Finding Beauty, a Spinozan approach to good use

The aim here is to arrive at a discursive and *athletic* concept of beauty. The argument is built upon the premise that Spinoza's concept of freedom and the consequences that flow from it are consistent with experience. I shall argue a familiar case, namely that beauty is a function of both the concepts of truth and the good. My conclusion however will be that all three are *a matter of exercise in the skill of finding them in our relationship with things* by testing or measuring our conceptions of something that is beautiful, good or true against our metaphysical understanding the world. Metaphysics I define along the pragmatic advice of Charles Sanders Peirce, as a discipline that concerns itself with finding useful ways to conceive and talk about the world.[1] Beauty, Goodness and truth are thus *produced in our measurement of things*. By measurement I mean something quite straight forward, namely the act of conceptual placement: placing concepts and ideas relative to others and relative to oneself. The metaphysical model provided by Spinoza in his *Ethica* of 1678 is still extraordinarily compelling and has, so far, not been contradicted by or been shown to be inconsistent with modern science. Spinoza provides science with an adequate and sophisticated metaphysical framework and relates this framework to our thinking and doing. Spinoza moreover, long before Darwin, was the first to properly argue through a non-anthropocentric universe, denying the idea of design and diminishing our obsession with final causes, thus doing the groundwork for Darwin's paradigm of natural selection.

Plato implies the interchangeability of the notions of truth, beauty and goodness.[2] The question is how his version of this interchange might work.

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[1] Peirce, C.S.: 1960, Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, 6 vols., Charles Hartshorne & Paul Weiss, (eds) Cambridge Mass, V. §122.

[2] Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz (1972) The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter, 1972), pp. 165-180 In which he argues

About that he says little. How would the one be an attribute, mode or aspect of the other? Or to put it into the language of process, how would one be a way of *producing* the other? There are two statements about beauty dating from the middle ages that are relevant here. The first is that *Pulchrum et perfectum idem est*, that beauty and perfection are identical.[3] Taken at face value this statement means unequivocally that anything that is found perfect must be found beautiful and anything found beautiful must necessarily be perfect. Beauty is the perfection of something and perfection is the beauty of something. The second statement says that beauty is *the splendour* of truth. It indicates the presence of truth much as the last two lines of John Keat's Ode to a Grecian Urn: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know."

The relationship between truth and perfection, beauty's constitution as it were, is as interesting as it is self-evident; how can a truth that is a truth, not be a perfect truth? Confining ourselves to the way both words work in any intelligible discussion would make any other conclusion absurd. The nice thing about truth is that it functions like an on-off switch. Something is either true or it is not. What we call half-truths are whole truths that tell only part of the story; that is different. The same holds with perfection. A thing is either perfect or it is not so. However, in contrast to truth, perfection has a very curious way of behaving itself, as we shall see below. The important thing for the moment is that neither truth nor perfection allows a gradual or partial homecoming. This has implications for the idea of beauty. Is beauty also an on-off switch? That would seem to follow from the premises, however, we speak of things being *quite* beautiful and *more* beautiful than something else. This ability would appear to contradict such a position. This apparent contradiction needs to be

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rightly that the Greek concept of beauty was more like our concept of goodness. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz (1980) "The Aesthetics of Plato," in History of Aesthetics, Vol. 1, p. 114. The triad is referred to in the Phaedrus and the Philebus. See also the chapter 10 "Where the Beauty of Truth Lies", in Levin, David Michael. *The Philosopher's Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment.* Berkeley: University of California Press, c1999 1999. http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft896nb5sx/

[3] The source of this quote is elusive. W. Tatarkiewicz, (1980) A History of Six Ideas, p. 123 calls it a mediaeval dictum. Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologica Beauty demands (…) integrity, or perfection. Summa theol. I q. 39 a. 8.

resolved and it can be, perhaps with reference to Peter Sloterdijk's notion of spheres. But more of that later.

Taking the two statements from the middle ages, we might venture to complete Plato's model, in whose theory of forms the concept of the Good occupied the very apex, by saying that truth is what comes to presence in beauty, beauty being an experiential quality, so that the finding of beauty in experience leads one to the finding of truths about our experience of the world. These truths are however no more than ways of conceiving the world well, and this way will then lead to the good, which is where experience and conception come together in action and being. After all, as Spinoza would immediately concede, no-one willingly makes a bad decision, no-one willingly believes in false ideas. All three concepts, beauty, truth and goodness are then expressions of a perfection that makes the one the measure of the other. The one brings it to presence, the second makes it intelligible and the third shows us a way to be in relation to what we have found.[4] If I find something that is good, I must also be able to find beauty somewhere relative to that good and vice versa.[5]

This does not at first appear to rhyme well with daily experience. Many of us find different things beautiful. I know myself to find things beautiful that others profess to find ugly. Or at least they tell me they do. How do we deal with these problems? It would be too easy to take this messiness as an indication that the interchangeability of truth, beauty and goodness is false, or that we could only decide the issue by instituting a standard of beauty that we all obey. Those strategies have been tried and not been found completely satisfactory; the problem remains. We have, instead, to take Keats at face value: truth is beauty and beauty is truth. The question

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[4] W. Tatarkiewicz, "The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas," in: History of Aesthetics, Vol. II, Medieval Aesthetics, The Hague, Mouton, 1980, 246

[5] The repeated use of the first person singular in this essay is deliberate. The philosophical struggle cannot be decontextualized; it is a personal activity dependent on an acquired and probably unique frame of reference which is personal and must be negotiated when shared with others through discourse. This is no less true in the attempt to formulate *an athletic* conception of beauty which is the forging of relations with an object of experience by a subject of experience through practise. Even though beauty is a product of reason and thus accessible to all rational beings, it is arrived at through personal struggle.

to ask is: what am I able to find beautiful? How do I produce beauty in my experience of my environment? How good am I at finding beauty? Beauty is the product of the causal fabric of relations, putting my body through a process. There can be no single cause for beauty because beauty is the product of my relationship to some aspect of my environment. Beauty is what my bodily experience produces in some of its relationships with the environment. Spinoza, who himself thought that beauty was a product of the imagination of the body, felt it could attach itself to anything in God, with which he expressly meant anything in nature. We shall see that this is consistent with his concept of the world's perfection. In any case, beauty is produced by my body meeting its environment within what we might call the climate of a culture and the weather of a situation; beauty is the product of embodied experience: the capacity to bring something into a special relationship with me.[6] I know from personal experience that I learn to produce beauty by concerning myself with it when undergoing my environment, I look for it and *find* it. It is produced by my negotiating the answers to three fundamental questions: what do I want and how should I go about achieving it and what can I trust? This last question is crucial because it gives me my standard of truth and knowledge about the world in which I find myself. At the same time, knowing what or whom to trust presents me with a problem. Whose council do I accept, who or what do I learn from and what do I learn? Who or what helps me decide what is beautiful, good and true? Is it God? Is it reason? Is it me, you, my boss, my neighbour, my understanding of the world? Is it the culture I am part of, my story? Is it perhaps the structure of the universe as it is made accessible to me? Is it perhaps the universe as I imagine or hope it to be? To answer this question I am condemned to freedom and have recourse only to my own experience that provides a frame of reference, my own ability to reason within it, my own inclinations that provide my ability to decide upon the issue. I am by necessity alone when I invest this or that person or principle with the authority to decide such things for me. Speaking from a personal point of view I have to admit that all of the above have at times served as authority for what I find beautiful: I have accepted and rejected fashions and still do; I have accepted and rejected gods, paradigms or axioms presented me; tried out independence and

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[6] Johnson, Mark (2007) *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. University of Chicago Press

autonomy in reason, I have struggled with my place in society, listened to friends and people in authority and then made up my mind. An ability to find things and situations beautiful has depended on them all in discontinuous, sometimes opportunistic sometimes destructive negotiation with each other against the background of the place I take up in my environment measured against my story about myself, the way I look at my situation, at what is presented to me. In this way the emergence of beauty in my finding of it is the product of a complex and reflexive process that attempts to bind my existence in the world into a coherent image, attempts to form an understanding judged from a well-exercised and conservatively adjusted point of view.[7]

The structure of the universe or whatever the cause of my existence may be, clearly allows me to form an idea of beauty and ugliness, loveliness and hatefulness. I am after all, a product of the universe as it is. That much must be obvious. But the relationship between this structure and the idea of it that I form is, to an extent that I cannot know, shrouded in ignorance and error. This knowledge gap is what Spinoza defines as freedom.

“men are mistaken in thinking themselves free; their opinion is made up of consciousness of their own actions, and ignorance of the causes by which they are conditioned. Their idea of freedom, therefore, is simply their ignorance of any cause for their actions. As for their saying that human actions depend on the will, this is a mere phrase without any idea to correspond thereto. What the will is, and how it moves the body, they none of them know; those who boast of such knowledge, and feign dwellings and habitations for the soul, are wont to provoke either laughter or disgust.” (ethics, 2p35)

The fact is that I do not know myself well. I do not know what the body is capable of. The idea I form of the world around me and my place in it is not just personal. I appear to be able to share it or aspects of it with others whose bodily structure and use of their environment is comparable. After

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[7] For the importance of embodied context in thought see Hubert Dreyfus, *What computers still can't do : a critique of artificial reason*, Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, c1992

all we are able to talk, teach and learn from each other. It is also undeniable that the ideas I form of what is beautiful are capable of change: things I have found ugly in the past have since become beautiful to me and vice versa. What does this say about the truth they reveal?

Marc Quinn's statue of Alison Lapper as unveiled in Trafalgar Square in 2005 presents a fundamental challenge in this respect. How is this sculpture beautiful? We have a number of ways of producing its beauty in our judgment. We have the traditional modes of judgment at hand. The sculpture may be beautifully made. It may also be a beautiful sculpture in the sense that the sculpture does what we like sculptures to do, which is to come to presence in the light as form, creating a focus for our attention, presenting textures, hues and colours, highlight and shade, and creating an image that is then free to become an infinite number of stories. We might even allow Quinns' statue beauty as a piece of successful political rhetoric: a necessary and heroic celebration of the marginalised. But what about the subject? What about Alison Lapper who was born without arms and short legs? What about the body that *deviates from the Vitruvian norm*? How is the subject beautiful? Am I capable of overcoming my habituated norms and values with respect to what is tellingly too often called *the misshapen*? Marc Quinn and Alison Lapper show me a way, by presenting her like that, in her full glory, pregnant and dignified. If I can find *her* beauty there, in the sculpture, as a celebration of what she is, I will have achieved a road to finding beauty in places I have not had the chance to explore; I will, as Nietzsche advised us to do, have *overcome my self*.

In order to achieve this it might help to grapple with Spinoza's strange concept of freedom and trace the way it emerges from his determinist position. Determinism is the ontological assumption that what happens in time and place is a function of the mechanical nature of things. Nature behaves according to laws; it is rational, complex perhaps, but rational nevertheless. The consequences of this assumption is that everything must be predetermined. If the world functions according to laws, the future has to be at least theoretically knowable. Too often this leads to the fatalist and unnecessary notion that one cannot have any influence upon the course of the world on any scale, so that one might as well rest in one's lot, it arms itself with despondency: if we can't change the course of

history, why bother with anything? Good point, although experience shows us that despondency and fatalism usually tend to make the situation worse. Things are more interesting than this naïve determinism. Spinoza in his *Ethics* arrived at a more sophisticated conception which starts on familiar ground, namely the logical assumption that if God-or-nature is perfect then his perfection must surely imply at least the theoretical possibility of complete knowledge, and what is complete knowledge if it is not an exact knowledge of the future? And if knowledge of the future is possible, well then the future has been completely determined. Any other conclusion would be absurd. At the same time, experience tells us that we are capable of learning, of making better decisions within certain familiar situations, especially when we take the time to think things through clearly. Does this contradict Spinoza's determinism? Surely if we can change the world, the world is changeable, making rubbish of its determinist workings. That is a nice objection but the answer is nevertheless no. Spinoza's determinism does not lead to fatalism: reason, practise and learning improve our power over ourselves and our relationship with our environment. This does not mean the world is after all not determinist; it means merely that determinism demands our acknowledgement that a fine critical mind in a proactive body willing to improve his lot is itself a necessary product of nature and part of its causal fabric. It is part of the working of the universe. The real problem is that the world's determinism is a matter of extreme complexity and our ability to penetrate it, still extremely limited. Nevertheless, the exercise of reason within the context of our daily lives, when carried out rigorously, avoiding distinctions that unnecessarily rupture the continuity of experience and impose untenable dualisms, which though useful for a while tend to get us into problems, teaches us to live in harmony with the world, which is a joy. Learning increases our power over ourselves and the situations we are confronted with but does not contradict Spinoza's determinism. In fact his determinism is backed by the experience of daily life: learning how things work is useful to us and makes us function better in our world, makes us use things better, more generously, makes us enjoy the world and allows us control over our situations. So we are able to improve our lot *because* the world is essentially rational. The possibility for human progress is however localised in its own sphere. Although they are part of a perfect world, they themselves do not know how to dwell in that world. Ignorance cause hardship to them, but does not in any way imply

that the world as a whole is less than perfect. Our ability to learn is an aspect of the perfection of this dynamic and changeable complex system we call the world. When we do things better for ourselves, or at least when we think we are doing things better, does not mean that the world or the universe as a whole is any the better for it. Progress for us is possible because we are fully situated in our environment, of which our knowledge is fragmentary and sketchy at best and it is the relationship between us and our environment, both of which change continuously, that needs response. Nevertheless, learning indubitably increases our power and at the same time appears to reinforce the fact that nature works according to laws.

If existence is the behaviour of substance subject to the laws of a physics it imposes on itself, our future is not just fully determined but the world can be described as perfect. Perfection means that everything in the world will follow its course as determined. Spinoza's God is nature, *is* the physics of motion, attraction and repulsion and the chemistry of coupling, the biology of attraction and repulsion, thought, reflection and judgment. If the world as it is, it is perfect itself. As a result beauty must be able to be found everywhere, in some way. However it might require us to leave behind our localised perspective, our grounding in the concerns of the moment and place rearrange them in a larger view that does not put us and our concerns at the very centre. However, we have to manage the larger view we are trying to acquire very carefully. We must avoid the trap of becoming disdainful of humanity and its concerns; that would stop us playing the game properly. Taking on a more distant view should not make us more distant to the concerns of our body as was the case with Christian dualism where the soul was privileged over the body. We are part of the world and so are our lives and the relationship between our lives and the universe is what is at issue.

The flux of interlacing processes governing the universe as a whole is so complex and reflexive that predictions with our current knowledge of nature's processes are impossible to make with regard to the things that really matter to us: such as which number will come up in the lottery, what the weather will be like in Cornwall next summer, why I like this dinner and why you did not, etc. We shall only ever be able to approximate the truth in our simulations and mathematical descriptions of

the world. This is consistent with Peirce's Pragmaticist view of truth which assumes that a complete grasp of the truth is, to say the least, ambitious. There is, as the next best thing, a useful way of looking at a problem by trying to simulate reality as compellingly as possible. An objective truth is, as Kant also recognised, too large and strange for us.[8] The true structure of the universe is unknowable in its entirety as things are only knowlable in relation to us. The Truth with a capital T is masked and at the same time represented by a succession of paradigms, each of which constitute a working theory about the world, which in turn services the production of beauty when we measure things and ideas relative to them. Truth in our picturesque world of localised and embodied perspectives, as an absolute and all-encompassing thing can only be *approached* by devising descriptions of the world's behaviour with the help of our *knowing that*, though language and mathematics and our bodily *know-how* which tries to cope with the world it is part of. Using these tools of our understanding we can never be completely sure when or where we have arrived regarding the truth. Mind you, when a theory *works* in that it appears to capture the behaviour of some aspect of the world and makes an event predictable, such a theory becomes extremely compelling and certainly a cause as well as an object of beauty.

Freedom in one's choice of actions and opinions is, according to Spinoza, another way of describing our ignorance. The universe is far too complex to be able to see, never mind put to immediate use, the determinism that Spinoza accepted as ruling it. All we can do is approximate its structure in our understanding through reason and self-knowledge, knowledge of our situated body. If freedom is to do what you want, then Spinoza would want you to think very carefully about what you want. We are free to struggle to get things right, trying to avoid bad decisions, to avoid holding false truths and to exercise our understanding of ourselves. Determinism is there, it shows itself in the relatively straightforward, artificially isolated systems studied in physics and chemistry, (which certainly have a compelling beauty) but when things get really complex, when, for example, we want to describe the delight of a good dinner, or the beauty of violence, the problem spirals out of hand and we are forced to revert to the only system we have successfully developed to cope with complexity,

[8] Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, A256/B312,P27

namely discourse, using everyday, ordinary language which is great for approximations and generalising metaphors but only ever as good as our grasp of words and nuance. An existential position with regard to freedom is then not incompatible with that of Spinoza: freedom is no joy in itself, it is what we are, in Sartrean terms, *condemned* to, as we never know what is right in a particular context or situation, which is always in some way unique; freedom is our narrow perspective on the world set within an anxious-making, oceanic ignorance, which nevertheless helps us as we go, struggling to get things right. The joy comes when we do indeed appear to get things right and learn to love the attempt of understanding our world by exercising our power to act well upon that understanding. Spinoza's advice in the face of this unassailable complexity is *to learn* to love nature *in its perfection*. How is it possible to look at this vale of tears and consider it perfect and, assuming we manage to do that, how does his determinism affect us, what can we do?

Perfection is a strange concept. As a predicate it either comes down to the judgment that something is *good* the way it is and cannot be improved upon because it is itself, perfectly. Or something would be perfect if it were to fulfil a set of *imaginable* criteria. These two ways of looking at perfection seem to contradict each other. The first perspective is ontological and circular: something is perfect in being itself perfectly. In this sense everything that is itself is also perfectly itself, we could call this kind of perfection *autonomous*. The second is clearly *heteronomous*, it engages final causes: use and purpose; something is perfect if it *performs* well in the play in which it has been cast; if it does what it is supposed to do and does it well in the eyes of the judge. In the first perfection is categorical. In the second perfection is hypothetical, a culmination of qualities residing in the relationship between it and the rest. The clearer we are with respect to the purpose of something, the more unequivocal our view of the good and its logical extreme in perfection. A door is a good or indeed a perfect door, when it does its various jobs as a door well, or even perfectly. To be a good or even perfect door would appear to be not very difficult. But to call a door perfect is problematic: it is perfect when it is judged so by something or someone else. Such heteronomous and anthropocentric perfection is of course not exactly fair to the thing that is being described as perfect. It is a judgment imposed by an *other,* who dwells in his own sphere, with its own truths, goods, purposes and

beauties, on something that is claimed as part of that sphere but does not necessarily or exclusively belong to it. It is measured against specific desires over which the object has nothing to say. We might call this a heteronomous as well as a teleological perspective, one that might be defined as constituting a portrait of ourselves in our world against which we measure our actions.

Having had the example of the door, let's try to expand this teleological perspective or point of view further. We might say something like: this person is *a perfect member of the community*. This communitarian approach to perfection is no less teleological than the example of the door but widens the point of view from that of the purposes and desires of a single individual body negotiating a door to the assumed or projected purposes and desires of a more abstract body such as a community or institution.[9] A perfect member of the community is one who presents in his bearing and actions the norms and values that a particular community cherishes. Is it possible to widen the perspective even further? Things become very strange as we attempt to do so. Ask yourself the question: what is a perfect human being? Teleology now begins to lose direction like the needle of the compass near the north-pole. We have to ask the question: What is the purpose of humanity? And if we cannot answer that question without resorting to explanations that fall well outside of what is acceptable to empirical science, we expose ourselves to the risk of going beyond the reasonable into the unverifiable and the fantastic, which is not a place I want to go. We might then be tempted to ask ourselves what the purpose of evolution is and consider this to be the ultimate question possible in the light of our current knowledge. The purpose of evolution is, surely, to allow genes to adapt their vehicles to changing situations through selective behaviour and thus to ensure their survival in reproduction. In that case any human being who has done that might be considered a perfect human being. But in fact this purpose is too narrow and would appear to exclude a group I *want* included in my view of the world: all those organisms that haven't managed to pass on their genes but nevertheless have lead their life. In my experience of humanity, people are more than mere vehicles for selfish genes, even if they did not,

[9] This argument follows Kant's two expressions of the hypothetical imperative in the Groundwork of the Metaphysic(s) of Morals, 1785.

perhaps, start out being so. Who cares what they started out being? Now we are creatures that are happily trying to transcend our status as vehicles for our genes. In any case this obsession with final causes is restrictive. If one were to say that humanity has a purpose in itself, which is to exist and make use of its capacities, whatever they are, then everyone who is human and exists and makes use of their capacity is also a perfect human being. But when do we know we are making full use of our capacities? At this point the case of Alison Lapper, as a person, a model in both an artistic as well as a moral sense, begins to claim my attention. Her autonomy in being the being that she is helps me to adjust the coordinates of my view upon the world. Her perfection, once we strip from our judgment our own narrow obsession with final causes, is indubitable. And where there is perfection, beauty can be found in some way, and when we have found beauty somewhere, we have found truth.

As we shift the dial from a narrow and heteronomous purposiveness to an autonomous and indeterminate purposiveness, or, if you like, to an ontological perspective on perfection, allowing any product of nature its perfection, its own being, our sense of beauty similarly shifts from that which is driven by use in our intentional universe restricted by our anthropocentrism, to that which drives use: our infinite capacity for finding possibilities within our bodily limitations. Ugliness becomes our inability to grasp a thing's beauty. Beauty becomes a function of understanding. When it is only from the point of view of a narrow purpose and use that we define good and bad, the perfect and the imperfect, we in fact debilitate the use and purpose of understanding. When our inchoate view is directed at everything and we are able to transcend our narrower interests and look upon ourselves as part of a partially understood whole, indeed as an expression of the whole, the composition, maintenance and enjoyment of *our portrait of the world itself becomes our purpose,* what Aristotle in the tenth book of the ethics called *theoria,* or divine contemplation. That is how we can rediscover the continuity that relates the two kinds of perfection we have identified.

The attempt to love nature, in its perfection as a whole, through reason, learning and practise, gives us power over ourselves. To love nature's perfection is to love the whole, for it is perfect as it is in its entirety. We lose power when we fail to understand Nature as a whole and we gain

power when we increase our understanding of it and put that understanding to good effect in our actions. In this, Spinoza's *Ethics* is the metaphysical manifesto for Science as well as an existentialist and pragmaticist approach to the world. This power is not the power to intervene in and alter the course of nature, for God is never surprised by His own products. In fact God is never surprised at all; He is, after all, perfect: Nature is perfect and by extension all its products, including what we naively set up as its opposite, namely the so-called artificial also participate in its perfection. The power to understand what is happening will help us develop adequate techniques for coping in that world, live in harmony with it. Everything that exists is perfect ontologically, as itself. Only when we claim the world as our own, as made for our purpose, does it *appear imperfect.* (ethics 1pAppendix) There is no free-will involved, even though power sounds very much like free will. But this is where Spinoza's psychological axiom comes into view: Who would possibly make bad decisions if they knew what a good decision was? Who could possibly accept a falsehood when knowing the truth? We are not free, we are geared to the finding the useful, the good and the true and it is the finding of beauty that helps us in our quest. So Alison Lapper *is beautiful* and if we cannot find her beauty it is our ignorance our flabby unathletic approach to the world, our lack of training that is to blame. It is however useful to find her beauty as it helps you on your way to love this world in its perfection. Rather than finding objects that are consistent with our settled and comfortable idea of the beautiful, nicely sharpened to our sense of final cause, the onus is on us to exercise, explore and make sophisticated our sense of beauty. We do this by increasing our understanding. Free will is not free, it is the pursuit of understanding and in that understanding the furtherance of our power to work in harmony with Spinoza's God, Nature. If like Hegel, you then believe the problem of evil and ugliness has not been dealt with, then think again. It has, although the brevity of this essay will not allow me to explore that particular issue here. The problem of evil and its possible relation to beauty is easy enough to solve. Evil does not need to be beautiful as beauty resides not in things or events but in our relationship to them: we find beauty in building a relationship to things around us. Even healthy people can find beauty in the way evil is responded to by good. While those who find beauty in evil itself can be shown quite easily to reason from a frame of reference that is flawed, narrow or both. This frame of reference is crucial.

Spinoza's concept of perfection begins with a narrow teleological perspective but ends in what can only be described as an existential indeterminacy: If what there is, is itself, and therefore by definition perfect, we have to make sense of our lives by trying to understand what there is and act according to that understanding. The world is perfect in the sense that it is what it is and the reason we experience our being as a vale of tears is down to the fact that we do not understand our being, too often taking a narrow purpose for the whole, getting things wrong, getting ourselves into a muddle, not getting it right.

Coming back to our statue of Alison Lapper, it is not enough to say that Quinn's statue celebrates the marginalised and adjusts our political spectacles. It does that and is very successful at it: by celebrating Alison Lapper as a human being the sculpture demands dignity for all members of society which is surely a good thing when seen from the fact that modern societies are predicated on the just allowing a pluralism of the good. Alison Lapper presents a greater problem, not just one of tolerance of the deviant or a celebration of the marginalised. She is a human being, not a door. She demands her dignity as a human being, she commands respect as an emblem for a political struggle to gain recognition etc. But again that does not touch upon a fundamental problem. The question is: How is she beautiful? Is the answer that she is beautiful as a human being, as herself and as what she is? Is she beautiful in her humanity, in its fragility, its persistence, its courage and its need for courage? How do you measure the beauty of a woman? How athletic are you in finding beauty in her or in anything else for that matter? Do we measure that beauty against the standards of fashion; do we measure it personally against our own private desires? Do we measure it against Platonic ideals? Remember that Plato had all misshapen creatures killed at birth in his supposedly "just" state. We know what misshapen means, it means deviant from the norm. It turned Shakespeare's Richard III against the world that loathed him. The norm shows us how we are situated. And although a situated and embodied context is indispensable in finding anything, in thought itself coming to a decision, in pure reason coming to judgment, it is also at the same time the very boundary we need to overcome in our thinking. And Alison Lapper certainly deviates from the norm from a number of possible perspectives: she has no arms and strange legs as she sits there with great

dignity on the pedestal. Do not fall into the temptation of using compensatory arguments and say things like: well, her body is certainly not perfect but she has lovely hair… Do the supposedly ugly require our sympathy? Why exactly? Do they require it because they are ugly, or because the rest of humanity cannot screw its perceptive sophistication up high enough so that it can find beauty where one's sense of beauty requires hard exercise and training? We tend, in these times of ease, towards a flabby and passive sense of beauty. Understanding the nature of Alison Lapper's shape helps: careless science, commercial eagerness and our hatred for small discomforts gave her what she got, a fact that must have haunted her mother. Her shape demands behaviour which also deviates from the norm, but as soon as we understand that we can also cope with this deviancy. Removing our biological fear of the misshapen will already help us qualify the misshapen in terms that are not just politically but also conceptually correct: differently shaped. The word misshapen assumes a correct shape. A correct shape assumes a determined purpose. But this is our wonderful position: we cannot be sure as to our purpose. Our purpose is ours to define. Our own purpose is not of much consequence within the limitless perspective of existence. Once we have dealt with all these issues, what is left of her ugliness? Is she bitter? Is she unkind? Is she vulgar? I don't know, I do not know her personally. In any case these things are not relevant, she is herself and perfectly herself. Her beauty is there to be found. As an entity that works hard at being and maintaining an entity and developing herself as an entity, she is the most beautiful Alison Lapper. If beauty is the sign of truth and truth leads to goodness, then every truth has its beauty, and can lead to goodness. We learn through philosophical exercise and constant practise to love the world in its perfection. Taking the interchangeability of the three transcendentals as normative, means giving up on any hope of a standard that lies outside discourse. Discourse and its practise does not provide a standard of truth or beauty with a stability that lies outside discourse. To that extent both truth and goodness are bound in culture, just as our methods of approaching truth. But let's make sure we know what that means. Culture determines how I allow my body to meet its environment. It determines my behaviour. It is not purely subjective, not objective but relational, it is the law I give myself, because I believe it is

right on the basis of my experience and the authority I dispense to inform me.[10] I can overcome culture, without simply rejecting it. It is my task to find Alison Lapper's beauty in as full a way as possible. To love her, as Spinoza would say, in her perfection and her perfection is infinite.

[10] See Spinoza's Letter XXXV to Oldenburg, dated November 20, 1665: "I attribute to nature neither beauty nor ugliness, neither order nor confusion. For it is only in relation to our imagination that we can say of things that they are beautiful or ugly, ordered or confused see also Letter LVIII to H. Boxel, September 1674: If one considers things in themselves, that is to say, in relation to God, they are neither beautiful nor ugly.