

## charis and radiance *the ontological dimensions of beauty*

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Whenever we look at things, we tend to look at them with a cross-eyed view, with two images superimposed so that we see a single thing, as if suspended between two states of being: one of its parts gathering, the other the object itself being part of a larger set of relations in an environment, context or world. This is true for any person, motorcycle, tree, mountain, painting, country, or anything else. Though much has been said about this topic, the mystery remains: things are made up of parts and are themselves engaged in relations. This is the standard model, and though some introvert theories tend to stress the first state and some extrovert ones the second, both states need to be explained as related to each other. Things do not simply lead a double existence, alternating between two states, melancholic one moment and jovial the next. Contenting ourselves with such a nestedness of existence won't suffice, because sets of existence turn being into a form of coexistence. There have been completely vertical notions of it, such as the Great Chain of Being, and completely horizontal ones, such as DeLanda's flat ontology.<sup>1</sup> Neither explains how, through the various magnitudes, existence itself occurs. When the parts are happily collaborating to form a whole, how can they simultaneously be engaged in what the whole experiences when engaging other wholes? Such questions need to be answered without resort to paradox, ambiguity or any other form of doubling. Things have to be thought of as singular. My claim is that only beauty – that is, not *logos* or *physis* in any form, be it mathematics, philosophy, materiality or nature itself – allows things to jump from one scale to the other. It enables the parts on the first scale to communicate with those on the second scale, but only via the contraction of the single thing, since it is things

that are beautiful, not parts. With beauty, a certain inversion or twist takes place, a certain jump or turn between multiple levels, from the parts to the whole as well as from time to space, and from the vertical to the horizontal as well as from the convergent to the divergent. Strangely enough, with beauty we are able to accept the fact that nature makes jumps – in contrast to Darwin’s axiom “*Natura non facit saltus*”<sup>2</sup> (“Nature does not make jumps”) – without adding those jumps together to form an infinite ladder leading to heaven.

Let us consider, for a moment, a typical experience of beauty. Suppose you’re wandering through the forest when suddenly something comes over you – an experience that doesn’t happen every time (and might not happen again). On this occasion, though, you exclaim out loud, “Oh, that smell!” or maybe, pointing at the foliage, “Look at that green!” or, pointing upward, “Look at the sun trying to work its way through the canopy!” These are all examples of familiar exclamations in response to beauty, which often occur in combination, even in sequence, cumulating into the typical cascading effect of beauty. Such an experience can take any form, as long as it involves the confirmation of one or more properties (greenness, smell, light) accompanied by an exclamation point.<sup>3</sup> Again, we could easily repeat the same type of experience in an encounter with a sunset, a mountain, a girl, a painting or a car. Or a motorcycle or a country. Or a boy or a man – at this point the varieties are of no importance. What matters is identifying the ontological turn of beauty, the actual jump or twist, namely that in the experience of beauty, the parts that make up the thing are shed or even thrown at you in an absolutely singular form. Parts that merge into a whole spill out of that whole. Parts that converge into a whole diverge from that whole. This inversion I propose to call, albeit somewhat weightily, the saltational principle of beauty. What at first seems a double movement – parts gathering, parts spilling – is turned into a single movement by beauty. Take a sip of the best possible scotch and notice how the hints of pear, oak, spice and coconut won’t stop rolling over your tongue, filling the space of your nose and eventually your whole head, if not your whole body. How odd is that? Is the scotch alienated from itself and broken up into pear, oak and spice? No, the pear is an inalienable part of the scotch – which in the land of philosophy would be an illegitimate statement to make, as it would be in mathematics, set theory or any other logical discipline. Except that of aesthetics. Beauty

takes place at the very heart of ontology; it explains how things are inwardly composed while outwardly oriented. Beauty and existence need to be understood as inherent to one another. In this respect, yes, it is the parts that are beautiful, but not *qua* parts, only *after* they have been gathered into a whole, as radiating from it. When I enjoy the specific greenness of the leaves, the “of” matters as much as the greenness itself; that is, though we find pleasure in the color, we accept it only as given by the leaves, not as a green in itself. It’s both a property and shared, which, in short, makes it a gift – a manifestation of that ancient concept based on distributed ownership. The greenness is given away without the leaves *de facto* departing from it, while we could as easily say that it is a property impossible for the leaves to own, since it’s a greenness shed, not kept.

If these statements are valid, beauty might be understood as intrinsically related to the gift, and subsequently the experiencing, sharing and making of beautiful things as varieties of participation in gift exchange. In fact, the best evidence for such a hypothesis may lie in the origination of what the ancient Greeks called *charis* (pronounced with a hard “h”), which evolved from gift exchange into an extensive notion of aesthetics that involved actions as well as objects. Though mostly translated as “grace,” *charis* was considered a form of radiance, which was later to be remodeled by Plato into *ekphanestaton*, by Aquinas into *claritas*, and by Schiller into *Schein* – all variations of radiance and each one playing an instrumental role in the history of beauty. At this point, however, there is no need to trace the particular mutations; we should first try to uncover the conceptual linkages between radiance, *charis*, gift and existence. Although they share many overlappings, the four can be clearly distinguished. Radiance denotes the general form of beauty, *charis* its social form and the gift its economic form, while existence employs only specifications of the general form. Though it relies on radiance, existence doesn’t necessarily rely on the actual beauty of things, since it also makes use of the ugly, the cute, the comical, the splendid and much more. How exactly such specification proceeds is yet another story we’ll have to save for later; for now, we should merely explore beauty from the perspective of its general form: all things radiate in one way or another. Only positivity exists, not negativity, nor neutrality – even in cases when things are horrendous, melancholic or boring. Radiance is usually viewed as a form of glory or magnificence, which is fitting where the crowns of kings or halos

of saints are concerned, though not in general; this is why beauty is so often confused with the sheer verticalism of the sublime. We should take great pains in unraveling this tangle, and as we do so, we should be able to see why beauty so closely resembles grace, for grace, according to Schiller, is a movable beauty, and in the end, it is the mobility and variability of the parts that allows them to be shed.

### charis and beauty

That the notion of the gift turns up in a discussion of beauty probably comes as no surprise – we have seen it happen on various occasions.<sup>4</sup> However, it is astonishing that when following the historical development of the gift from its tribal roots to its Greek application in the form of *charis* in particular, one can literally observe the realm of gift exchange transforming into that of beauty. What is more, while investigating *charis*, its close ally grace, and the accompanying conceptual model of the Three Graces, we encounter the very same jumps from time to space and from the vertical to the horizontal. In this context, the first thing to know about the gift as it was and still is in use in tribal gift cultures is that it is completely different in nature from a free gift. As the British anthropologist Mary Douglas says, there simply is no such thing as a free gift.<sup>5</sup> The gift as it occurs in such cultures is fundamentally an exchange, and part of a highly ritualized cycle of giving, receiving and returning. According to Marcel Mauss, in his seminal essay *The Gift*, these three stages are essential to the gift cycle.<sup>6</sup> He famously gets to the core of the problem early in the book by posing an intriguing question: “What power resides in the object given which makes the recipient return it?”<sup>7</sup> And a few pages later, he offers an answer by introducing us to the *hau*, the spirit of the gift in the Maori system of thought, which always “wishes to return to its birthplace.”<sup>8</sup> This concept has both inspired and troubled many scholars. In short, it means that the gift is inalienable;<sup>9</sup> it can only part from its origin for a certain period of time. Giver and gift, in this regard, cannot be conceived of as fully separable; the act of giving comprises the creation of an elastic sphere, so to speak, a sphere of extension and contraction, more than an actual parting with an object.

This constitutes the whole reason why gift exchange – and to my mind the experience of beauty – cannot be schematized by two agents, such as an object and a subject or a sender and a receiver, which constitute the usual model of information exchange. In fact, we should represent it in terms of three partners (see fig. 1). At the origin, we position a person who gives away the *hau*-object to a second person, who then returns it to the first. Next to the arrow between the first person and the *hau*-object, we write the word “giving,” since it diagrams the very act of the gift, and next to the arrow going from the *hau*-object to the second person, we write “receiving,” and from the arrow of that person back to the first, “returning.” When we transfer this model into figures personifying these acts, we immediately recognize them as the Three Charites, as they were known in ancient Greece, or, in their Roman guise, the Three Graces, the first goddess (Aglaia) embodying giving, the second (Euphrosyne) receiving and the third (Thalia) representing the return.<sup>10</sup> Later on in this essay we will have more room to elaborate on their names and their specific relationships to beauty, but it is already quite clear that the structure of giving parallels the structure of beauty: the given parts must return to the whole, and three steps make one circle. Let us also keep in mind that the number three in this case does not constitute the static geometry of a triangle, as we encounter it in the Christian Trinity, for instance, but the dynamic geometry of circulation, as is the case with other female Greek triads, such as the Horai (seasons) and the Moirai (fate). While Mauss extensively discusses the “three obligations” (to give, to receive, to reciprocate) in relation to the potlatch, he surprisingly declines to link

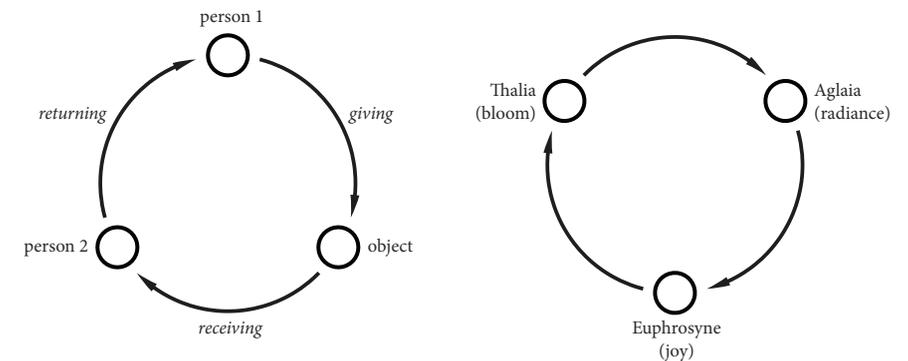


Fig. 1. The three-step procedure of gift-giving (left) and its representation in the Three Graces (right).

them to the Charites, and he therefore overlooks the possible connection between what he calls the “force of things” and beauty or grace. In fact, he explicitly states that he doesn’t want “to take into account the aesthetic phenomena”<sup>11</sup> that are related to the gift, and of course, for his sociology it might not be of primary concern. It is all the more so to us, precisely because the force of things – beauty – can only be circulated and not owned and therefore has an unmistakable bonding effect on all involved.

Every now and then we find references to the gift in aesthetic theories, but conversely, there are hardly any references to beauty in anthropological or sociological studies of the gift. I could only trace one exception, in Maurice Godelier’s *The Enigma of the Gift*:

The beauty of a shell, its singularity are not purely accidents of nature: in order for it to become an exchangeable object, a shell must be worked – polished, pierced, mounted, decorated; a copper must be poured, molded, fashioned. Exchange-objects are therefore unequally beautiful and unequally singular, and their value varies accordingly.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, in anthropology it mostly goes without saying that gifts are beautiful, but surely it can’t be an accident that clothes offered as presents are extensively patterned and colored, and that metal objects, such as necklaces, bracelets and rings, are painstakingly polished. Moreover, they are given during special festivities, ceremonies and feasts that are themselves meticulously constructed spheres of beauty created by music, song and dance. A purely sociological theory, a purely anthropological or economic theory of the gift, will by definition fail to grasp the scope of what occurs in gift exchange – we need a discipline that takes Mauss’s force of things to heart. More precisely, aesthetics is able to deal with one of the major problems of such theories, namely the nagging discrepancy between symmetrical and asymmetrical gifts. Obviously, when one takes into account Mauss’s theory of reciprocity, acts of pure generosity (giving without expecting return) or pure thievery (taking without being given) cannot be explicated, which is why Marshall Sahlins defines them respectively as “generalized and negative reciprocity,” as opposed to the balanced form.<sup>13</sup> When discussing the first category, generalized reciprocity, Sahlins lists examples, such as *noblesse oblige*, help, generosity and hospitality, taking a mother’s suckling

of her baby as the primordial example of the “pure gift.” Now, in the first place, we should never underestimate a baby’s cuteness, which is an extreme form – an extremely distorted form – of beauty, a beauty compensating the lack of power of its subject, the infant, which is in constant need of help, nourishment and care. Secondly, the infant’s well-being and flourishing should clearly be considered a response to the gift of the milk,<sup>14</sup> similarly to how the ancient Greeks regarded the flowering of plants as a response to the gifts of the sun and rain. After all, flourishing is one of the Three Graces. All Sahlins’ exceptions must involve an aesthetic of some kind – not just the cute – and can therefore be included in cycles of reciprocation, since a pure gift can’t exist. Therefore, instead of denying the existence of the force of things by seeking exceptions to reciprocation, we should expand it from material to aesthetic exchanges. What the cute-milk-growth connection shows is that exchanges must be viewed in this broader aesthetic sphere, where (a) responses need not be immediate – on the contrary, the longer they take, the stronger the bond; (b) it is not always clear where the original gift and counter-gift should be located – a gift can generate strings or clusters of cycles; and (c) exchanges don’t necessarily consist of the transfer of matter; feeling – the etymological root of the word *aesthetic* – is always involved, and the feelings by definition concern the distribution of ownership, as we will see later when discussing the relationship between joy and gratitude.

This broadening of the notion of the gift, the suspense of the return, the ambiguity of gift and counter-gift, and the involvement of feelings as well as actions and objects in cycles of exchange can be examined in all possible detail in ancient Greek culture. The fact that the Greeks slowly moved from a tribal clan-based system highly dependent on gift exchange to a myriad of city-states and military cultures based on alliances and friendship but also sacrifice and heroism means they saw everything, every object, every act, in the light of a general aesthetic, or, as they called it, *charis*. Though we see it in words like *charisma* and *charity*, the term *charis* is usually translated as “grace,” derived from the Latin *gratia*, a term that today carries as much theological meaning as it does an aesthetic signification of gracefulness. Thus, *charis* is deeply embedded in the idea of the gift and its reciprocation but also in feelings of gratitude and gratification. Looking at ancient Greek culture to gain a better understanding of the kinship between the gift and

beauty can prove extremely illuminating, because as a transition from one into the other it follows the saltational model almost literally. Between gift and beauty, we see the act of giving an object transform into an object that presents itself as a gift; that is, an object that is not simply present but present with a certain forwardness, acting toward you, the recipient. This, in brief, is the definition of a beautiful object, with all its implications of movement and directionality.

Why was ancient Greek culture so obsessed with beauty? We see it not only in the meticulously painted vases and carved temples, the refined statues and clothing, but likewise in the political speeches delivered with the help of Peitho, the goddess of persuasion, and in the combing of a soldier's hair and the anointment of his body before battle.<sup>15</sup> Beauty in ancient Greece was to be found in every pore of society, at the heart of every exchange. One of the main reasons for beauty's emergence must have been the shifting of *charis* from the realm of agricultural tribes to the *polis*. Enabling the circulation of grace between variably sized groups at variable moments in time, and thus allowing it to become a circulation of values, enabled the foundation of the city and the state, far larger organizational entities than tribes and their villages. What functioned as *charis* in actual – temporal – exchanges during ceremonies and rituals started to function as beauty under primarily spatial conditions. The German classics scholar Christian Meier compellingly argues in his 1985 book *Politik und Anmut* that the *polis* is based on a highly designed and regulated state of kindness, of politeness (a term exposing its etymological roots) and the maintenance of friendships (*philia*), facilitating a wide variety of exchanges in which violence is the exception and beauty the norm. Besides beautiful objects, we encounter stylized manners, the pervasiveness of music and dance, eloquence in every possible situation, the formalized drinking of wine during the *symposium*, even the art of making honey<sup>16</sup> – the list is endless.

At first, it appears that the link between beauty and gift exchange reveals the social (or ethical) nature of the aesthetic,<sup>17</sup> but more disturbingly, the reverse turns out to be true: the social is fundamentally aesthetic. Beauty, in this regard, is the spatialization of *charis*, and subsequently the democratization of it.<sup>18</sup> Beauty allowed *charis* to disseminate itself, to be distributed at any time and place, instead of only during feasts and ceremonies, those special events organized in temples and courts. In the context of the gift

cycle being a form of distributed ownership, beauty amounted to an increase not only in scale but in strategy as well. Beauty could be given before the receiver was yet present and received after the giver was no longer in sight. Though the reciprocation of the gift in tribal cultures was already meant to be delayed or even suspended, it always involved a material connection between a giver, a gift and a recipient, whereas beauty stretches itself out over time into space, allowing for the distributed ownership of the gift to be multiplied. For when it is spatialized, the gift becomes available to all who encounter it and therefore becomes a public act, turning the establishment of space first and foremost into that of public space. Public space is the arena of appearances. When the gift is the sharing of inalienable properties, beauty is circulating among the public and considered beneficial to that public, a public good. The gift would be returned not only through pleasure but through people's being good citizens, lovers or good friends. Marcel Hénaff speaks in this context of a "unilateral gift,"<sup>19</sup> similar to Sahlins' pure gift, suggesting beauty can do without reciprocation. However, in the final analysis there can be no question of unilateralism; beauty marks the transformation from the single exchange of the gift not into its absence but into a multiple exchange. It freed *charis* from the chains of actuality and opened it up to space and its organization, which may contain many actualities, because each experience of beauty is in itself an individual experience. The temporal quality of *charis* transformed into the spatial quality of beauty, a quality that from very early on – earlier than the eighth century BC – was described as a glow, radiance or shining.

In *The Age of Grace*,<sup>20</sup> Bonnie MacLachlan collects almost a dozen different meanings of the word *charis* from ancient Greek poetry, be it Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Work and Days* or Pindar's *Olympian Odes*, to mention just a few of her sources. Next to taking on the meaning of the gift itself, *charis* can involve the pleasure the gift invokes, but also the act of a favor, a sexual one or one of kindness; an offering to the gods; a feeling of gratitude or, more generally, the communal bond that *charis* establishes; and, last but not least, beauty: the beauty of a hairdo, earrings, a garment or a way of speaking or singing. The breadth of the spectrum is mind-boggling. A lack of *charis*, for instance, is how Achilles describes Agamemnon's lack of recompense for the prowess he exhibits on the battlefield, which makes Achilles so angry that no booty can make him change his mind, until his

friend and lover is killed and he returns to fighting using the shining shield made by Hephaistos (the lame god-smith and the husband of one of the Three Graces). In the *Odyssey*, the term *charis* is also used to describe the beauty of Odysseus when he anoints himself by bathing in oil, with “the locks flowing in curls like the hyacinth flower.”<sup>21</sup> And *charis* likewise denotes the radiance of Hera when she puts on her “earrings, consisting of three berry-like drops / and much *charis* gleamed therefrom.”<sup>22</sup> The shining shield, the glistening body, the gleaming beauty – without exception, they are forms of radiance. In most cases, radiance doesn’t involve actual light or reflections; it primarily involves the aforementioned shedding of properties by a thing or being, which can be actions such as favors as well as objects such as earrings. Radiance occurs when activity and object are inextricably bound up. Radiance is not simply directed outward but actively oriented. Parts are not passively stored in the object, quieted down by harmony and order, and wrested from their origins through some operation called beauty. No, in beautiful things there exists a certain looseness of parts, resulting in a thing’s openness and even vulnerability. I have already mentioned motion and variation as formal aspects of beauty, and though this is not the moment to investigate their relationship, it is precisely that mergence of activity and beauty which we define as grace, as we see in the fact that the term “graceful” is still used to praise gestures, postures and movements but not objects. “Grace,” said Schiller, “is a movable beauty.”<sup>23</sup> And conversely, as Leonardo said a few centuries earlier, “Beauty is arrested grace.”<sup>24</sup> The thought of the one clarifies the other by reversal. Of beauty, while it is physically at a standstill, we could say that it appears not as an image but as an act, and of grace we could say that it appears not as an act but as an image, though physically in motion. Such a switching of roles prevents actions from being simply submerged in the flows of time and opens up things (images, objects) to reciprocation and response. To be sure, beauty and grace are not identical, and Schiller rightfully distinguished them, though it would be a mistake to think of grace as distinct from beauty in the way that ugliness is, or magnificence, or cuteness: conceptually, grace and beauty are equals, but since grace historically appeared first on the scene in the form of *charis*, it remains at the core of beauty. Grace is the beauty of actual movement, but beauty is the movement of the gift. At a certain point in history, it was no longer necessary for the object to be literally handed over by the gift; in the ancient

Greek view, its beauty sufficed. Hence, the role between the act and the object was slowly reversed: in the tribal world the act contained the object, while in the Greek world of beauty the object comprised the act of giving (see fig. 2). Therefore, we shouldn’t conclude simply that grace consists of movement and beauty of stoppage, since in either case both motion and arrest play a role; in grace, movement is objectified, and in beauty, the object is mobilized.

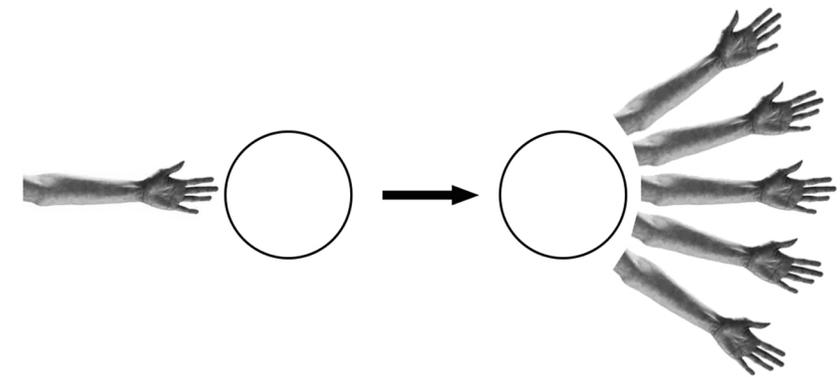


Fig. 2. Beauty as gift: a diagram of the gift’s transformation into beauty via “*charis*,” depicting generosity on the left and radiance on the right.

If *charis* defined the way a bride’s dowry was passed on or the way a general thanked his soldiers by offering them booty, at a certain point in Greek history it was no different from the glistening coming from gold or the movement coming from jewelry and hair, or the way the sun sent down its rays or the clouds nourished the fields with rain. The primordial act of giving is that of nourishment. For the ancient Greeks, life was absorbed in ever-revolving cycles of giving that were just as much circles of beauty-sharing. A beautiful thing was a gift, a thing that came forth or, as was often written, shone forth. It did not simply appear (*phainesthai*, a term still present in contemporary words like phenomenon, phantasm and epiphany) but was something that appeared with a forward motion (in Plato’s word, *ekphainesthai*), making beauty both an object and a movement.

The gift and its reciprocation are the reason why the Three Graces have become such a powerful model for understanding beauty. Let us, for example, take a look at Antonio Canova's beautiful neoclassical sculpture of the Three Graces and see how the hands, arms, elbows, knees interlock, how the bending, weakening or even exclusion of a part of one is compensated for by one of the others. In fact, we don't see three young women standing and simply holding hands; we see them as a unit. Leaning, dancing and standing are all intermixed, and if one of the sisters were to step out, the others would surely lose their balance and fall. We discern a group more complex than three merely interconnected entities, a collective with all its parts woven together, revolving around a vertical axis: three sister-goddesses named Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia. We'll return to the latter two further on, but let us start by establishing that the name of the first literally denotes radiance. Aglaia, as she is called in Hesiod's *Theogony*,<sup>25</sup> is mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* as Charis,<sup>26</sup> and in both cases portrayed as the wife of Hephaistos. As radiance, she represents beauty perfectly; she is its giving, shedding quality, and light pours from her.

Looking more carefully at Canova's sculpture, we notice something curious: Aglaia stands a bit higher than the other two – not much, just a few centimeters, yet it seems rather fitting when one thinks about how things or people of beauty, which is what Aglaia embodies, “stand out,” exceeding not only themselves but often others as well. I don't have to remind anyone that Achilles is a hero, and “hero” was a technical term in ancient Greece, i.e., part of the metaphysical system, and the same goes for the heroism of Odysseus. In fact, their heroic deeds are the basis of epic poetry, which is the poetry of praise, and praise is a vertical act: it turns a man or woman into a demigod, moves him or her upward but also removes the person from actuality to reserve them for immortality. Greek society, which was fully engaged in the construction of a horizontal plane of exchanges through inventing the notions of *dēmos* (the people), *dikē* (justice), *eirēnē* (peace) and, in a way, equality, could only construct such a flat society through idols of verticality, that is, gods, victors and heroes, and what Hannah Arendt called “greatness.”<sup>27</sup> And this has been the source of some serious misunderstandings. Of course, sociologically, these are two distinct directions; aesthetically, however, the double move is turned into the single act of beauty: in order to jump forward, that is, to make a horizontal connection for reciprocation,

things (humans, objects, anything) initially jump upward. To jump as far as you can implies you first need to gain enough height – respectively a feat of excess and one of measure. Every leap follows its own specific, curved path. It is a single curved trajectory constructed between two linear axes: one vertical, the other horizontal; one of excellence, the other of connectivity; one of sacrifice and heroics, the other of equality and bonding.

Why not a movement that is purely vertical? one might ask. Well, that would be the move of the sublime and the sacred, and the sublime can only be answered by awe, by complete congelation and passivity, while the sacred is that which retreats from circulation,<sup>28</sup> raising itself above society, not landing between humans but blocking circulation by setting taboos and remaining high up in the air with all the other untouchable entities. In mentioning “serious misunderstandings” a moment ago, I was referring to the confusion of the sublime and the beautiful. The sublime and the sacred constantly demand that we answer them with subordination and submission: more precisely, they treat recipients as subjects, in absolute contrast to how beauty works. So why not simply horizontal, then? Well, ontologically speaking, there is no ground to walk on; the connections between things cannot be preconditioned by a horizontal ground or a “plane of immanence”;<sup>29</sup> there is no “sub-“ to the “-stance.” A ground would by consequence create a vertical system, since things would necessarily have to take place on that supporting surface, thereby prohibiting the development of equality. No, beautiful things pull themselves up by their bootstraps. That doesn't mean heroes exist or gods exist, or even God himself exists (nor that they don't exist, either); it means that to connect you need to jump the gap in front of you, and to do that you need some form of faith (this is the proverbial leap of faith),<sup>30</sup> or sacrifice, or bravery, though I don't think that Achilles is more brave than, say, a blooming lily in the field, since both demonstrate the same vulnerability during encounters.

While beauty is deeply linked to excess, to confuse it with ecstasy, with the Dionysian *Rausch*, or with even terror<sup>31</sup> is to deny it the necessary measure, the *metron*, that allows the gift to be passed on to a recipient. Without measure, the excessive nature of beauty will immediately slip into the realm of the sublime, into the realm of Bataille's excess,<sup>32</sup> inevitably retiring into the sacred. For ages aestheticians were afraid of excess; this fear was gradually assimilated by Romanticism – we, on the other hand, fundamentally

shy away from measure, drilled by a century of undergoing the excesses of the sublime, or, as it is better known, the age of modernism. Our weariness has proven wholly inappropriate: we have mistaken measure for proportion, harmony and *consonantia*, which are merely seasonable variations of an act that every age has to reinvent, and even challenge, though never blindly abolish. Beauty is a measured form of excess, and it is vital to distinguish it clearly and definitely from, on the one hand, mere harmony and, on the other, the sublime, even from splendor or magnificence. The costs of immersing ourselves in an aesthetic of the purely vertical are enormous, since this denies beauty the creation of local – not global (there is no “world” as far as beauty is concerned) – horizons, i.e., spheres of action and cycles of exchange, or even collective moods, atmospheres and lifestyles.

### **radiance and existence**

What at first in this essay seemed to be the development of an aesthetic theory presenting the umpteenth view on beauty has now slowly turned into a concept of existence – existence in the broadest possible sense, namely the existence of all things, objects as well as living beings. In the realm of grace and beauty, things present themselves to us – and to other things – as gifts. To assess this concept of the thing-gift, we should position it between two extremes, between the thing as an empirical bundle of properties on the one hand and as ontologically held together by dark essences on the other. Although the gift borrows aspects from both philosophies, it resists identification with either one separately. Empiricism is so obsessed with properties that it can never be sure how they are bundled, and essentialism is so certain of the whole that the multitude of parts seems a mere illusion. As we saw above, the theory of beauty as a gift claims that an appearance is accompanied by a certain vector, though not necessarily of actual motion. Beauty replaces the actual handing over of the gift with radiance, which gives it more of the character of excess or emanation. Radiance combines the two stronger halves of essentialism and empiricism: a continuous stream of properties that includes a certainty that they flow from a single source. Without their weaker halves, i.e., the skepticism of the one and the need

for a dark entity of the other, radiance in effect amounts to the following: things by nature exceed themselves – a phrase so paradoxical it would surely drive any philosopher mad. Things are somehow larger than the space they physically and mentally occupy, penetrating their environment while at the same time not connecting to it.

Exceeding is generally equated with transcendence, that is, the transcending of the physical, tangible object by something else, a higher being or a higher idea. Though I am in full agreement with the first part – “transcending the physical” – I am not with the second – “by something else.” The transcendence of beauty has long been considered as a matter of things going beyond themselves – a formulation which can’t be improved, but which is invariably followed by that disappointing extrapolation stating that things go beyond themselves to arrive at a state of the Pure, the True, the Perfect, the Just, the Ideal – in short, at the Beyond with a capital B. It’s completely unnecessary to assume things transcend themselves because a higher reality is hoisting them upward. Even so, that is no reason to shut our eyes to the vertical component of beauty and proclaim the universal flatness of immanence. That “micro” transcendence of the first step, perhaps better termed a local transcendence, is a form of excess that in fact enables a notion of the real; it’s what real things do, not what the ideal does to make other things exist. Local transcendence is part of the saltational act: real things jump upward to land horizontally between other things, not to detach themselves from them. Beauty goes from real things outward, not from idealities inward. It is not one thing shining through another; no, beauty is the way things exist, and they do so forwardly and givingly. Things create a zone around themselves in which they can act and interact with others; without that zone, they would be merely a collection of parts and never reach the state of a whole. Therefore, the type of transcendence argued here is radically different from the usual one, since instead of a thing being exceeded by something else, we should ask: How can a thing exceed *itself*?

One answer is that although things are finite, they are never finalities. To all things there clings a degree of indeterminacy. Sure enough, this view is widely accepted with respect to objects of fine art or glamorous fashion models, enveloped as they are by a cloud of *je ne sais quoi*,<sup>33</sup> but it applies even to the most finished, determinate objects. For instance, when I throw a heavy bolt through the kitchen window because I’ve forgotten my house

keys, that bolt transcends the finality of being screwed into a nut. Or, a bit less dramatically, when I put my dinner plate on top of a stack of books, in a hurry to see a football match and lacking a table, the books transcend their definition as reading material. And we can quickly extend such encounters to, for instance, skiing down a mountain slope or dancing to music; committing murder with a hammer; staring into a lake or fire; making a bird's nest or bungee-jumping off a bridge<sup>34</sup> – all engagements with the indeterminacy of things. There is nothing in a sound that tells us to move our feet, head or hips. And snowy slopes are not made to ski down, nor are lakes made to provoke staring. Nor are twigs made to be assembled into a nest, nor bridges made to jump from; and hammers are made to drive nails into walls. Still, things have encounters like these every day, encounters that aren't accidental, merely intervening with their operability, but are of a more fundamental and more direct, aesthetic order than that of any possible usage or skilled action. An essentialist like Heidegger would never have been able to appreciate that. To him, things were either (invisibly) handy or (visibly) broken,<sup>35</sup> and even though his shift from the phenomenal to the operational expanded the power of things, it meant things would be able to do only what they were supposed to – a jug pouring wine – or less – a jug getting cracked – but never more. Yet there is always more, as Adorno writes in his memorable statement on nature's beauty:<sup>36</sup> a "more" leading us toward things, a quality of being what we call enchanting or charming. That is the forwardness of things; they glow in our hands, in our minds and eyes: the thought of an action such as throwing the bolt through the window enters our mind as an irresistible spell. In other words, radiance can make us see things that are not immediately visible in the realm of the phenomenal but still belong to the presence of the object. We do not grasp things with our consciousness; it's more the reverse: things touch, strike and captivate us – and if we take another look at the diagram of the outstretched hands of radiance (fig. 2, on the right), that is not so surprising. The indeterminacy of a thing by far outshines any predetermined state, as if it is surrounded by thousands of whirling loose threads – loose threads which exist for our sake, so we can tie into it, not simply for their own sake.

And it's all there; things do not withhold anything or keep anything in reserve. They are utterly generous. Their existence consists more of a surplus than a reserve. Reserve is essence, virtuality, order, meaning, all those attrib-

utes that are obscured by externalities and that lie hidden *behind* a thing; surplus and excess, in contrast, lie *before* it, either literally shed around it or, more metaphorically, residing in its future meetings with us and other things. That is the genius of things, and beauty begins there. It starts with episodes as banal as a dinner plate on a stack of books – one hardly notices the miracle that is taking place there – and continues all the way to the most exquisite demonstrations of beauty, be they objects set with shining jewels, faces surrounded by the most lavish of fair tresses, the sparkling faces of film stars, or paintings in all possible colors and swirling forms. It's the whole reason why film stars and fashion models have faces that are, on the one hand, utterly unique, and, on the other, wholly average. How is it possible that when you superimpose all the faces of all the women of a certain age of a certain period and region, you get Kate Moss or Greta Garbo? If they are so average, why aren't they plain? It is because, in contrast to the hexagonal metal bolt, they have physically and formally merged with their indeterminacy. The bolt is only beautiful in its heroic flight toward the kitchen window; Moss and Garbo don't have to resort to such extremes.

Surplus doesn't mean all is necessarily immediately visible to us or to the many others the object may have relations with; it means *nothing is in principle invisible*, and therefore that the phenomenal has to be seen as continuous with the ontological. To be sure, the phenomenal doesn't cover all of what a thing is, but it definitely is not on the other side of it either. A thing is all that which radiates, though it glows beyond what we see at a certain moment. What radiates is not an invisible idea exceeding the object's appearance but a visible indeterminacy exceeding the determinately visible – an *extra*, a *bonus*, that exceeds the finite contour of things. Certainly, when we form a cycle of beauty with a number of an object's qualities, we aren't consuming all its qualities. This is merely because we are not taking everything in, not because the object keeps anything hidden. And other people, other things, form other circles taking in other aspects; ergo, there must be a fundamental too-much to things, and such excess is the aesthetic quality in itself, an absolute abundance or redundancy. There is no reason for things to hold anything back, to be timid or secretive. If they kept a part for themselves, we would never be able to explain how the repressed part related to whatever they were willing to share with others. No, it's all there. Beauty keeps a grip on you as more and more properties are released, replacing the

temporal, streaming sequence of experiences with the experience of spatial depth. The true extensiveness or weight of a thing lies in its radiance, in the thickening of its appearance, in the depth constructed by the contrasts and similarities between properties. Beauty expands from the phenomenal into the real by becoming a phenomenality of the extra. This radical generosity makes the world fuller than full. Reality is a plenum of things, each thing existing in a state of generous surplus, while actuality – what happens – is a smaller, received and returned, segment of that, with the aim of feeding change and novelty back into reality. In contrast to virtuality, which explains events from an even smaller germ that potentializes and unfolds, the theory of radiance is one of a superactualism, that is, of a *presence beyond the present*, of a beauty that always exceeds its interactions. Reality is filled with more than actuality can deal with, or, in our earlier terms, the given exceeds what can be reciprocated – amounting to a superactuality which by far exceeds what the present can process. Evidently, the prefix “super-” implies the saltational principle. The world is full, then, yes, but not solid, or, if you like, not consistent. The indeterminate zone surrounding things prevents solidity. They slide and roll over one another in a sea of contingency, never to be fixed in position, circulating in ongoing cycles of exchange.

In the history of art, this zone of indeterminacy and radiance was famously described as an aura by Walter Benjamin, who compared it to an *Umzirkung*,<sup>37</sup> and when associated with the Christian saints, it has been literally depicted as a golden nimbus or halo. As is well known, painters have rendered this as a glow emanating from the saint’s head, a simple glowing ring of light hovering above it, or – as was more common during earlier periods – a disk of gold leaf fitted around the head. In *The Coming Community*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben dedicates a brief, captivating chapter on Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of halos;<sup>38</sup> according to St. Thomas, they should be regarded as a form of surplus (*superaddi*), as an extra that makes the blessed object more brilliant (*clarior*). Coming close to the notion of a bonus, Aquinas refers to this extra as a “reward,” or what Agamben calls “the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges,” and – even more closely approaching the argument of the preceding paragraphs – “an indetermination of its limits.”<sup>39</sup> Here, a conceptual shift occurs in which indetermination, which is generally categorized as potential – a force that is *under way*, to be determined – no longer occurs in time but in space

and thereby shifts from a state of being-not-yet to being-too-much, with beauty becoming a force that is *moving away* from the determined state. Or, in Agamben’s words: “One can think of the halo ... as a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable.”<sup>40</sup> A striking thought, since I know of no other examples of the conflation of these two terms in philosophy. Potential, like its twin brother the virtual, usually precedes the actual: for something to exist, there must be (or have been) the potential for it to exist. In contrast to this virtual potentiality that mediates between inexistence and existence, the halo’s actual potentiality mediates between existence and coexistence. For something to exist, there must be the potential for it to exist *with others*, which, by the way, does not imply existence with others is already actual – the connections are not established yet. Rather, it means that things need to offer something and to exist superactually *toward others*. The best way to explain the rays of radiance is to imagine them as “half-relations,” as relations emanating from an object that have not yet connected to other things (see fig. 3b). And they are not a few; they are abundant, like hairs on a head – and some are short and engaged in defining the object, while some are long and blur its contours. Therefore, in our encounters with beauty there is always more than we can actually deal with, but in contrast to virtual potentiality, it has already realized itself: the more is *there*. When reciprocating beauty, we merely place some – not all – of it back in time, making it circulate *now*. The superactual, then, is a form of space, and the actual a form of time. Space, similarly to our earlier findings on the public space of the *polis*, is a product of beauty.

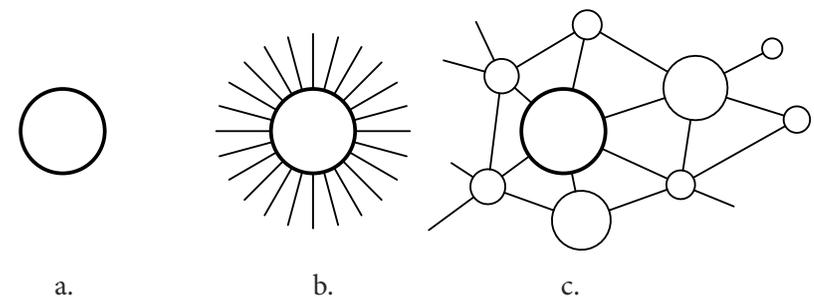


Fig. 3. Three states of existence: a. things as cut off; b. things as radiant; c. things as related. The second, in-between state allows things to be discrete as well as outwardly oriented.

Sifting further through the history of art, and beyond, we quickly find more examples of the aesthetic object exceeding itself: for instance, in the form of bloom, which we encounter in multiple variations in reference to youth, to springtime, to adventure, and to ornament and abundance. Crispin Sartwell investigates the “six names of beauty” in his excellent book of that title,<sup>41</sup> and one of them is the Hebrew term *yapha*, which can mean radiance as well as bloom, which Sartwell associates with scent-exuding flowers as much as with scintillating fireworks and gems. Though it is perhaps a superfluous remark, we should bear in mind that flowers are beautiful because they have formally assimilated radiance by organizing themselves radially. Along with the hair-covered head, the flower is among the few examples of proper halos in nature, and if we allow a slightly broader definition, so are sunsets, songs and snow. The covering of brides and victors (as well as objects of festivities, such as houses or temples) with flowers, wreaths and garlands has been a custom for almost three millennia, directly linking beauty to flourishing and bloom.<sup>42</sup> Ornament, of course, is bloom, the flourishing of a thing, and, as John Ruskin argued,<sup>43</sup> ornamentation is a form of sacrifice, a spending that goes beyond reason, logic or use, wholly in line with our notion of beauty as a gift. Similarly, the English art theorist Adrian Stokes speaks of “stone bloom”<sup>44</sup> and, in the same breath, of luminosity, which brings us back to light. And philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly speak of “shining things,”<sup>45</sup> in an admirable attempt to revive Heidegger’s concepts of *Leuchten* and *Scheinen* – though they heavily rely on terminology such as “awe,” “sacred” and “overwhelming,”<sup>46</sup> fundamentally confusing beauty with sublimity, as scholars so often do. Of course, nothing shines more than gold, and, in its wake, blondness, a phenomenon that conveniently developed into fairness. In early medieval philosophy, all being had the nature of light, as exemplified by Plotinus’ notion of beauty as emanation and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s *claritas*,<sup>47</sup> or brilliance, a concept that six hundred years later strongly influenced Thomas Aquinas and the project of the Gothic, with its breathtaking stained-glass windows and book illuminations.

But the strongest connection between giving, light and flourishing urges us to return to the Three Graces, or, as they were known in ancient Greece, the Three Charites. The Charites’ connotations of light and radiance are considerably older even than their later breakdown into three distinct god-

esses. According to some sources, the origin probably lies with the “bright horses of the sun,”<sup>48</sup> for which the Vedic poets used the Sanskrit name Haritas, a divine force that was part of a larger earth religion that related the rays of the sun to natural fertility and growth. This divinity was inherited by early mystery cults in a still-agricultural Greece, first simply as Charis and later as three distinct dancing figures, of whom Aglaia adopted the status of the radiant one; we encounter her this way in Hesiod<sup>49</sup> and Pindar,<sup>50</sup> next to her sisters Euphrosyne and Thalia. Briefly put, the cycle of sunset and sunrise slowly became the dance of the Three Charites, eventually turning into the gift cycle; we find this interpretation of the Three Graces in Aristotle<sup>51</sup> and later in Seneca who – indirectly – connects Aglaia with the giving of the gift, Euphrosyne with its receipt, and Thalia with its return.<sup>52</sup>

Though we see the term *charis* turning up again and again in the epics, where objects and actions alike are described in terms of shining and glistening, whether they be favorable acts toward others, sacrifices on the battlefield, acts of kindness, anointed bodies or gleaming garments, we encounter the Charites themselves in the context of what we identified as the extra and the bonus when discussing St. Thomas’s *superaddi* of halos. The Charites should be understood as the personification and circulation of effects involving *charis*. While the Charites almost exclusively deal with the practices of beauty (dance, adornment, singing, etc.), they are to be viewed in the much wider context of kindness, bravery, sacrifice, fame and friendliness. Though much has been said about the topic, the radicalness of the Charites acting as the model of *charis* has gone mainly unnoticed. The appropriate question to ask ourselves is why the term *charis* is used for such a vast range of sociable acts while the Charites spend all their time working on their makeup (and that of others). My claim, again, is that the fundamental relation between them doesn’t mean beauty is ultimately of a social nature but exactly the opposite: all acts of bonding are both regulated by the spheres of beauty and exceeded by them. Understanding things necessitates the understanding of beauty, but the interaction of things necessitates it even more. The Charites sing during festivities, they dance undressed but dress other goddesses, they bring roses and garlands and, in particular, they adorn the divine with jewelry – a golden necklace and a diadem for Pandora, a spiralling bracelet for the arm of Aphrodite, dangling earrings for Hera – along with an endless list of perfumes, gleaming veils, silver mantles, purple

robes, anointments, and hairdos. Western metaphysics has notoriously failed to come to grips with the nature of adornment, classifying it – either positively or negatively – under the rubric of illusions and masks, thinking the *superaddi* covers up some true natural state. But superaddition is not concealment. Rather, we should view adornment as an exponent of the saltational principle, each part (superactually) leaping from the object without (actually) leaving its origin. I am opting for a metaphysics of adornment.<sup>53</sup> Jewelry superadds to each motion of the body an extra movement, to each turn of Hera’s head an extra swing of her earrings, to each movement of Aphrodite’s arm the sparkling and tinkling of the golden bracelet, to each gesture of a hand the flash of a ring. And the same applies to makeup, perfume, hairdos, garments: the gleaming of the eyes is enhanced – *heightened* – by eyeliner and eyeshadow; the speaking and breathing of the mouth by lipstick; the motion of the head is enhanced by the movement of curls and tresses; the walking of the body by the moving folds and shifting layers of cloth; a person’s passing by enhanced by leaving a trail of fragrance. Last but not least, we should recognize the smile as the apex of radiance, superadding the brightness of teeth – compared to pearls by so many poets<sup>54</sup> – to the beaming of a face.

Most of the above takes place in the realm of Aglaia – of *aglaa dora*,<sup>55</sup> shining gifts – but to get the full picture, we need to finally attend to her sisters Euphrosyne and Thalia. Oddly enough, not much has been written on these two as distinct from their more famous sister. It goes without saying that to truly understand the nature of beauty, *charis* and the cycle of gift exchange we need to conceptualize Euphrosyne and Thalia at least as clearly as we did Aglaia. Euphrosyne’s name carries similar meanings such as joy, mirth, merriment, pleasure, or glee, which relates to gladness; *glad* means smooth in some languages (such as Dutch and German), or, again, bright. Any of these words indicates that she personifies a feeling. Let us keep in mind that *chara* literally means “joy” and *charein* “to rejoice,”<sup>56</sup> and that *charis*, as it appears in the epics, just as often carries the meaning of joy as it does that of favor, recompense or beauty. If Euphrosyne connotes joy, how does that connect to her acting as the recipient, as the second stage in the cycle of giving, receiving and returning? This will be our main question to tackle. In an analysis of these figures, there is danger in falling back on the informational model of a sender and a receiver by regarding Aglaia as the repre-

sentative of the objective aspects of beauty and Euphrosyne of the subjective ones and subsequently claiming that somehow object and subject are merged by the cycle. If only things were that easy. Certainly, the nature of the cycle must play a key role in any analysis, but not simply through a bending of the linear model with the nature of the agents kept intact. The participants in the cycle are completely different from those playing their parts in the linear model of information exchange. Concerning the nature of the cycle, we decided early on that it involved distributed ownership. Gifts are inalienable; they can be neither owned nor wholly appropriated. And to illustrate that, the sphere of the gift was described as elastic. Peculiar as it may seem, the image of elasticity can help us understand why objects suddenly involve feelings; that is, why the cycle of goods can be understood as aesthetic and vice versa.

When we apply the image of elasticity and picture the giver as deforming itself, thinly stretching out into the shape of a gift by partially extruding into space, then surely the recipient can likewise be pictured as deforming itself into the shape of, say, a bag or a mouth to encapsulate that gift. In this sense, the term “reception” doesn’t fully cover what is occurring at Euphrosyne’s position, since the act of reception is extended by acceptance – or acception, which is definitive and decisive, certainly when compared to perception, the concept usually employed in relation to beauty. To “perceive” means something you “take at a distance,” while to “accept” means to “take in.” Perception is critical, while acception is absolutely uncritical, without (Kantian) judgment. In keeping things at a distance, perception and criticality can never explain why beauty is felt, whereas in fact beauty is felt before it is seen. To feel joy means to share the space of the given object by “taking in” the gift. While the given is an externalization, a shedding of properties, a *superaddi*, the received is an internalization, a swallowing, which makes acception first and foremost a feeling, since an object assimilated by the body is not seen but felt. For psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, *every* feeling of enjoyment is connected with gratitude,<sup>57</sup> framed within the mother-infant relationship, a connection made through nourishment, as we saw in the example of milk and suckling. Seeing joy as a derivative of gratitude draws feeling into a wholly nonsubjective realm. We take in food in the same way that we take pleasure in something – the receptivity of the recipient implies a certain openness, if not proper hunger or thirst.<sup>58</sup> Thinking of the gift ex-

change, one would assume the gift necessarily constitutes an actual object, but such objecthood is wholly dependent on, if not secondary to, the feeling of gratification, personified by this strangely lighthearted party girl named Euphrosyne, who is always ready to dance and drink. In one of the few remaining depictions of her, in a Roman mosaic from the first century AD, we find her lying on a couch holding out her cup to Akrotos, the spirit of drinking, who fills it with an elegant arc spouting from his golden horn.<sup>59</sup> What is being held out, and by and to whom? Is it her welcoming cup or his overflowing horn of plenty? The fact that we cannot say is telling enough.

We swallow to turn objects into feelings, and we discharge to turn feelings back into objects. In short, I assert that (a) the bare fact that we have any feelings at all is due to our participation in the cycle of beauty; greed or frugality should be considered obstructions of the cycle (through either swallowing too much or not discharging enough<sup>60</sup>); and (b) the fact that the cycle involves feelings as much as objects historically allowed the gift exchange of actual goods to transform into the exchange of beauty. That doesn't make beauty illusory or unreal, on the contrary. When we go back for a moment to the very beginning of this essay, back to the forest, the green leaves and the pear hinted at by the scotch, we now understand that an object shedding its properties sheds them as real objects, not as percepts or representations of objects. We physically take in the part when we partake or participate in the exchange of beauty. The fact that beauty is a broadening of gift exchange implies it remained an exchange of real objects, and even though there is no exchange of matter, these objects are swallowed and taken in. The American philosopher Guy Sircello called this "expansion," referring to the fact that we are "filled" with the beauty of a landscape or the sweetness of a melody.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, I'd be very hesitant to say we own our feelings. It would be better to think of feeling as a way for objects to appear in us<sup>62</sup> – when we "open up" to things during the act of acceptance, we are in fact extending the reach of public space. Aesthetics has too easily come to mean the sensualization of the subject, if not a complete subjectification of beauty in the manner of Hume and Kant – as if we can project any sense of beauty onto anything; for that view, you would have to firmly shut your eyes to almost everything else that occurs in the cycle, leaving out the transcendence of the object, leaving out the saltational principle, leaving out the distributed

ownership of properties, and, of course, leaving out the final stage of the return, the counter-gift.

The third role, Thalia's, was an equally brilliant invention of the Greeks. The first thing to note – other than the fact that the name Thalia means "flourishing" or "blooming," implying growth – is that Thalia was also later known as Thallo, one of the Horai, the Hour of Spring, the goddess of the spring season. The Horai and the Charites are closely associated in Greek mythology; it is Thallo, for instance, who jumps forward with the flowered mantle to cover the naked Aphrodite in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. The Horai are involved as much in the cycles of life, the seasons, as in determining the right moment to act. To put it concisely, with Thalia the gift cycle switches from the space phase to the time phase: it's now that beauty makes things start to happen. The blooming of Thalia occurs in time, which means that although beauty shines in the superactual, it can only be reciprocated in the actual moment. The feelings of gratitude and joy which we located at the position of Euphrosyne now start to provoke an increase, a growth, which may be the youth of an adolescent, the blooming of a flower, the fertility of the land, the prosperity of a family, the wealth of a city – all, without exception, forms of plenty and abundance. As Melanie Klein puts it in *Envy and Gratitude*:

Gratitude is closely bound up with generosity. Inner wealth derives from having assimilated the good object so that the individual becomes able to share its gifts with others. This makes it possible to introject a more friendly outer world, and a feeling of enrichment ensues.<sup>63</sup>

The passage in the cycle from Aglaia to Euphrosyne is instigated by generosity, and from Euphrosyne to Thalia by gratitude, and from Thalia back to Aglaia by enrichment. How different the triadist model of the Graces is from the dualist models of beauty! Dualisms can at best be reconciled, while the circle merely has to be closed. Therefore, enjoyment should not be simply understood as a form of aesthetic pleasure, which would turn Euphrosyne's position into that of a terminus, but as a thoroughfare to enrichment and growth. It is not enough for beauty to be internalized; it needs to be transformative to be reciprocated. Thalia returns the gift by be-

coming beautiful and radiant herself, through an overflowing and flourishing, which again occurs in space. When Euphrosyne personifies the swallowing of the object by turning it into feeling, Thalia stands for the discharging of that feeling back into the object. While in the gift exchange one returns the actual gift or an equivalent, in beauty exchange we offer ourselves as counter-gift, i.e., as radiant. Between blocks of beauty, we find flows of time to make changes, to make progress, whatever – periods of high risk, when things can turn out ugly. In any case, Thalia is doing well, if not extremely so, and this is what Klein alludes to with the “good object,” a very fitting term. Philosophers have always struggled with the relationship of beauty to the good and the true, but many of their conclusions have proved unsustainable. It has been suggested that the beautiful is only beautiful if it is morally correct, or politically correct, or ethically proper, or in some other way references the massive archives of righteousness elevated far above us. That is not what good means. Good means beneficial: it helps you to be. Beauty is favorable; beauty is healthy. It helps you to walk down the street,<sup>64</sup> to talk to others; it helps you to be convincing, to make things, to solve problems; it helped Greek soldiers to fight their battles; it helps a leopard to kill; it helped Helen of Troy to start a war; it helps everyone with anything. Beauty has no particular interest in the Good. It doesn't help good things to be; *it helps things to be well*, i.e., it helps them to act and to move, with agility and with grace. Beauty is a radical form of alleviation or relief. In this regard, beauty can be considered as prosthetic, having as much the nature of a contrivance as of an adornment;<sup>65</sup> a twin phenomenon of a type we recognize from the works of Hephaistos, the crippled god who forged golden automata that looked like maidens to assist him, merging the prosthetic with the mimetic. It is no accident that he was both crippled and married to Aglaia. Her beauty, and the beauty of the things he makes, restores his mobility; it heals him and does him good. To be sure, we often speak of the good as a moral code for our actions, but we also speak of goods to mean a flow of merchandise, we say “Good!” to express approval of the way things are going, and we speak of people being “good at” what they're doing to praise them for excellence, not moral behaviour. The good is first and foremost a qualification of movement, which evidently takes place in the actual. The good belongs to the actual in the way that beauty belongs

to the superactual, which makes the good a function of beauty, not the reverse.

With Thalia, things go from good to better, since ultimately it is enrichment that enables the exchange. To be returned into the hands of Aglaia, the temporal phase of growth needs to turn into a spatial object of bloom, as if a movie is suddenly being played in slow motion – the very same “slow Time” of Keats in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”<sup>66</sup> – turning the momentary formlessness of transformation into a form of pure radiation. This is the whole reason why, for example, so many photos are taken of sunsets. Time seemingly keeps passing, but from the viewpoint of beauty, all has come to a halt, which marks the moment to push the button. Does this, in the end, make Thalia into a copy of Aglaia? Is the gift cycle a mechanism by which beauty reproduces itself? In a way, yes, though Thalia is no carbon copy. She needs to match the beauty of Aglaia, or else there is no return of the gift. The circle of movement can only be closed by the matching of the starting and ending points; that is, by stoppage. Surely, this is inherent to a cycle; it denotes the collapse of the distinction between progress and standstill, between movement and arrest and, more importantly, as Nietzsche said, between becoming and being.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, it turns Aglaia into a belated recipient as well, and since a recipient is the seat of feeling, the question becomes one of what exactly she feels. According to Epicurus and Goethe, it is the pleasure of giving itself,<sup>68</sup> which means that, when we apply our definition of feeling as the appearance of an internal object, Aglaia now suddenly sees herself in the mirror as a stranger, realizing in shock that beauty cannot be owned by anyone or anything and is a stranger to its own object.

### notes

1. Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), 58 and passim.
2. Charles Darwin, *The Annotated Origin: A Facsimile of the First Edition of On the Origin of Species*, annotated by James Costa (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2009), 194. Quoted by Leibniz in his *New Essays* IV, 16.
3. A similar argument was made by Guy Sircello in his unique *A New Theory of Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Sircello based his theory on the connection between the medieval concept of *claritas* (or radiance) and what he called “properties of qualitative degree” (PQDs). I only partially follow him in this matter, since I trace the notion of radiance further back to the ancient mythology of Aglaia and her sister Charites and subsequently frame radiance within gift theory. Although I admire his radically anti-subjectivist stance on beauty, my theory is grounded in the apparent paradox between “property” and “gift.”

4. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007 [1979]). Stephen David Ross, *The Gift of Beauty: The Good as Art* (New York: SUNY, 1996).
5. Introduction to Mauss' *The Gift* in: Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1990), vii.
6. See "The three obligations: to give, to receive, to reciprocate" in: Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 39–43.
7. Mauss, *The Gift*, 3 (my translation of "Quelle force y a-t-il dans la chose qu'on donne qui fait que le donataire la rend?").
8. Mauss, *The Gift*, 12.
9. Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping while Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), and Maurice Godelier, *The Engima of the Gift*, transl. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
10. Seneca, *On Benefits* I, 3. See note 52.
11. Mauss, *The Gift*, 3, and again on 38.
12. Godelier, *The Engima of the Gift*, 163.
13. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972), 193–96.
14. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude* (London: Virago Press, 1988), Chapter Ten.
15. In his *Politik und Anmut*, classicist Christian Meier calls beauty the "Greek miracle," while Michel Foucault speaks of an "aesthetics of existence" in a similar context (*The Courage of Truth*, 161–64). Despite its small size, Meier's *Politik und Anmut* (WJS Corso, 1985) has been very influential in this discussion. For more on the connection between exchange and beauty, see: Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Arpad Szalkolczai, *Sociology, Religion and Grace* (London: Routledge, 2007), Part I.
16. Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), Chapter Two.
17. Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 11.
18. As suggested by Hannah Arendt in 1954, then articulated by Christian Meier in 1985 (p. 43: "Auf dieser Weise wäre Anmut in die Konstitution der Öffentlichkeit, in die Grundlagen des Zusammenlebens eingegangen"), and later adopted by Marcel Hénaff in his 2002 *The Price of Truth* and by Arpad Szalkolczai in his *Sociology, Religion and Grace* of 2007.
19. Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth*, Chapter Seven, "The Paradoxes of Grace," esp. "Kharis and Polis," 246–52. Hénaff bases his argument on a reading of Meier's *Politik und Anmut* similar to mine, and in addition on Hannah Arendt's *Between Past and Future*.
20. MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace*, 21–34.
21. *Odyssey* 6.231.
22. *Iliad* 14.182 and *Odyssey* 18.298.
23. Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," in: *Schiller's "On Grace and Dignity" in Its Cultural Context*, eds. Jane Curran and Christopher Fricker (New York: Camden House, 2005), 125 [italics removed]. Cf. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: "Schönheit in Bewegung," in: *Sämtliche Schriften*, Vol. 6, XXI, 499.
24. Quoted from Henri Bergson's lecture on Félix Ravaisson published in *The Creative Mind*, transl. M. Andison (New York: Dover, 2007), 207.
25. *Theogony*, 945: "And Hephaestus, the famous Lame One, made Aglaea, youngest of the Graces, his buxom wife."
26. *Iliad* 18.382–83. Besides having a different name, she operates on her own in *The Iliad*, without her two sisters, Euphrosyne and Thalia.
27. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York and London: Penguin, 2006), 43–52, 63–4.
28. One of the main arguments in Annette Weiner's *Inalienable Possessions*, later taken up by Maurice Godelier in *The Enigma of the Gift*. Both are deeply indebted to Roger Caillois' 1959 *Man and the Sacred* (Illinois, 2001).
29. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Verso, 1994), Chapter Two, "The Plane of Immanence." My argument here is that even if the world consists of one layer, it is still stratified.
30. For Kierkegaard it meant that faith could only come suddenly, not gradually (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*), similarly, I guess, to the way we "fall" in love, or to Man's fall from grace, or to the way one starts a lecture: it cannot be done without leaping into it.
31. Rilke, *Duino Elegies*: "beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure."
32. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, 2 vols. (New York: Zone Books, 1983 and 1988).
33. The phrase "je ne sais quoi" appears first in Italian, in Agnolo Firenzuola's *On the Beauty of Women* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, orig. 1541. See p. 35), who calls this cloud a "vaghezza" (36), which means vagueness or indeterminacy as well as grace or charm. The term was later adopted by Dominique Bouhours as "je ne sçay quoy" in *Les Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène* in 1671. See Samuel Monk, "A Grace Beyond the Reach of Art," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1944).
34. For a discussion of bird's nests, see my *The Sympathy of Things*, 66; and for bungee jumping, 319.
35. Heidegger famously distinguished between *Zubandenheit* (readiness-at-hand, "handy") and *Vorhandenheit* (presentness-at-hand, "at hand"). The first is accompanied by an invisibility, since things, when caught up in the rhythms of usage and work, are not consciously paid attention to but exist as hidden or veiled, while the second entails a return to visibility, for instance when a thing is broken or not in use. See Graham Harman, "Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 2010). In these paragraphs I use similar phrasing to Harman's for the opposite argument: excess is not a form of withdrawal but of generosity. Withdrawal accumulates into essence, but since it is unknowable and hidden, it necessarily takes on the form of the gap, an "absence-at-hand," or, if you don't mind the pun, an *Abhandenheit*. Heidegger, of course, was obsessed by the gap: the essence of *Heim* was the *Unheimlich*; that of *Grund* was the *Abgrund*; the essence of the jug was the void, and that of *Lichtung* wasn't radiance but the clearing (the gap in the forest). As a result, the fundamental mood of being turns into anxiety, which in the end is an aesthetic of the sublime, not of beauty.
36. Cf. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 78: "Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from more's contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: this is the idea of art. That substance could be totally null, and still the artworks could posit a more as what it appears. Artworks become artworks in the production of this more; they produce their own transcendence, rather than being its arena, and thereby they once again become separated from transcendence." On the following page, Adorno refers to Benjamin's concept of the aura as being similar to his notion of the more.
37. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," transl. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott (SW 4, 253–56). Also see the discussion of *Schein* (semblance, shine) in the text on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. "[G]enuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things," in: "Protocols of Drug Experiments," *On Hashish*, transl. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 58. The fact that Benjamin experiences an aura around objects while high fits with Huxley's descriptions in *Heaven and Hell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956) of the radiance observed during his mescaline sessions. The best definition of the aura that Benjamin offers states that the object has "the ability to look back at us" ("Little History of Photography"). Note the distinction between the haptic notion of giving and the optic notion of looking. Benjamin's *Umzirkung* are the rays emitting from an object as it looks back, not the hands, as in the "handing over" of the gift.
38. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, transl. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minn. Press, 2005), 54. Agamben develops this into "a paradoxical individuation by indetermination," thereby shifting the notion of the individual thing from Aquinas' own *quidditas* (whatness) to Scotus' *haecceitas* (thisness). And he adds, "The halo is this supplement added to perfection – something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges." The original Aquinas quote reads: "beatitudo includit in se omnia bona quae sunt necessaria ad perfectam hominis vitam, quae consistit in perfecta hominis operatione; sed quaedam possunt superaddi non quasi

- necessaria ad perfectam operationem, ut sine quibus esse non possit, sed quia his additis est beatitudo clarior" (*Scriptum super Sententiis*, 4.49.5, *Opera Omnia*).
39. *Ibid.*, 55. We find the same notion of "gratuitous surplus" and "something more" in Plotinus and Ravaisson, who both define it as grace. See: Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 50.
40. *Ibid.*, 55.
41. Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty* (New York: Routledge, 2006), Chapter Two, "Yapha," 27–56.
42. A custom known as phyllobolia.
43. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Sunnyside: George Allen, 1880). Walter Benjamin also compared his notion of the aura to ornament: "the distinctive feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo [*Umzirkung*] in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case" (*On Hashish*, 58).
44. Adrian Stokes, *The Stones of Rimini* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
45. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
46. Some examples are "Homer's Greeks were brought to a state of reverential awe when they were in the presence of anything that was beautiful in the highest degree" (*All Things Shining*, 85) and "[A]bout the sacred moments in sport ... in the truly extraordinary moments, something overwhelming occurs. It wells up and carries you along as on a powerful wave" (199).
47. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* (Fintry Brook: Shrine of Wisdom, 1980). He uses the Greek term *aglaia*, which is translated into Latin as *claritas*. See: Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics, Vol. II: Medieval Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 30.
48. See: Fr. Max Müller, *Theosophy*, 79. Also, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 404–13. Bourgeaud and MacLachlan disagree; see: "Les Kharites et la Lumière" (*Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63 (1985), 5–14. Though Müller's theory is disputed, it is quite certain the Charites have a non-Greek origin, going even beyond the Egyptian roots of Herodotes (see Barbara Breitenberger, *Aphrodite and Eros*, Chapter Five).
49. *Theogony* 907ff.
50. *Olympian Ode* 14.5ff.
51. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 5, 1133a: "... This is why we set up a shrine of the Graces in a public place, to remind men to return a kindness; for that is a special characteristic of grace, since it is a duty not only to repay a service done one, but another time to take the initiative in doing a service oneself."
52. Seneca, *On Benefits*, I, 3, on the same page: "... there is one who bestows a benefit, one who receives it, and a third who returns it ... [Hesiod] named the eldest Aglaia, the middle one Euphrosyne, the third Thalia." See also Karl Deichgräber, *Charis und Chariten, Grazie und Grazien* (Munich: Heimeran Verlag, 1971), 56. Deichgräber's little book is one of the best on the topic of the Graces. Another is Erkinger Schwarzenberg's *Die Grazien* (Habelt, 1966), and also useful is the entry on *charis* and the Chariten in W.H. Roscher's 1884 *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, 873–84. Another valuable nineteenth-century source is Heinrich Krause's *Musen, Grazien, Horen, und Nymphen* of 1871. Alongside Bonnie MacLachlan's excellent *The Age of Grace* and Arpad Szalkolczai's *Sociology, Religion and Grace*, there are a number of more contemporary publications of great interest: Veronika Mertens' *Die drei Grazien* (Harrosowitz, 1994), Barbara Breitenberger's *Aphrodite and Eros* (Routledge, 2007) and Beate Wagner-Hasel's *Der Stoff der Gaben* (Campus, 2000). All texts on the Three Graces describe them as personifying giving, accepting and returning (or thanking) as well as radiance, joy and bloom via their names, Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia. That is, some emphasize the ethical nature of the Charites, others the aesthetic one. However, there are hardly any texts that combine the two readings to say that giving equates to radiance, accepting equates to joy and returning equates to bloom – one of the main theses of this essay. Seneca comes closest; the Roman statesman-philosopher based his comments on the thought of the Hellenistic philosopher Chrysippus (*Peri Chariton*, "On the Graces," a text that has been lost), who, as Erkinger Schwarzenberg concludes, was the first to relate the Three Graces to the giving, receiving and returning of the gift (*Die Grazien*, 72).
53. This differs from – noteworthy – philosophies of adornment or clothing such as we find in Thomas Carlyle and Georg Simmel. A philosophy is a theory, including technical terms that refer to one another, which constructs a systematized thought *on* a topic – in their case, fashion or adornment. A "metaphysics of adornment" claims adorning *itself* as a philosophy, conflating the realms of the sensuous (adorned) and the mind (metaphysics). It takes the model of adornments such as jewelry and pendants as a model of existence of all things, including unadorned ones – this in contrast to a sociology. However, Simmel's theories on adornment are very close to the ones that are developed here: "One may speak of human radioactivity in the sense that every individual is surrounded by a larger or smaller sphere of significance radiating from him; and everybody else, who deals with him, is immersed in this sphere" (*The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 339).
54. Cf. Robert Browning, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*: "With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls, / And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls, / Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after / The wonderful music with shouting and laughter."
55. *Iliad* 1.212–14.
56. Carl Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 101.
57. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 187–90. With this concept of happiness and gratification, she broadens Freud's idea of sexual enjoyment as being derived from the infant-breast relationship (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*) to include all forms of enjoyment.
58. "Hunger" is a term used by Levinas to distinguish his notion of being from Heidegger's, but it fails to establish a cycle in his philosophy. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969 [1961]): "In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone." And, in *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): "As consumable, [the world] is nourishment, and in enjoyment, it offers itself, gives itself, belongs to me" – this is the taker's view, not that of the one who returns.
59. In the collection of the Gaziantep Museum, Gaziantep, Turkey.
60. In Melanie Klein's terms, respectively "to introject" and "to project," her versions of Freud's oral and anal phases.
61. Sircello, *A New Theory of Beauty*, 20.
62. Consequently, it is vital to make felt objects leave our bodies again by reciprocation, which constitutes the third phase of the cycle, or else the object turns into a possessive fetish, and feelings into obsessions. Possession plays a major role in the pathology of beauty as an unrecycled form.
63. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 189.
64. See my *The Sympathy of Things*, 304–5.
65. Hephaistos has many traits of Daidalos, who is of later origin. For a similar connection between contrivance and adornment, see my *The Sympathy of Things*, 279. More importantly, see: Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Dédale: Mythologie de l'artisan en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Maspero, 1975), 68–73
66. The first two sentences go: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time ..."
67. Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht*, nr. 617 (Edition Kröner, 1930): "... eternal recurrence is the closest possible approximation of a world of becoming to that of being." Quoted in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 42.
68. Epicurus, *On Gifts and Gratitude*, 544 (quoted in Deichgräber, 54: "Das Wohltun, sagt er, ist im Vergleich zum Guten, was man empfängt, nicht nur schöner, sondern auch erfreulicher: denn nichts spendet so viel Freude wie Charis, das Gefällige, Schenken."). And: "Nur der ist froh, der geben mag," from J.W. Goethe's *Faust*, Part One, Sc. II.