote a book on the tendency of the imagination to see wholeness in beautiful objects, and in the world around, and to be pleased by that fact. Kant is often regarded as having written mostly about beauty in art. But his *Critique of Judgement* (1791) considered spiritual imagination on a much wider basis. It considered the perfection the human mind ascribed to objects, both man-made and natural, and even to the whole universe. Here Kant was already making a move away from that rather mean streak in traditional Christian teaching which made perfection the unique province of God and the spirit and humbled

¹ Murdoch, Iris (1997) 'Nostalgia for the Particular' *Existentialists and Mystics* London Chatto and Windus p.57.

the human and the material. For Kant it was typically the inventive powers of the human mind that mattered, and how those powers bound the human mind to its moral-material situation.

The powers of man alone were easily exaggerated by the Enlightenment. The instrumental rationalism that stimulated the rise of technology has generally been seen as having a mixed outcome on human happiness, making the world more comfortable materially but sometimes less so spiritually. And so poets and thinkers through the nineteenth century who wanted to hold on to some love of purposiveness for its own sake, purposeless purpose, even sheer inscrutability, from the old religious attitude found those qualities now in the sheer marvellous materiality of the world, which reason seemed to pass over so carelessly. They turned their minds to the materiality of life, and building into their attentiveness something of the delicacy of the aesthetic attitude, found that the purpose of the object-world was its own existence. And nothing else. They came then to invest their entire spirituality in the material plenitude and diversity of the world and to love the fact *that* the world was. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who famously praised God for dappled things was one such lover of objects. Hopkins was hardly a thoroughgoing materialist. But he turned away from Thomism, the traditional philosophy underpinning Christianity, because it organized creation in an ascending line towards divine perfection, and thus spoke of greater and lesser things. More appealing to Hopkins was a dissident Christian view expressed in the thirteenth century by the Franciscan monk Duns Scotus, that everything was what it was and nothing else. Every *thing* mattered, for its own sake.

It's difficult to assemble a hard and fast lineage for an outlook that mixed a spiritually inclined aesthetics with a love of nature and a rejection of traditional Christian perfectionism, let alone give it a name. But what emerged in the early twentieth century West was an attitude of care towards all the objects, natural and man-made, constituting material life in the here and now. Hopkins amongst others was its English spokesman.

The new outlook was stimulated on the one hand by what philosophers called 'the death of God' and which meant that the Church could no longer provide the resources for an adequate love of the world as it was; and on the other hand by the rise of modern materialistic culture which at once delighted and overwhelmed and horrified minds that felt some spiritual value in a traditionally crafted world, and a natural world untouched by technology, was being lost. The twentieth-century philosophy of objects expressed a desire to treat objects individually, and with care, regardless of whether they were beautiful or even useful. It wanted to recover and hold on to a joy in materiality that, having wrenched it back from the excesses of Thomist spirituality, it did not now want to lose to technology and to consumerism. Things mattered as they existed in themselves. Proust and Nabokov were among the great novelists who pursued a joy in materiality. But no philosopher ever wrote it down with more genius than, after Kant, another great mind in the German tradition, Martin Heidegger.

Many artists and many people generally today seem to tie 'experiences of significance' to the value of object-reality, and to take those sentiments as guiding moments in their lives. A contemporary British philosopher, much influenced by Heidegger, and who through that influence has come to write on the philosophy of everyday life, recently cited a man who grew a giant squash, which he knew to be a

thoroughly ugly piece of vegetation, but which he regarded as a gift of grace. The philosopher, David Cooper, added that this moment in a gardener's life turned on a sense of value which many like him found it uncomfortable or awkward to articulate, but to which they testified; and to those experiences of value his own book was dedicated.² Cooper's project is only one which seems to fit as a small part of some new philosophy of the object, which still needs its definitive statement.

Perhaps we can come closer to what is needed by reviewing its history in greater detail.

There would be no beauty in nature, art or human life if our minds did not project it there. Beauty in other words is intensely human. It is a basic aspiration and, because we come into the world equipped to admire it, a basic human need. Not in the sense that we need food and shelter and the company of other human beings, do we need beauty. It is rather as an aspiration towards a harmony, or a greater clarity, or power, that beauty happens to us. It happens when we begin to feel, or picture, or sense, what we cannot quite grasp conceptually, and it leaves us with various feelings of awe, and clarification and contentment. Concerned with our fulfilment as beings in time and space, we seek beauty's mysterious purpose but cannot dominate its outcome. That we seek beauty defines an elusive quality and limitation given to us in being human. That there is beauty and that we respond to it creates a relationship between what I am and what is more than me, and which I need and love.

Philosophers have sometimes noticed that with the fulfilling experience of beauty comes a sense of reciprocity. We offer our expectations to beauty which are then gratified. We are filled with something. Some process, some exchange, has the feeling of

² Cooper, David E. (2006) *A Philosophy of Gardens* Oxford: Clarendon p.73.

having been made complete. The classic definition of beauty as non-purposive purpose allows for this non-utilitarian experience. It is a kind of perception of which knowledge is not the outcome. The formulation was Kant's. Other philosophers had theories of beauty in art and nature, but Kant, one of the guiding geniuses of the modern attitude, was the first to consider the capacity for beauty as one of the fundamental human assets. Beauty was *part* of the quest for Enlightenment, he said, *alongside* moral and scientific understanding.

I want to dwell for a moment on that connection between the Enlightenment and the rise of the modern Western philosophy of beauty, in England and, preeminently with Kant, in the German-speaking world. The latter half of the eighteenth century is enormously important for understanding where we stand in the twenty-first, because it is when feelings that had existed unexamined within the corpus of Christian belief needed, as a new critical light was turned on religion by reason, a separate explanation. Christian art, accommodating and transforming influences from a wider world, had for a thousand years given the West not only the what of beauty and sublimity but also the why. The Western sense of beauty was the product of a Christian view of the world which saw God as the maker of all perfect things. Natural disasters – sublime for as long as you did not consider the human victims of tempests and earthquakes - were among His aesthetic lessons. Western art imitated and showed what God made. This composite of sacred beauty and sublime destructiveness, given by divinity to man who had no control over his fate, cracked under the gaze of brilliant sceptics like Goethe and Voltaire and Hume.

Some of the greatest philosophy ever written began to ask whether beauty could survive as a cultural force if faith in God declined. Kant made the best case that it could,

and why he was able to make such a good case was that he concentrated on the capacity of the human subject for that significant experience. In a way he was saying, in *The Critique of Judgement*, that even if reason argues God away, you can't stop the human mind imagining purposefulness, and beauty, and perfection and placing those qualities in the world. To which a believer in Pascal's Wager might then say: and so it would also not turn out badly if those things in the world *were* God.

The perception of beauty contains a mixture of passive and active elements: a capacity to receive and a reciprocally to give back, to cultivate, to respond, to feel horror and gratitude; to be moved. Kant began to think about such things on ground shared between philosophy and psychology and anthropology. His way was to tease out assumptions about art and human nature that looked ever more important to the future of mankind as explicit belief in God receded.

The science of aesthetics was invented, in Kant's Idealist tradition, to make explicit (where it was always left implicit in religious faith) the moral functioning of beauty: to explain how beauty worked, how men needed it, and how it made them better. Aesthetics also developed along more materialistic lines, as a study of how the senses were affected. Indeed this was the dominant way of thinking in eighteenth-century England and after. But great poets like Coleridge and Matthew Arnold and Manley Hopkins always knew they had to go in search of some deeper notion of beauty, to make sense of their own work, and they found the meaning they wanted in Idealism, whose founder in this context was Kant. Kant was an Idealist because of the exhaustive emphasis he put on the power of the human subject to create his or her own world; every human perception was for Kant a figment of the human mind. With his notion of rational,

moral and emotional faculties in the human makeup, Kant left aside whether there was an ultimately knowable 'reality' and concentrated on what man as a potentially noble creature could do. The question of the existence of God was not entirely brushed aside, but it was no longer there as the cause of the imperative to lead a good life, in which good character and the encouragement and appreciation of beauty had a prominent place. Even if reason removed God from the picture, human spirituality remained intact.

To stress any and all these attitudes has the feeling of a new beginning today.

Some people will immediately ask whether in the twenty-first century there is any scientific evidence, in the brain perhaps, to support the idea of faculties or capacities for reason, morality and beauty. But the evidence for aesthetic need and aesthetic response stares out at us every day from whatever culture we live in. It need not emanate from an already identified area of the brain to be true. And if that area has already been found by neuroscience, or will be found, it makes no difference to how we behave. It is the feeling that accompanies certain behaviour, not its detectable origin in the synapses, that matters: a feeling for beauty, and intrinsic, non-utilitarian purposiveness which has gradually spread out of the artistic domain as such to find its gratification in the sheer materiality of modern life.

Even in the most difficult material circumstances someone will tidy the broken glass and the litter and sweep the floor, arrange a bunch of flowers, set some random object that has toppled over back to rights, set another object in an unexpected light, admire the light through the window, hearken to a piece of music coming from somewhere or climb to a vantage point to admire the view. I find myself thinking back to the war in Bosnia in 1993 when the American writer Susan Sontag went to Sarajevo to

direct a production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Accounts of that wonderful occasion³ and that grandly human initiative speak of audiences coming out of performances awed and fulfilled, even if the gesture was artistically flawed.⁴

Because of the dual nature of aesthetic experience, beauty felt as need and beauty felt as the desire to reciprocate, we somehow feel we should match the beautiful objects we apprehend. They seem to draw us up. They seem to offer us a moral lesson in their mysterious completeness. Most of us can't match the beauty we experience in nature and in art in our own artistic creation, but for a while at least the experience raises us up and leaves us feeling we would match it if we could, through the unexpected bunch of flowers and the swept floor and the object set to rights. Both in the small, everyday impulse and in the grander gestures of art, a basic aesthetic impulse constantly reveals itself which seems to express what it is to be a person *grateful* for dwelling in time and space, in the here and now. Let's keep the example of Sontag in Bosnia in mind, because, as has often been noticed, it can often take an emergency to make us wake up to our ownmost human situation and needs -- the nature of our 'here and now'. It can take an emergency which, from the time of Greek tragedy, art has simulated. In Sarajevo Sontag, an eminent literary critic, doubled this experience, as an event in Sarajevo and an event on the stage, for those who were lucky enough to attend one of her packed-out performances.

We aspire towards our own fulfilment in beauty, and when we find it we reciprocate, out of gratitude, with gestures that help create that fulfilment. Many contemporary philosophers would object to that 'we' on the grounds that its universality is doubtful. But I'm going to insist here that the foundations for the aesthetic experience

³ Munk, Erika (1993) 'Notes from a trip to Sarajevo' *Theater* 24.3 [1993] pp.31-36.

of life are laid in those first psychological moments common to very, very nearly all of us. I want to start with the moment when the infant at the breast gazes on the face of the mother.

Centuries of Western painting have centered on this formative human moment and made it holy. Of course we are not surprised by this theme in traditional Christian iconography. But we tend to see the painting of the Christian themes too readily as telling an historical story, about the birth of Jesus to his mother Mary, and, when we extrapolate from Mary to all mothers with babes-in-arms, we take the content of the picture as a moral model. We see the story of Jesus and Mary as an example of the love which, if we were fortunate, we too received from our own parents and feel for our children. But surely it's also possible to see in the Madonna and Child an allegory of the awakening to beauty, as the child gazes on the face of the mother. The Madonna who is every mother is an allegory of beauty. She gives the human infant, male or female, his or her first experience of beauty: which at once a vision and a completely fulfilled relationship. Beauty is there for all of us, fulfilling our needs, from the moment we are born. It is a gift, and it comes with a desire to reciprocate the perfect otherness of the mother, the first beautiful object.

The interpretation of the Madonna and Child as showing the birth of the sense of beauty does not eclipse the predominant historical interpretation through the ages of Mary as the mother of Jesus, but has an extra function. It moves aesthetic experience to the centre of human being and it names the capacity to respond to beauty as universal. It

⁴ Akstens, Thomas, n.d., 'Under fire: Sontag, Godot, Sarajevo' downloaded at www.tau.ac.il/arts/publications/ASSAPHTH11/AKSTENS

says that beauty does not begin as a higher or a cultured experience but is as basic as love and like love only needs to be nourished and drawn out.

To mention the name of Freud may jar here. But Sigmund Freud's invention of psychoanalysis, which did so much to set the twentieth century on an awkward, self-ironizing path and whose work was the study of unhappy exceptions, nevertheless implicitly took the Madonna-and-child relationship as his starting-point. Here for Freud was that primal experience of fulfilment which, he suggested, in certain cases no other relationship could ever wholly replicate.⁵

Freud knew that not all lives are happy in their first moments and this can impair the capacity for love, even for a lifetime. The aesthetic sense can similarly be impaired. But all of us at any age can return to the primal experience of being fulfilled in our here-and-now existence by gazing on a Caravaggio madonna. The Madonna and Child topos, as so often painted, is an allegory for the birth of aesthetic feeling whenever. This is one reason perhaps why a philosopher bold enough to see himself as a replacement for Kant, Martin Heidegger, conceived of beauty as a gift whenever it 'happened'. A gift is received in a reciprocal relationship. The recipient is at once passive and active as the receiver. When Heidegger, a theologian by training before he became a philosopher, began writing about beauty in this way, he surely had God in mind even while he rejected an aesthetic dependent on religious faith. He wanted beauty to be a sudden accentuation of our love of being - and gazing on - the 'here and now'. Heidegger helped to extend the old disinterested love we used to give to art into a much more general sense of being. By

⁵ Strachey, James, ed., (1957) *Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* London: The Hogarth Press vol. 11. p.203 (The Tabu of Virginity 1918).

talking about art as a gift or bestowal he laid the foundations for a new post-metaphysical philosophy of objects.⁶

The only thing Heidegger was not interested in, in this respect, was psychology, something we can remedy by recalling Freud's contribution to the philosophy of objects alongside his own. One day it would be a fine thing to try to write a history of aesthetic development in terms of how individuals learn to see, and treat, objects, by building on the perfect beauty and fulfilment of the first moments of life. A history, that would be, of how individuals look for beauty in objects; of how the world around us, so teeming with objects, slowly displaces the mother as the focus of our emotional and aesthetic attention. The mother of our infancy becomes, in our maturity, the other of other people and of objects outside ourselves. One of the most thoughtful places where we *do* find histories of objects and how we treat them *is* in psychoanalysis, because the relationship is instantly so complex, and the aesthetic, like the loving, response is so quickly inhibited and diverted. When I read psychoanalysis I wonder how the aesthetic response can survive in the imperfect personalities most of us are. Psychoanalysis exposes all the ways in which we invest objects with our troubled emotions. Even as children, we have already transferred the need to express aggression, possessiveness and insecurity to the objects around us, as well as love. The problems psychoanalysis recognises account almost entirely for why a pre-cultural history of the aesthetic response can't be written. (Which is why early twentieth-century art theory, much affected by Freud, was fascinated by the

⁶ Heidegger, Martin (1971) 'The origin of the work of art' in *Poetry, language, thought* tr. Albert Hofstadter New York Harper and Row esp. pp.71-77.

idea of the sensual individual regressing to childhood.⁷) The pure response is over long before we take our place in the world as aesthetic subjects.

And yet the remarkable thing is that the aesthetic sense survives, and that the passer-by who puts flowers in a bottle in war-torn Sarajevo, or gasps at the beauty of the early morning may express it better, and more purely, than the wealthy art collector. Evidence allows one to assume that, psychoanalysis notwithstanding, the outcome and counterpart of the basic experience of maternal beauty has many forms which retain their direct identification with beauty. Their range will become clearer when we look at the expansion of the need for beauty first into nature, then into art, and finally into the manmade environment.

What can one say about the birth of culture that has not been set out before and with the greatest sensitivity and intricacy, through studies of the emotional, social, physical and linguistic development of human beings within a given set of practices and values? Studies I've read recently have suggested not very convincing Darwinian origins for the love of art and more convincing anthropological origins in our desire to dress up and show ourselves off to the other. Probably these two theories, one published in 2009, the other in 1795, can be merged to the benefit of the present day. Yet neither is so persuasive as Heidegger who produced his own marriage of aesthetics and evolution. Heidegger thought truth occurred in the here and now like moments of natural growth. Just as a plant can spring up from the earth, just as life suddenly happens, when long invisible processes suddenly become visible, so too the work of art happens, and then by its special qualities as a work it creates a space for the disclosure of truth. The work of art is a gift, as are all moments when truth reveals itself in being.

⁷ Fineberg, Jonathan (1997) *The innocent eye* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press

As a twenty-first century thinker I'm shy of that word truth outside of a strictly logical context, but at the same time like Heidegger I want to hang on to it, because neither Darwinian nor neurological explanations of why I value the grass and the stone and the jug and the tree can tell me why I love independently of their usefulness and, indeed, independent of their beauty. Scientific endeavours cannot measure the elusive aesthetic attitude to the *gift* to me of *my* being in space and time, among these objects that constitute my space and time.

Sometimes I think that like a river that was diverted underground centuries ago, the aesthetic need flows on from generation to generation, entirely functional and yet with fewer and fewer people aware that it is there. But, for instance, in every true conservationist something of the aesthetic need is at work, alongside other considerations. It might even be useful yardstick, today, to try to measure how much.

Let me repeat the loosely allegorical story so far. When we were infants we experienced a kind of aesthetic belonging at the mother's breast. As we matured we came to see that nature at large was that other, larger place in which we also belonged, and where we had scope to act: to build our own home and raise our own children. Depending on how much the surrounding culture alerted and encouraged us, we already perceived beauty in nature as part of our awakening to the larger human home, the earth. We felt that here was a non-purposive relationship in which we were caught up, offering us fulfilment through the grateful perception of a gift, which we would be then filled with the desire to reciprocate.

The beauty of nature corresponds not to that narrow, intimate focus of love that the family brings, but to a much larger sense of our own being, as a creature thrown into

existence in space and time and surrounded by objects that are 'always already' there. No doubt I'm simplifying Heidegger's message. I'm also reloading his concept of human existence with the developmental psychology he stripped out of it. With those provisos, I would maintain that no other philosopher of the modern era has given so much succour to what aesthetic experience can continue to do for, and explain about, a spiritually satisfying human life. Heidegger invoked that need which determines at the most basic level how we reciprocate the gift of existence; and how (ideally, because he assumes a static notion of human being) we treat the world we are thrown into.

Human being isn't static. It changes; it matures, emotionally and intellectually. When we get to the age or the emotional point to respond to nature, then powerful impersonal feelings in response to our own existence in that nature suddenly expand our emotional horizons: we have a sense of our own being in space and time. I see the beauty of trees and grass and mountains; and of the bird in the tree and the bee buzzing at the window. I noticed all those objects as a child, but I did not respond with the same emotional intensity because my emotions were still focused within the family and immediate community. Now, as I grow away from the family and become an independent person, I notice that these objects around me are all perfect creations I share life with; and, mostly, because they do not share my human doubts and imperfections, I look to them as perfect creations, as I once looked upon my mother.

The philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt recalled, from his youth:

I sat that night under a starry sky in a small acacia grove. And as I imagined more and more vividly how everything around me was a separate being, like myself, each leaf that rustle in my ear, each crumb of earth I stepped on, and that the

sleeping powers of these beings would one day waken and be heightened, a nameless enthusiasm overcame me. I can still feel how it was, how I knelt and cried for joy, and how I prayed devoutly to the star-sown heavens.⁸

You might detect an element of original sin entering the story here, and it seems the case that as our emotional involvement in being alive increases, so too does the possibility of our feeling inadequate to the gift and of a resentful or remorseful search to explain the inadequacy. But I'm talking about something more like the modesty nature inspires in us, its far-from-perfect human manifestations; about an emotion which is at once moving, exhilarating and limiting; a feeling quite unlike guilt. With emotional maturity the aesthetic response increases in range to include not just the harmoniously beautiful but the terrifyingly sublime. My keen yet fragile existence amid the grandeur of the natural world leads beyond beauty to a feeling of sweet terror at what I am never going to be able to grasp, but which I am part of and will eventually dissolve in.

Perhaps one of the lessons we learn from both harmonious beauty and terrifying sublimity is that nature cautions us not to exaggerate our preeminence, and not to assume our right to dominate nature. It is one of the ways in which, from its eighteenth-century beginnings in the emerging science of beauty perceived in art and nature, a certain philosophy of objects developed, through Heidegger's notion of the gift of being, into a body of thought that can be immensely useful to us today, with our continuing concerns for art, self-reflection and respect for everything entailed in our being transiently on earth.

⁸ Humboldt, Wilhelm von, (1903) *Gesammelte Schriften* Berlin Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften I, p.75 (My translation.)

A long tradition of nature philosophy linking the age of Kant to the age of Heidegger insisted on looking to nature for moral lessons which were often a matter of teaching humanity self-restraint: that we should leave the world to be. Kant was more concerned with ethics than with nature. But insofar as his ethics insisted that no human being should ever use another as the means to an end but should always be treated as an end in himself, it seems that those ethics spilled over into an attitude to nature which became visible in later generations. In the philosophy of being which Heidegger soldered on to aesthetic Idealism non-exploitation also became a factor in the treatment of all the objects around us which add up to our being in time.

Thus there grew up a way of thinking, mainly German, but now and again enthusing the English poets I mentioned above, that insisted on linking full humanity with a non-utilitarian attentiveness to art, to nature and finally to objects. Ideally it took the whole range of our whole natural lives, setting our love of sculpture alongside our love of sport, and arguing from our respect for our own physical being to the way we exercise our human power over nature as such: with a similar restraint, because in that very choice we exercise aesthetic discrimination and moral freedom.

Again I think these attitudes develop naturally in human beings, though no doubt they can take some encouragement and support in a rough world. Consider the first time you became aware in a neutral, non-sexual sense, of the beauty of the human form. In your mid-teens perhaps. I remember being moved by Dürer's astonishingly sensitive drawings of hands and by the sad grace of Picasso's circus folk from his blue and pink periods. In paintings of the Crucifixion, as a counterpart to depictions of the Madonna, for me it is often the beauty of Christ's body in torment that strikes home, as a double-

edged symbol of human possibility. Christ's existence as a man even suggests we mistreat the greatest human endowment, the beauty of our physical being, when we fail to care for our own bodies and persecute and harm each other and our object-world. The agony and the ecstasy of growing up into an awareness of beauty and evil expresses itself in this aesthetic form and generates this aesthetic responsibility.

Aesthetic education in this very general sense, and in which we are self-taught as human beings, but need guidance in how to articulate the results, is so terribly important that one has to wonder why it is not more often sought-after. It is not an alternative to moral education, but is its complement and its much more flexible partner. It teaches us to care generally for the spirit of good order in nature and human life in a way nothing formally taught in the classroom or in the pulpit can. It generates feelings which apply equally to nature and the manmade environment, and make us worry about buildings and landscape and all the scope modern human beings have to apply their power ill-advisedly, without restraint or understanding.

The aesthetic education has as one of its messages that there is so much of beauty in nature and human relations that we should protect and that this would be the best use of our material and technological strength. Heidegger explicitly developed his philosophy of objects against a background of the inevitable growth of technology. He looked for an accommodation with it that would preserve peace of mind.

What changes the aesthetic story from a natural one to a cultural one and creates the need for a guiding philosophy is anxiety over whether developed humankind is *adequate* to holding on to any of its fine natural possibilities. Anxiety sharpens and complicates the business of how we reciprocate the gift of nature and carry it forward. It

asks how we can express ourselves beautifully in a world that has a complexity independent of and rivalling nature's. We need a body of thought about how to care for our world, which would answer our anxieties

The philosophy of the gift would be a starting-point for this philosophy of objects, and, like all the key developments in aesthetic philosophy over the last two centuries or so, it could claim to respond to changes in the European socio-economic structure. The British philosopher G.E. Moore wrote in the early twentieth century that the good life amounted to 'the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects'.⁹ But that was already a dying privilege and hardly a universal truth. Through the nineteenth century appreciation of beauty in art and nature was the province of the well-off. The manual worker was neither encouraged nor did he have the time to refine his aesthetic sensibility. Beauty in art and nature were hardly universal concerns, though their theory presupposed a universal human being. These contradictions, though they never struck Moore, began to be exposed towards the end of the nineteenth century. Spurred on an intellectual level by the injustice of a class-divided society and by establishment fear at the unpredictable powers of a rising mass of people, aesthetics came under pressure to broaden its remit. Suddenly, with radical countries like Russia showing the way, there were theories of art as popular activity such as street theatre and cinema. A museum-based art that was the effete preserve of a tiny minority equipped with the money and leisure to enjoy it suddenly looked irrelevant and, in spirit, dead. Art parted company with beauty as its necessary component and took on new functions of social commentary. The philosophy of the gift now quietly moved in to art's vacated territory,

⁹ Quoted in Rogers, Ben (1999) *A.J. Ayer a life* London Chatto and Windus p.47.

in developed Western societies. With the ambition to apply aesthetic concern much more generally to the art of life, it encouraged the formulation of philosophies of objects.

I have sometimes tried to describe the need for such a philosophy as the need to answer the question: ‘why I should care for an object that is neither beautiful nor mine nor even needed?’ I’m thinking of whatever we feel when we see a chipped cup or a smashed window. Another cup can be bought, another pane of glass installed. But in the moment I catch sight of these broken objects I am nevertheless seized by the thought that they would be better as a whole examples of themselves, rather than imperfect ones, and it would be better if they were not broken. I would like to give a name to that thought.

One can stand in the middle of a busy market, or walk along a new street, one can even look down on traffic moving along a motorway, I think, and marvel at the degree of peaceful cooperation and clever organization that has gone into making a world that works and which gives people joy. There is a positive correlative to the negative feelings which invade all too easily in pushy overcrowded contemporary environments, and I think it can be called a feeling of disinterested admiration. The word ‘disinterest’, which means something different from ‘uninterest’, goes back once again to Kant, the grandfather of the philosophy of objects. Disinterest was the English translation of Kant’s idea that what we admire about beauty, and what guides our approach to art, is intrinsic purposiveness without a utilitarian goal.

It is a term which has a masked Christian heritage. What was God’s idea in creating the world? No one could know. But for as long as it was claimed, by Christian philosophers building on the Greek Logos, that God created the world it was assumed that the divine purpose, which could be read and interpreted out of nature, was good.

Whatever purpose God had in making the world as it was -- and which we couldn't know by its origin but which we could marvel at in the result -- became for Kant the purposiveness without purpose that hallmarked the beautiful object and required that we approach it in an aesthetic spirit; not to analyse it to pieces, as it were, but to cherish it. Disinterest was, and is, a way of respecting what we can't wholly understand and also have no wish to dominate.

The philosophy of objects aims to recover this idea of disinterest for the twenty-first century, as the basis for living in a cared-for world, which offers us wonder and fulfilment and gives us the chance to reciprocate its beauty. Schiller once said that to treat the least object as if it were something infinite was to follow a recipe for happiness.¹⁰ To treat the least object as if it were infinite is a way, evidently, of giving it a meaning which has nothing to do with who it belongs to or whether it is perfect or useful or beautiful. My religious colleagues may say that that is what loving God's Creation always amounted to. But what makes the modern philosophy of objects stand out is the tolerance - and love - it has for the imperfection that results from our human way with life. There is a lovable materiality about modern life which need not collide with old strictures against materialism (which, with Thomism, developed out of a religiously inspired sense that only 'spirit' counted). The hope behind any adequate new philosophy of objects would be to foster that joyful satisfaction at being alive that amounts to being in receipt of the gift. The aim would be to encourage a delight in the materiality of life through the good use of that astonishing materiality.

¹⁰ Wilkinson, Elizabeth M., and L.A. Willoughby, eds., (1967), *Friedrich Schiller On the aesthetic education of man in a series of letters* Oxford: Clarendon, pp.166-7 (Letter 23).

The dream then would be to apply this philosophy of objects more widely, so that to care for the environment, and the planet, would become as natural as caring for the objects inside our own homes, and with the same memento: that each of these objects is worth attending to as if it were infinite, for our happiness's sake.