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## Basketball and Philosophy

Jerry Walls

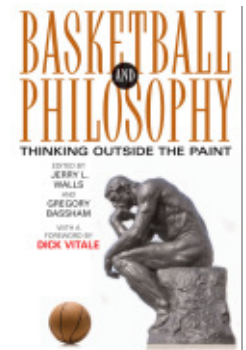
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*Peg Brand and Myles Brand*

## THE BEAUTY OF THE GAME

“IT’S BEAUTIFUL, BABY!” yelled Dickie V, as the unheralded junior dunked over his opponent, drawing a foul and tying the score with six seconds remaining in the championship game. “And one!”

“It wasn’t beautiful,” Billy said, struggling to be heard above the cheers of the crowd. “It wasn’t pretty at all, but it got the job done, and that’s all that counts.”

The shooter bounced the ball, slowly and repeatedly, trying hard to loosen his limbs and lessen the stress that had fallen upon his shoulders. It was a hard foul.

“He’s not the best free throw shooter on the team,” Billy said, with considerable understatement. Forty-five thousand fans shifted in their seats.

The shooter knew what they were thinking, and *he* wanted to be responsible for the first and only loss of their opponent’s perfect season. Feeling all eyes upon him, he prepared to shoot.

“Focus,” he thought, as the crowd hushed and he raised his arms. Game sweat glistened on his muscles, deepening the colors of a tattoo acquired together with his teammates, celebrating their win in last year’s Sweet Sixteen.

*Swoosh.*

“NBN, baby! Nothing but nylon!” Dickie yelled.

“It’s not over yet,” Billy grumbled, adding in a greatly lowered voice, “And just what did you mean when you said his dunk was beautiful? It was accurate, sure. But *beautiful*? Did we actually see the same shot?”

For several seconds, there was silence. Believe it or not, Dickie failed to respond. On-air time was ticking away. The television producer muttered to himself, “Talk, guys, talk!” He began to regret that Dickie had been hired as a guest commentator this year. The chemistry was all wrong.

“What do you mean what did I mean? I meant the shot was beautiful,” Dickie finally said. “The player is beautiful. It’s a beautiful game, baby. I oughta know! I’ve been doing this game since you were learning to dribble. . . . Hey, thirty-second timeout. What do you think the strategy will be, Billy?”

“Well, Dick, I don’t think they’re planning any *beautiful* shots, if that’s what you’re asking. Having studied the philosophy of art, particularly the birth of modern aesthetics in the eighteenth century, I’m not so sure I’m willing to take the judgment of an ‘expert’ about what counts as beautiful. Why not just admit it was a successful shot, satisfactorily executed, and leave it at that?”

The producer wished they had gone to a commercial. “What are you doing?!” he screamed into their earpieces. “Talk about the game, guys. Jim, cut in. Quick!”

“Billy,” Jim interjected, “they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Who’s to say that Dick’s not right in his subjective response to what he saw on the court? He’s a man of taste; surely he knows that the pleasure he feels in watching such a shot merits the highest praise. On the other hand, I can also understand your point; it was an awkward, off-balance shot—anything but beautiful. And I’ll bet if we polled our television audience, nearly everyone would agree.”

Panic was quickly setting in behind the camera as the opposing team prepared to inbound the ball. They needed a bucket to win, a free throw to send the game into overtime. The crowd cheered wildly; the roar was deafening.

The announcers, however, were so intent on their discussion of beauty that they missed the final play. With additional seconds of dead air and the producer at his wits’ end, the instant replay appeared onscreen faster than lightning, prompting immediate comments about the missed shot and the fact that the game was over. Exhausted but animated, they agreed, in the end, that it had been a beautiful game. But now Jim wanted to know: What did they mean by that?

## Hume Drives the Lane

Those in charge took a long commercial break—time to momentarily regroup—hoping that the postgame analysis would return to a focus on strategy, teamwork, and all the factors that led up to this unexpected result, this surprise ending. With a perfect record shattered, the year’s dream team fell short.

Back on air, Jim was the first to speak. “Billy, Dick, let’s talk about what we’ve just seen: a team nearly perfect in its execution, players toned to the highest levels of strength and stamina, a team—ranked number one all season—fails to complete its mission in the final seconds when the most intense pressure is on. How exactly was this a *beautiful* game?”

The camera crew gasped and looked at the producer. His jaw trembled; his lips moved, but no sounds could be heard. The crowd noise intensified as crews behind the scenes frantically started editing the footage that would be shown with the presentation of the national trophy. There was quite a bit of time to fill: fifteen minutes at least.

Dickie didn’t miss a beat. “Hey, I’m an expert, baby. You’re not the only one who studied those philosophers in England and Scotland intent on describing the typical aesthetic experience when a viewer looks upon beauty. I know what David Hume said in his famous 1757 essay, “Of the Standard of Taste.” He was perfectly clear and unyielding about the subjectivity of a person’s judgment of beauty, and his thesis is as true now as it was 250 years ago. As Hume said, ‘Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.’<sup>1</sup> And that’s how I know when a shot is beautiful and when to call a game beautiful!”

Jim unexpectedly jumped back into the conversation. “I can see Dick’s point about knowing the game,” he said slowly. “He does have long experience and what Hume would call a certain ‘delicacy of taste’ when it comes to seeing things an ordinary fan might miss, recognizing good moves, and making judgments about the artistry of the game.<sup>2</sup> Hume might as well have been speaking about our own Dickie V when he said, ‘But though there be naturally a wide difference in point of delicacy between one person and another, nothing tends further to increase and improve this talent, than *practice* in a particular art, and the frequent

survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty.<sup>3</sup> Few know basketball as well as our friend Dickie V.”

“What makes *your* subjective experience the measure of all things beautiful?” shouted Billy, now wildly waving his arms. “This arena is filled with knowledgeable and devoted fans. There’s no way to distinguish one expert from another, and shouting louder doesn’t count. To say that an expert is the one who makes the right judgment call is circular, since your friend Hume also says that the right judgment is the one made by the expert.

“Look, Dick,” Billy said, “an expert is someone who makes the right judgments about beauty. It is he—or she—who pronounces, who ordains that something is beautiful, whether it’s a painting or a basketball game. But how do you define who counts as an expert? In the end, no matter what we say about refined taste or past experience, it comes down to making the right judgments. And that is circular! It doesn’t help us at all in understanding the nature of beauty and which things are beautiful.”

Dickie was stunned. His claim to expertise tottered on the shaky ground of circular reasoning.

### Plato Goes Zone

Gaining momentum, Billy leapfrogged past Dickie’s historical reference to travel back thousands of years to ancient Greece, the fountainhead of Western philosophy. “I know how to tell when something is beautiful,” he said with growing animation, “and it doesn’t rest on anyone’s subjective judgment. There is an ideal of beauty—the Form Beauty—by which things and events in the world inherit their beauty and by which they are to be judged, and that dunk shot simply doesn’t measure up to the ideal. The ideal is independent of any person, even purported experts. Beauty is objective. It doesn’t depend on circumstances or context. As Plato (428–347 B.C.) wrote in the *Symposium*: ‘This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders. . . . [The

beholder] will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it.”<sup>4</sup> Saying something is beautiful, no matter the emphasis and no matter *who* says it is beautiful, carries no weight. Beauty isn’t in the eye of the beholder! Beauty depends on copying, imitating, the ideal Beauty. Period!”

The producer feared that the viewing audience had long since switched channels or had left the room and were staring vacantly into an open refrigerator. Jim, looking more like Rodin’s famous sculpture, *The Thinker*, than a postgame analyst, thoughtfully stroked his chin. He spoke up: “Billy is invoking a clear ideal of a particular kind of shot, Plato’s famous theory of imitation, in which a good player strives to imitate, or copy, the ideal Form Beauty in his own play. Not satisfied with a merely adequate shot that lacks beauty, the skilled athlete tries—through inspiration and craftsmanship—to ‘keep looking back and forth, to Justice, Beauty, . . . and all such things as by nature exist,’ as Plato explains in the *Republic*—just as the best artists did in creating marble sculptures of powerful, dignified men.”<sup>5</sup>

“Yes,” said Billy, “the ancient Greeks gave us statues of exceptionally muscular, fit, and toned athletes; they wanted to imitate the athletes who imitated the Form and excellence of Beauty: men who embodied strength, courage, stamina, skill, and self-confidence.”

“What are you talking about?” Dickie gruffly interrupted. “There’s no such ‘thing’ as the ideal dunk shot. There are only the dunk shots we’ve seen and experienced over the years; there are only the games we’ve viewed and judged to be beautiful, all of which are based on a notion of beauty that resides in the eye of the beholder. It’s a mistake to presume that there are ideals or Forms out there, somewhere in Plato’s heaven, eternal and unchanging, that influence the way an athlete looks, the way his body is physically sculpted, the way he plays, and the level of skill he strives to perfect and implement. You’re hypothesizing things—freestanding ideals—that just don’t exist. Billy, I thought you were more sensible than that!”

The producer could feel a migraine coming on. “Guys, would someone *please* talk about the game? What’s wrong with you? Get off this philosophy crap! Jim, help! Hurry up with the trophy presentation!” he said to no one in particular. “Come on!”

Jim looked at Billy and Dick, or rather past them. Deep in thought, he was considering his colleagues' contrasting views. Secure in his position—and his ironclad contract—he continued the discussion.

“We recognize that not only actual events, such as the game we just saw, are beautiful, but also works of art, such as paintings and sculpture, are beautiful. According to Plato, there is a tiered system of imitation, in which objects or events in the world imitate or resemble the Forms and inherit their characteristics from them. The game inherits its beauty from the Form Beauty by imitating it. Artists copy actual events or things, and their paintings and sculpture inherit the characteristics of those actual things they copy. So, for instance, a painting of a dunk would be beautiful if it copied the beauty of the actual shot.

“However, despite the attractiveness of this explanation, there are deep problems. In addition to Dick's point that there is no direct evidence that Forms exist independently of persons and their opinions, it's hard to see how these abstract ideals relate to actual things in the world.

“Look, guys, there's a dilemma here. Consider the ideal athlete, Plato's Form Athlete. Either this Form is itself an athlete or it's not. On the one hand, if the Form is an athlete, like the particular athletes we saw compete this evening, then there must be another Form, a third thing over and above the ideal athlete and the particular athletes, that makes them both athletes, from which they each inherit their natures of being athletes. Using the same reasoning, there is not only a third athlete, but a fourth one, and so on to infinity. But then we can never know what an athlete is, since to do so would involve knowing an infinite number of Forms, and no person can know an infinite number of things.<sup>6</sup>

“Suppose, on the other hand, that the Form Athlete is not itself an athlete, but an abstract ideal that doesn't exist in time and space. Then the problem is that the relationship between these abstract ideals and things in the world is mysterious. What sense could it make to say that an actual athlete, a person, ‘copies,’ ‘resembles,’ or ‘imitates’ the ideal? One is flesh and blood, and the other is an abstract, immaterial essence. The Form Athlete, then, has no apparent relationship to actual athletes and gives us no knowledge about them.

“So, Billy, even if the ideal Form Athlete exists, it can't help us at all in knowing what true athleticism is or in picking out excellent athletes.

The same goes for beauty. The Form Beauty provides no standard of what beauty is or what things are beautiful—dunks included.”

Another awkward silence ensued. Billy, having been skewered on the horns of a dilemma, leaned back in his chair and looked pensively at the scoreboard. The only on-air sound was that of the producer exhaling.

Moments later, things finally looked like they were returning to normal. The winning team slowly mounted the hastily set-up platform at midcourt for the trophy presentation. Jim stood up and was gathering his notes when an urgent voice sounded in his earpiece: “Jim, hold the presentation! New York just called. The top brass! They say we can’t leave it like this. Stop the confetti! Resolve the beauty argument! Now!”

### Teamwork Wins, Once Again

Fortunately, Jim had thought through these issues before. In his long broadcasting career, he had seen chip shots head toward the hole as if they were drawn by magnets, tennis shots that buzzed like angry hornets as they kicked up chalk, three-pointers that arched high into the rafters and hit nothing but net—and philosophical arguments that were marvels of cogency and lucidity. And Jim knew beauty.

He interrupted Dickie and Billy, who had begun arguing again. “Of course, you’re each partly right. Beauty isn’t something merely subjective, but neither is it purely objective, based on some idealized, independent standard. Beautiful things in the world share some objective features and some subjective ones; or as I prefer to put it, they have both outer and inner beauty.

“The outer beauty is what is universally observable and follows a pattern of excellence for the type of object or event that it is. Take basketball. There is some similarity between music, dance, and athletics. Improvised jazz, like improvised but practiced dance, is similar to basketball. In them, beauty is to be found in the sequencing of the movements (or sounds), in the transitions between parts of the sequences, and especially in the interaction between participants. Just as a jazz musician must anticipate what others with whom he is playing will do and alternately lead and support them, so too must the basketball player anticipate where others will be on the court and either pass, dribble, or take the shot himself. The whole is beautiful when it works together seemingly effortlessly.



The beauty is on display for all to see and doesn't need an expert to translate it for us. This is beauty in the world.

"This is the beauty the fan sees and appreciates. It's satisfying to watch basketball when it's played beautifully. Like all improvised art, it flows in a way that anticipates what comes next and surprises at the same time. In large part, this objective, 'outer' beauty explains why the college game is so popular, and getting more so.

"But there is more to it than that. In addition to the motion, the fluidity, the coordination of individuals and teams, there's the strategy that makes it all work. This 'inner' beauty depends on what's going on in the players' heads, not just their bodies. The coaches devise the strategies that are internalized by the players during repetitious practice, and the players apply these strategies to rapidly changing events on the floor. Basketball, when played well, is a head game. It takes cognitive ability—smarts—to create a beautiful play and certainly a beautiful game. It's more than just what one sees on the surface; there is an inner beauty, a level of acumen and insight, to the game. It's what Plato called 'true excellence.'<sup>7</sup> This aspect requires expertise and experience to explain the strategies. Those who lack this expertise, or don't have an expert to explain it to them, miss much of the beauty of the game.

"Those who play know when they are in a beautiful game. The strategy unfolds, almost in slow motion. Teammates are where they are supposed to be, cuts are sharp, picks are set just at the right moment, and the ball arrives perfectly on time. For the knowledgeable basketball fan, there is a joy that is almost inexplicable in knowing the patterns in advance."

"Do you mean by 'inner beauty' the intelligence and excellence of execution that it takes for a player to be successful on the court?" Billy asked. "It's all coming back to me now. I recall Plato writing about the purpose of arts like music, poetry, and theater and their role in teaching people, especially the young, how to learn to recognize, love, imitate, and partake in beauty. Speaking of those artisans and craftsmen whose societal role was to create and promote the arts in his ideal republic, Plato wrote, 'We must seek out such craftsmen as have the talent to pursue the beautiful and the graceful in their work, in order that our young men shall be benefited from all sides like those who live in a healthy place, whence something from these beautiful works will strike their eyes and ears like a breeze that brings health from salubrious places, and lead

them unawares from childhood to love of, resemblance to, and harmony with, the beauty of reason.”<sup>8</sup>

“Excellent memory, Billy!” Jim exclaimed. “Yes, I like to think of the beauty of reason as an internal or inner beauty.

“Outer beauty and inner beauty,” Jim continued. “There must be both. Physical movement by exceptional athletes for all to see, plus players acting with purpose, reason, and in concert with each other. These are the objective and subjective sides to beauty. Together, that’s what made this a beautiful game!”

### Beauty Rewarded

A voice spoke in Jim’s earpiece: “New York says great job, Jim! Start the presentation!”

A dozen modern-day exemplars of Greek gods now began to file onto the platform: tall, well-proportioned young men donning championship caps and T-shirts, in the prime of their lives, physically and mentally. They had played the game of their lives. Unparalleled. Unprecedented. And unwilling to let the moment pass without looking into the camera and saying, “Hi, Mom!”

As the opening chords of “One Shining Moment” filled the arena, highlights of the winning team’s season were shown. Magical moments from the Sweet Sixteen, the Elite Eight, the Final Four, and the title game flashed on the screen. Players were popping their game shirts and falling to the floor with joy. All the excitement, color, drama, and emotion of “March Madness” were relived, and the dark wooden trophy was handed to the winning coach, who hoisted it high in the air.

The announcers dabbed their eyes as the credits started to roll. Dickie and Billy thanked Jim, congratulated the winning team, each other, their viewers, their colleagues from the network, and, of course, their affiliates. They ended by thanking the student athletes, praising their skills and admiring their stamina, particularly their strength and grace under pressure. And finally, they agreed, “It *was* a beautiful game.” And now they knew why. “There was both outer and inner beauty,” Billy and Dickie said almost in unison.

As the music swelled and the singing began, Jim offered the last word.

“I consider ‘One Shining Moment’ to be the anthem to our coverage of this NCAA tournament.”<sup>9</sup>

In one shining moment, it's all on the line  
 One shining moment, there frozen in time . . .  
 [that] one shining moment, you reached for the sky  
 One shining moment you knew.

## Notes

Any similarity between the characters in this essay and real people is, of course, purely coincidental. Thanks to songwriter David Barrett for permission to reprint the lyrics to “One Shining Moment.”

1. David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (New York: Bedford / St. Martin's, 1989), 244.

2. Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 246.

3. Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” 247.

4. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e2–211b5, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Michael Joyce (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

5. Plato, *Republic*, 501b1–4, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974).

6. Jim seems to have read Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*, 178b. Plato himself recognized the problem. See his dialogue *Parmenides*, 132a. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations, The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941). Plato, *Parmenides*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. F. M. Cornford (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

7. Plato, *Symposium*, 212a3–5.

8. Plato, *Republic*, 401c4–d3.

9. Jim Nantz, CBS sports analyst, <http://www.oneshiningmoment.com/lyrics/index.html>.



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