

## *On Beauty*

*The meaning of beauty and its role in our lives.*

The following is a reflection on beauty and its unfulfilled potential to help us cross cultural boundaries and appreciate things which first appear foreign. How can art help us reach a deeper understanding of people who are different from us? I argue that part of our understanding can assume the perspective of others (section 2), part needs to make a few stops en route (section 3), and part, rather than being concerned with the destination, is primarily concerned with the starting point (section 1). Each of these possibilities represents a distinct facet of a single journey. Ultimately it is the attitude giving rise to this journey and enriching its every vantage point that we have reason to embrace.

*When elephants fight, ants die.*

—Cambodian proverb

### *1 Locus: naturalness and expanded selfness*

If one were to present an apologia for the arts that rested solely on the culture this country currently transmits, one had better draw on all the tricks of a persuasive salesperson. Even then one may not be successful in convincing a critically reflective person of its value, particularly if her interests happen to lie elsewhere. Yet right here lies an artistic heritage accumulated over the centuries: elusive and now almost vanished, the traces of Cambodia's history date back to the forerunners of a majestic Angkor civilisation, shining through the centuries as an inspiration to those who believe in the enlightening power of art. Fossils of cultures past and – still more interestingly – seeds for unexplored forms of art reveal a unique and enduring perspective on the world. These seeds are not, however, covered by a porous soil gently spread over nourishing land, but by a red clay, ruthlessly clamped down to extinguish any light that could threaten the prevailing darkness of a totalitarian Khmer Rouge (red because of blood).

Unearthing this heritage may seem an arduous, even unwelcome task; in this arid landscape one may search in vain for an empty canvas or a musical instrument waiting to be played. Still, the setting itself stands as an invitation to reflect on the role of the arts in our lives, especially the people in its foreground. Here, instances of untapped artistic talent are connected by a pursuit of any means available to fill life with beauty: an understated chair, carefully crafted; a rug rich in tradition; a rural house designed to merge with the surrounding nature; the sound of a traditional Khmer song sung to accompany the daily tasks of the family inhabiting it. If one has eyes to see it, one can witness a distilled statement of the place of beauty in this mundane reality.

Observing the landscape here, the sunrise momentarily sharpening its contours, I find myself surrounded by pervasive poverty. But looking again, in full daylight, I can discern a community that is not fragmented or subordinated to commerce: what exists makes up for what is missing. And the clay in which the seeds are embedded has not turned into concrete. If new works of creativity are now appearing, like plants breaking through a slowly yielding clay soil, they signify renewal and an uninhibited potential to look to the future without allowing the country's history to go unacknowledged. To me, this milieu inspires us to reach for something archetypal, for a partly lost vision of the true role of the arts in our community and our world. This invitation – perceptible in the landscape and perhaps more vivid in an uncritical, collective pose of open arms – is also a call for authenticity, for forms of creativity that are both serious and sincere.

My turn to seeds and, by analogy, the origin of artistic ideas, is partly inspired by the philosopher Philippa Foot. She, in searching for a basis for human morality, started with plants and animals, considering what a plant or animal *needs* to have, both in itself and in its environment, as well as what it *needs* to do in order to function well. In her book *Natural Goodness* she made a seemingly bold connection: the species-dependence of our judgements concerning a plant's leaves, an owl's night vision, or the behaviour of a dancing bee is not fundamentally different from that of judgements concerning the goodness or badness of human 'being' or human actions.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is that our actions depend on features of specifically human life, including the things most dear to us, such as our respect for truth, art, and scholarship, so that the origin and context of our actions are more complex than what we find among plants and animals. Her basic idea is that our rational will, together with an understanding of our species-dependent reasons for action and our acting on such reasons, can give us a unified theory of what moral action consists in. While her views may not provide us with a complete picture, they can bring clarity to our thinking about non-material values, including our aesthetic values. After all, a natural part of our practical rationality is having reason to strive not only for charity and justice, but for beauty, for ourselves and others, as well.

There is a further naturalness to beauty in the sense that beautiful things naturally complement our existence by entering into it at a most elementary level; put another way, Beauty is accessible to us also in primitive form. Having not only eyes to see but hearts to feel, we are surrounded by beauty in our everyday lives. It is part of what sustains us and makes us feel at home, even in a technologically driven reality or a hectic environment. Yet we also know how its active study – as it is illuminated in various forms of art – fosters character, develops a range of cognitive capacities, and occasionally helps nudge us towards the Good, both in our own lives and through an increased appreciation of the beauty exhibited by others. It may even affect our attitude towards those aspects of our natural environment

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<sup>1</sup> See Foot, Philippa. *Natural Goodness*. Clarendon Press, 2003.

that lie beyond nature's benefit to conscious life. Distinct and unmistakable in a flow of information, what is beautiful stands as an invitation to assume an elevated perspective on the world.

Past thinkers have reflected on the nature of art making and art appreciation and the long list of traits relevant to these pursuits. Some have argued that the relevant capacities indeed are virtues; think of imagination, sensibility, creative vision, authenticity, integrity, open-mindedness and persistence.<sup>2</sup> These traits seem to satisfy Foot's definition: they are intelligent dispositions to take certain things as reason for action and are associated with qualities needed for human flourishing, qualities that are not only capacities but capacities that engage the will (unlike, say, intelligence as such). We may also have heard of art taking on a deepened meaning in lives focused on survival and bare necessities, as it did in the deep recesses of suffering during the Khmer Rouge regime or in the concentration camps during the Second World War. And yet, if the connection with rationality lies at the deepest level, as Foot claims it does in the case of virtues such as charity and justice, then ultimately we should not need even these justifications for art: we value the arts because of who we are. And as a society we join forces to nurture a culture we deserve.

Reaching a consensus concerning the kind of culture different societies deserve is another matter. Our own multifaceted Western societies, in which beauty plays an integral part and takes a myriad of shapes, reflect the complexity of the individuals constituting them. Naturally, this implies that the potential for diverse forms of art is inherent in materially impoverished societies as well. And this, in turn, makes me reflect on the nature of our mindset regarding Cambodia and the developing world in general. It is clear that a view of developmental aid as facilitating a one-dimensional movement out of poverty or as involving one-way transactions aimed at satisfying some urgent need now seems downright dated, historically well founded though it may be. The idea, rather, should be to direct human and non-human resources in ways that are optimal in the long term, as evaluated on the basis of an expansive set of possibilities. But to decipher what is most effective, all things considered, is more demanding than it first appears (and undoubtedly more fascinating too).

If we adhere to the ancient notion that the pursuit of happiness and the exercise of virtue are inextricably linked, and if what we want is distant others to be able to live fulfilling lives, then this involves honest exchange based on the inherent 'fullness' of the human experience. Since virtues of the above-mentioned kind are essential to this fullness, our making and appreciation of art ought to enter into this exchange.<sup>3</sup> This justification for the arts in developmental aid should hold up to scrutiny not only if we subscribe to an in-vogue virtue ethics, but also if we follow Kant and strive to produce a will

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Goldie, Peter. "Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being." *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2008, pp. 179–195.

<sup>3</sup> I draw here on Edmund Husserl, who in investigating the features of things as experienced, applied the concept 'intuitional fullness' to describe what is fully present in our perception. While virtuous aspects associable with the arts are there for us all to see when we reflect on our life experience, their arts-related sources may be less visible.

that is good in itself or assume a consequentialist position of evaluating actions solely based on their outcomes.

Beauty has many advocates, and what is beautiful cannot be reduced to any one meaning. It is perhaps surprising that it is in the rugged terrain of the Cambodian mundanity that I encounter soil fertile for the most elemental questions concerning the arts, not only regarding aesthetic guidance but moral guidance as well. Here, the aesthetic and the moral are suddenly intertwined, seemingly of their own accord. I am reminded of what the philosopher Marcia Eaton has said, namely that we may insist that ‘You *should* enjoy trees and sunsets and music, where again the *should* is the “meaning-of-life” should.’ As she puts it: ‘It is at the meaning-of-life level where moral value and aesthetic value come together.’ And, we may add, this is the level at which genuine meetings between cultures can take hold.

*Let our artists rather be those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful;  
then will our youth dwell in a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good in everything;  
and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region,  
and insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason.*

—Plato, *The Republic*, 401c

## 2 *Perspective: cross-cultural traversal from I to I*

The richness of content in the world, its many-faceted appearances and our perceived ability to find common ground with others in the way we comprehend it, never ceases to fascinate me. Having lived here for a few years, I am still captivated by the way a Cambodian person may perceive things, this perception seemingly unpredictably alternating between concurrence with and deviation from my own Western way of seeing. Can I ever fully see the world as someone who grows up in an Asian country may see it, when our ways of seeing seem subject to so many kinds of distances? More specifically, how does the external world shape the perspective of the young student in the village? What is her view of the world beyond her home and her country?

While it may be impossible to fully arrive at her viewpoint, we have good reason to attend to the idea of perspective in our increasingly interconnected world. When I look at the world as it appears to me, trying not to let personal preferences skew my perception, it seems that people geographically and culturally distant from me shape the context of my lived experience but that I feel their presence only when I afford them sustained attention in thought. This fact both enriches and complicates my effort to arrive at a frame of reference that is truly representative of the world as it appears to me. Perhaps it is this sustaining and blending of imagined points of view with one’s own that is implied when we speak of striving to be a citizen of the world.

In trying to understand what these distances consist in, I realise that I must look beyond the immediately apparent. When I contrast the things that surround me in my Cambodian everyday life with those experienced elsewhere, I am first struck by a difference in sounds, with respect to both timbre and volume, and in sights, which are shaped by people's desire to feel at home in the community. Listening to a discussion in Khmer at the dinner table, its exotic syllables intermingling with the taste and smell of a herb-infused Cambodian dish, seems to make the differences more tangible still. And if over time I begin to distinguish connections in Cambodian everyday life to some of the sources of these differences, perhaps even some of them becoming part of my own life, then it seems I reach a better understanding of what the connections genuinely consist in. In other words, if I am perceptive, the world of sense transmits something quite different to me from what I have grown accustomed to, and despite these sense experiences being so plain at the surface level, the differences they reveal can themselves be profound.

Still, not all aspects of the seemingly foreign are foreign: consider cases where there is something about the other which appears to stand in closer relation to us than what we perceive in the people closest to us.<sup>4</sup> Such an aspect of familiarity may allow us to leap to the other's viewpoint, to see the world as it appears to them. And this may grow to comprise related aspects about the other in turn, thereby giving rise to an expanded selfness that, as it were, contains part of the other's perspective within it. However, in most cases a study of the terrain separating us from that otherness – be it of a cultural, philosophical, political, social, or economic kind – is necessary before any perspectival shifts can be internalised.

The philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey thought deeply about the nature of this terrain. His notion of 'productive systems' that give history order and meaning offers us a view into his understanding of the relationship between reason and history. An example of a tree-lined avenue provides an introduction:

*“When trees are perceived in a forest, they are judged as part of nature in general. But when we see trees lining an avenue, they take on a different significance. The fact that they stand in a straight line, that they are equidistant from each other, that they are of the same kind, all these indicate that they have been planted by human beings for a purpose... These trees receive a human stamp by the way they have been planted, cultivated, and pruned... The productive contribution of a tree-lined avenue might not be obvious at first... it can include the indirect way that the trees lining a public space encourage more social interchange among the inhabitants of a place.”<sup>5</sup>*

This exemplifies how our human values and purposes are imparted to the world of sense, forming productive nexuses that both affect us and contain information about us within them. It highlights a feature of the world presupposed by our common sense: that the stamps of our interaction with the external world – whether expressive of the demands of daily life or our individual aesthetic sensibility,

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<sup>4</sup> I here envisage the 'other' as someone who is epistemically distant to us and with respect to whom our conception of all relational knowledge is confined to the third person.

<sup>5</sup> Makkreel, Rudolf A. (2003). The productive force of history and Dilthey's formation of the historical world. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4:495-508. (I owe my interpretation of Dilthey primarily to the translations and writings of this author.)

or of those of the communities or cultures to which we belong – do point back to us and say something about us, oftentimes more than we ourselves are capable of expressing using our own words.

What fascinates me about Dilthey's writing is that it directly pertains to our attempts to traverse the terrains separating us. He makes an important distinction between a reasoning that works backwards through the course of production and a re-experiencing that moves forward with the line of events themselves. This distinction is reflected in my own personal experience. I can obtain reasonable insight into a Cambodian person's perspective by gradually approaching it from the outside, starting with the whole and arriving at the parts that shape it. But to arrive at the whole as it appears from her point of view, I need genuine touching points, re-experiences of things that have arisen out of her perspective. Such re-experience can function as a Trojan horse of undeviating perspectival information, deceiving and in turn improving my own guarded rationality. Imagination – that loyal companion of the arts – is central to this endeavour, for I cannot truly position myself at the point at which the other's perspective originates.<sup>6</sup>

The philosopher Sir Roger Scruton has written illuminatingly about what it means to engage in true communication with the other, about communication between I and you and an 'overreaching intentionality' which at best inspires traversals of the terrain between us. According to Scruton, we are subjects in a world of objects who in true communication express an intention to reach across the physical barriers separating us, including the human body, and who therefore direct our attitudes to the horizon of the other's being (whence the term *overreaching*). This intentional relation has over time given rise to autonomous spheres of knowledge; according to Scruton we find an exemplary instance in the world of music.<sup>7</sup>

This conception of the human distance also points to a particular conception of the arts: at best, art can both bless and bridge the space between us. A work of art may allow us to re-experience a nexus of lived experience, multiplying our world view by allowing us to see the world through the perspective of the other as conceived by a fellow human being. If we hear a piece of Southeast Asian music, we may choose to listen to it, perhaps even try to play it. If we are sufficiently ambitious, we can further learn how to compose a piece in the style it exhibits. While we may engage in any of these activities for the sake of pure enjoyment, each also represents a different level of engagement in overcoming the distance to the otherness expressed in the piece. Moreover, the creative engagement (here exemplified by the playing and, in particular, the composing) is distinct from the more passive engagement in that it forms another nexus through which we impart something to the world of sense.

This distinction points to the essence of my thoughts: namely, that by seeing the world in terms of

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<sup>6</sup> 'And by the imagination I don't mean fanciful things', declared Jacques Barzun in an interview with Charlie Rose. 'I mean the capacity to see beyond the end of your nose and beyond the object in front of you; to see its implications, its origins, its potential, its danger, its charm – all the things that enable one to navigate in this difficult and complex world with a modicum of wisdom, with calm ... with resources that in moments of stress, after retirement, in illness and loneliness keep one's soul and body alive.'

<sup>7</sup> See Scruton, Roger. *The Soul of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

productive nexuses we also renew our appreciation for the future importance of our creative processes. Only in the form of nurtured forces can these processes come to magnify humanity, offering the young and the unborn genuine choices accompanying the choice of life made on their behalf. More passive forms of partaking in life, phenomena which are now prevalent and which do not depend on initiative for their existence, will always be determined and enriched by the former's life-affirming capacities.

The above points to a salient theme: ultimately, preferring creativity to passive conformity is not wholly unlike preferring a life awake to a life asleep. It is a choice that aligns with a crucial philosophical distinction. More than handing us a life-vest and letting us float among currents in a world submerged in opportunities for passivity, the arts nurture our capacity to produce values and arrive at purposes. This, it seems, is what is at the heart of what the child given an arts education may say when she, after repeated trial and error, finds her own way of expressing herself – 'I am alive and my life has meaning'.

Genuine expressions arising out of individuals because of who they are in their own surroundings facilitate a sharing beyond material transactions and contractual obligations. Under the right circumstances, they become powerful forces that shape history for the better. Here in the Cambodian countryside, an individual's artistic expression allows her to communicate with the world beyond her village and her country without having to let go of the unique context that is her home.

And finding a pathway to the outer world is not a luxury, even in a landscape filled with human warmth as this one – there is more at stake than first meets the eye in a post-conflict area. Through art and beyond art, to pave this way with the openness that an international community can provide is to effect changes that reverberate through layers of both individual and community. After all, positioned at the opposite end of the spectrum is corruption and a rigid mindset advocating an attitude of suspicion towards intellect and excellence, an attitude shared by some of the architects of the genocidal regime here and nationalistic variants of which to some degree remain. These are gradually eroded when an able individual is trained and taught how to train herself from an early age.

This benefit to the individual and her community also has a counterpart in its benefit to us, which it both nurtures and depends on. By directly engaging with the academic and artistic pursuits of the young individual in an impoverished society, we reach over the terrain that divides us, including the societal circumstances that prevent her from entering into dialogue with others. Moreover, in helping her, we also establish a larger context for our own lived experience.

Those fond of sports analogies may here conceive a new event: one where we hand off a relay baton and throw a returning boomerang with the same hand at the same time. For such an individual may become a rather atypical citizen, someone with the courage and imagination to resist a conformity that keeps unjust societal structures in place. At best, she is someone who is able to mediate between individual initiative and communal tradition, someone whose horizon extends to our community in return.

Once we assume a reflective stance towards our situatedness in the world, we seem to have reason to think deeply about the terrain that still separates us from people in other communities, our global interconnectedness notwithstanding. This may lead us increasingly to value creativity and the arts, since these seem uniquely conducive to fostering cross-border communication. The arts also preserve an otherness, containing within it unique windows onto our human existence: by being sensitive to what the objects constitutive of the terrain tell us about a people and its culture (whether these consist in art works, literature, or folkways), we are able to approach genuinely distinctive points of view. This is a capacity we all possess, because beyond our nurtured selves is a shared condition that is transcultural and transpersonal. Ultimately, then, the arts offer us a passageway by way of a true form of communication, one that renders the productive nexuses of individuals and communities as self-originating rather than transplanted.

*'People be good.'*

—John Ruskin, at age two

*'For I am nearly convinced, that when once we see keenly enough, there is very little difficulty in drawing what we see.'*

—John Ruskin, some years later

### *3 Horizon: pond of suffering, oasis of awareness*

In a part of the capital much frequented by foreign tourists here, Western materialism is expressed in alleyways of fleeting allure: the promise of a happy hour, the sound of grinding pop beats, and the doorways embellished with kitschy signs addressing our crudest appetites. That you can feel at home even in this hollow setting says much about the warmth and hospitality of the Cambodian people. But take a walk in the neighbourhood and you also walk into a more authentic existence. Strolling down streets lined with homes, it is as if you are moving past theatre salons where there is no physical wall separating the stage from the audience. Here, a motorbike driven off the street and parked in the living room, there, an occasional invitation extended to a foreign passer-by to join a family for dinner. The continuity from street to home has a kind of African quality to it, a merging of nature and the collective with the household and the private. This is symbolic of something more than the ways of daily life. With large parts of an entire generation killed during the Khmer Rouge, the country's young are yearning for new opportunities and for communication with the outside world. While this is an openness anchored in hope for a better material existence, I have come to realise that it is also about something more fundamental.

During my brief time here, I have come to learn much about resilience and about perpetuating a warm connection between people in what is oftentimes a cold and destitute environment. Perhaps this expression of kindness is more common among people in developing countries. We certainly find it in

the developed world too, though it so often seems bounded, limited to the familiar and the nearby.<sup>8</sup> And I am not referring to a prioritising of the family, which is a fundamental element of Cambodian society too, but to our attitude to that part of our material welfare that exceeds what is needed for our comfortable existence.

The philosopher Peter Singer cast hard light on an old observation when he, in simplified form, asked the following: ‘Given that an overwhelming majority of us would save a child about to drown in a local pond even if this meant spoiling a new suit or dress, how come we do so little to save the lives of children in the developing world, although doing so involves a comparable cost?’ (Singer has continued to ask this question and has done much to try to answer it since his original article appeared.)<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, trends are shifting when it comes to thinking about altruism on a global scale. Many have now realised that we cannot shy away from the answers which follow when we contemplate scenarios of the kind just described. The philosophy and movement known as Effective Altruism exemplifies this insight. Its basic idea is that we have a duty to apply our current best data when evaluating effectiveness and to perform cause-prioritisation research to acquire new data. As an expanding forum for an intelligent exchange of ideas and for acting on these ideas, it is a laudable effort to direct our attention to the suffering that matters most.

Effectiveness as it applies to altruism is an evolving phenomenon. It is also a complex one; so much so that the identification and subsequent initiation of causal chains giving rise to optimal well-being may lie beyond human reach. Nonetheless, I am interested in how we might explore avenues central to a well-being beyond material welfare, avenues that shape an individual’s understanding of what well-being consists in once she finds them. I think such avenues contain many things, among them the right kind of acquaintance with beauty expressed in the right way. The challenge is that there is no universal positioning system: in order to locate them, we must look beyond mere coordinates to their meaning to the individual subject.<sup>10</sup>

There are two complementary aspects to our existence that are relevant here: one that is particular and fully situated, the other which is universal, unsituated, and in the relevant sense, intersubjective or

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<sup>8</sup> Data on the extent to which the developed world reaches out to the developing world reflects this boundedness. The figures for official development assistance published by The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development offers one indicator; In 2017, its 36 members, which include the wealthiest countries in the world, offered aid equivalent to a dismal 0.31% of their combined gross national income. Please see: <http://oe.cd/fsc-data>. (Virtuous individuals can and do improve the picture.)

<sup>9</sup> See Singer, Peter. *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Effective instances of such ‘open-ended avenues’ of meaning exist. For a concrete example, consider the international work inspired by El Sistema, the Venezuelan music education programme for impoverished children and youth. For a theoretical framework, consider the ‘capabilities approach’, pioneered by Amartya Sen and developed by Martha Nussbaum, among others. A number of arts-related articles have appeared: see, for instance, Maguire, Cindy, et al. “Choosing a life one has reason to value: The role of the arts in fostering capability development in four small urban high schools.” *Cambridge Journal of Education*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2012, pp. 367–390.

interchangeable across communities. Interestingly, it is primarily with the latter which the forces of globalisation have thus far been associated: the preference for a global frame of reference has to many in the West come to mean a devaluing of uniqueness, of heritage, and of our attachment to that which is nearby. Yet, we know that it is possible to be fully situated without therefore limiting the expansion of our altruistic horizons. There is no conflict in thinking that countries and cultures differ in their needs and are diverse in their potentialities while also knowing that the humanity in each of us favours the actions that are best for humanity as a whole.

This seems a timely observation. For our awareness of the humanity within us and the experienced connectedness to others which flows from it rests on insight of a deeply philosophical kind with which the genuinely educated stance must be associated. The distant other is on this view not an instance of otherness as such, but an instance of a differently situated sameness. While this situatedness may be substantive, in the sense of deserving preservation and requiring bridging, it is ultimately epiphenomenal to our human *being*. In other words, the contingency of our situatedness is a shared one even when our situatedness is not.

Notably, the last few decades have shown us that the globally most distinctive aspects of this situatedness are not geographical or economical, but cultural. It therefore seems a reasonable demand that we should be capable of viewing the world through a cultural lens, which also entails seeing that cultural and artistic exchange provides a most natural companion to our situatedness. It may of course be tempting to view cultural exchange as something that takes place unaided or as something that ought to be minimised so as to avoid imposing one set of values where another should freely reign. Still, insofar as the space between cultures remains void of genuine human exchange, there is also room for a perpetuation of ignorance of the other, accompanied by a perceived remoteness that is at odds with the overlapping domains of multinational structures.

While such remoteness may give us an impression of peaceful coexistence, it is fundamentally unlike a foundation nurtured to endure in a time of increasing interconnectedness. Remoteness does not do away with possible tensions, which are only shifted elsewhere, from directly concerning people to involving institutions, and so finally to concerning individuals whose connectedness has been diluted. By contrast, a cultural exchange carried out with knowledge of and respect for the other does not impose values. It aims instead precisely for a certain stability, for an equilibrium between parties whose relations to their counterpart are personified and whose understanding of the ties that bind them is allowed to mature.

To interact with someone in a different culture is to cultivate an acquaintance with otherness as such. It is also to nurture a gradual shift from mere notional to real encounters with otherness. This takes on significant meaning in a world where reliance on social media implies that faraway others, while ever-

present, are also ever-distant, so that our ethical judgement of our actions and inactions concerning them can be indefinitely suspended.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, it is deceptively easy to overlook investing in cultural exchange. Artists tend to immerse themselves in their work, turning their being towards timelessness and an imaginative exploration of material. They rarely possess societal ambitions outside their art, making them unlikely advocates for the arts in the political sphere. And yet, among them are untapped architects of a borderless peace. In this regard, they have something in common with the philosopher or the dreaming intellectual with whom they share traits of otherworldly detachment.<sup>12</sup>

In order to defend the role of the arts in an altruism that is both effective and far-sighted, we are ultimately better off looking to the nature of the aesthetic experience itself. And this brings us back to Dilthey, for the wide-ranging, elusive effects of art and beauty can appear in uncompromised form in a framework that accommodates productive nexuses. The central idea is that nexuses of an artistic and cultural kind will embody not only the purposes they were meant to fulfil but also other, far-reaching and less discernible effects. To insist that measurability is the single evaluative norm in the case of flow-through effects is therefore to commit a fundamental philosophical error. By contrast, the notion that I have alluded to is that something may be purposive in a general sense without therefore fulfilling a determinate purpose. Such insight is what led Dilthey to conceive of the ways the forces of life can converge not as purposive systems but as productive systems. That is to say, he reinvigorates the familiar notion that initiating something good often creates unforeseeable benefit. And this, I think, is close to the heart of those who value the arts and creativity in general.

What the long-term productivity of cross-cultural art making and art appreciation might comprise is admittedly unclear. What *is* clear is that some universalisable reasons to push our artistic and altruistic horizons have now appeared on our temporal horizon. Think, for instance, of our new-found technological interconnectedness. Examples abound of our immaturity when it comes to living in harmony with the interconnectedness that our virtual world now provides. In the coming decades, we will have to not only maintain our peaceful coexistence but also fill the touchstones technology thrusts upon us with genuine meaning. Shared acquaintances with what is beautiful are some of the most genuine and harmonious connections known to us.

Think also of the connection between an increasingly shallow, plebeian media culture, on the one hand, and our individualism and excessive consumerism, on the other, the consequences of which are

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<sup>11</sup> I draw here on Bernard Williams's distinction between real and notional confrontations in his analysis of encounters between different systems of belief. See Williams, Bernard. "The Truth in Relativism." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1975, pp. 215–228.

<sup>12</sup> It should of course not be denied that also the philosopher's role is manifestly cumbersome in a world where many individuals do not restrict their authority to the domain of their education (nor proportion it to their level of intellect, or their 'Bildung' – roughly 'self-cultivation' – to use a concept discussed by Hegel and Gadamer, among others).

now plain to see. Crucially, because of the effect we have had on the environment, our peaceful coexistence no longer implies our survival. It is therefore relevant that an authentic appreciation of art and beauty helps us turn away from what is shallow. At best it can also make us turn towards the beauty found in nature. After all, it speaks to the accessibility of the beautiful that some of our highest aesthetic pleasures are not materially costly but available through acquaintance with the environment that we want to preserve and the artworks it inspires.

Consider, finally, that it will be increasingly relevant for us to nurture our sense of what it means to be human once our existence is enveloped in a texture of artificial general intelligence. We live in a time when the boundary separating human beings from various artificially intelligent solutions is becoming longer and, with respect to economic utility, more ambiguous. It should increasingly matter to us that our *being* is not only about being rational, or moral, but also about the capacity to experience art and beauty at various levels of our existence. How we choose to formulate and exemplify this meaningfulness will take on added significance in the centuries to come: as a civilisation, we need a mature sense of what it is to be human, as opposed to nodes in the new set of causal relations which is bound to enter our existence.

In the end, the themes I have raised converge on the fact that our existence is a human existence, for to us, truth, goodness, and beauty are all aspects of a single ascent-conducive topography. They also point beyond our spatial and temporal boundedness: even if in Cambodia, as elsewhere, there may be no final redressing of past wrongs – no salutary séance with the community’s past, no definite realisation of its future potential – the arts accompany our movement through time by raising our sights above it.