Beauty as Divine Order: Berkeley on Proportion, Reason, and Subordination

di Aurora Yu

This paper reconstructs George Berkeley's theory of beauty as a coherent philosophical account grounded in relations of proportion, subordination, and teleological fittingness. It argues that beauty, for Berkeley, spans both natural and moral domains under a single unifying principle – the rational ordering of parts within a hierarchy of ends – and that this commitment leads to a qualified but significant rejection of the moral sense tradition in favor of a view on which beauty is an object of rational apprehension, ultimately grounded in divine reason.

Keywords: Divine Order, Berkeley, Proportion, Reason

1. Introduzione

Early modern philosophy is centrally concerned with the problem of order: how a world composed of diverse and heterogeneous elements can nevertheless exhibit unity, intelligibility, and normativity. In this context, the role of God is typically understood in terms of causation, epistemic guarantee, or metaphysical grounding. Yet an equally important, though often neglected, dimension of this problem concerns how such order becomes perceptible to finite minds. This paper argues that, for Berkeley, beauty is precisely the mode under which the rational structure of a divinely ordered world becomes accessible to human cognition.

Berkeley's scattered remarks on beauty – primarily in *Alciphron*, but also in the *Three Dialogues*, *Passive Obedience*, the *Principles*, and *Siris* – have often been treated as marginal or unsystematic. When discussed, they are typically assimilated either to early modern moral sense theories or to broader empiricist accounts of aesthetic response[1]. Such readings, however, obscure a central feature of Berkeley's view: beauty is not grounded in feeling, but in intelligible relations of order, proportion, and subordination, relations that ultimately reflect the teleological structure of creation.

In *Alciphron*, the character Alciphron defends a "moral sense" theory, according to which beauty is apprehended by a special faculty analogous to the senses: On this view, beauty is to be felt rather than understood. It attracts us without reason.

Berkeley, through Euphranor, rejects this account. The problem with the moral sense view is that it cannot distinguish between apparent and real beauty. If beauty is simply what pleases, then there is no standard for correcting mistaken judgments. Berkeley insists instead on an analogy between truth and beauty:

> They [truth and beauty] proceed from nature, and are conformable to right reason? Truth and beauty are in this alike, that the strictest survey sets them both off to advantage while the false lustre of error and disguise cannot endure being reviewed, or too nearly inspected[2].

This analogy implies that beauty, like truth, is objective and intelligible. It can withstand scrutiny because it is grounded in real relations. The distinction between apparent and true beauty is crucial. What pleases us is not always truly beautiful. Human beings are often guided by self-interest and immediate gratification, which can obscure the perception of real order. True beauty, by contrast, is what is genuinely good within the system as a whole.

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1 - See, e.g., discussions of Berkeley in relation to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism* (1960); also Guyer (2005).

2 - *Dialogue* II.

This paper reconstructs Berkeley's theory of beauty as a unified account spanning both natural and moral domains. I argue for three claims. First, Berkeley distinguishes between proper beauty (the beauty of visible and natural objects) and moral beauty (the beauty of actions and virtues), while insisting on a deep structural parallel between them. Second, in both domains, beauty consists in relations of proportion relative to ends, where parts are subordinated to wholes and coordinated within a system. Third, contrary to the moral sense theorists he engages, Berkeley holds that beauty is not immediately felt but rationally apprehended, and that this rational apprehension reveals the order of a world structured by divine reason.

On this interpretation, beauty plays a distinctive epistemic role. It is not merely an object of perception, but a way of perceiving order as such. To judge something beautiful is to recognize its place within a system of ends and its contribution to the harmony of the whole. In this way, aesthetic judgment becomes a site at which metaphysics, epistemology, and theology converge: it is through beauty that finite minds apprehend the intelligibility of divine creation.

This reading both builds on and departs from existing scholarship. Commentators such as Winkler and Stoneham have emphasized the role of divine language and signification in Berkeley's metaphysics, while Downing has stressed the importance of relational properties in his ontology[3]. Yet the aesthetic dimension of these relations – their appearance as beauty – has received comparatively little attention. Recent scholarship has begun to register precisely this gap. As Endre Szécsényi observes, Berkeley is "usually not discussed in the canonical histories of modern aesthetics," and even Berkeley specialists "do not seem to have paid attention to his possible contribution to modern aesthetics"[4]. This neglect is not accidental. Berkeley does not present a formal aesthetic treatise; rather, his reflections on beauty are dispersed across dialogues, sermons, and practical writings, and are "profoundly interwoven with his philosophy of language and his (popular) theology"[5]. As a result, the aesthetic dimension of his thought has often remained implicit, overshadowed by epistemological and metaphysical concerns. The present paper builds on this recent reassessment, but departs from it in one crucial respect. Whereas Szécsényi emphasizes Berkeley's contribution to an emerging "theologico-aesthetic language," the argument here is that Berkeley offers not merely a

3 - Cf. K. P. Winkler, Berkeley: An Interpretation, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989; T. Stoneham, Berkeley's World: An Examination of the Three Dialogues, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002; L. Downing, George Berkeley, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

4 - E. Szécsényi, "The Aesthetics of the Invisible: George Berkeley and the Modern Aesthetics," in «History of European Ideas», 48 (2022) n. 6, pp. 731–743, here p. 731.

5 - E. Szécsényi, "The Aesthetics of the Invisible," cit., p. 732.

language or mode of discourse, but a coherent, if dispersed, account of beauty grounded in relations of proportion, subordination, and rational order. Beauty, on this reading, is not an ancillary feature of Berkeley's philosophy, but a central category through which the intelligibility of divine order becomes accessible to finite minds. By foregrounding this dimension, the present paper shows that Berkeley's aesthetics is not an ancillary doctrine, but an integral part of his broader philosophical system.

The argument proceeds by developing a unified account of beauty across both natural and moral domains. Section 2 begins by clarifying Berkeley's distinction between proper and moral beauty, showing that this distinction does not mark two fundamentally different kinds of phenomena, but two domains structured by a single principle: proportion relative to ends. Section 3 then turns to natural beauty, arguing that Berkeley conceives it as the perception of a system of mutually dependent parts whose coordination reveals an underlying order. Section 4 extends this framework to the moral domain, where beauty consists in the rational ordering of action within a system governed by stable and intelligible rules. Section 5 draws out the philosophical stakes of this account by examining Berkeley's critique of the moral sense tradition and his insistence that beauty, like truth, is an object of rational apprehension rather than immediate feeling. Section 6 brings these strands together by articulating the concept of subordination as the unifying structure of beauty, and by showing how apparent imperfections can be understood as contributing to the harmony of a larger whole.

2. Proper and Moral Beauties: a Single Structure

Berkeley's account of beauty begins from a distinction that is at once intuitive and theoretically loaded: the distinction between proper beauty and moral beauty. In Alciphron, this distinction is introduced in a deceptively simple formulation:

> As the eye perceiveth the one, so the mind doth by a certain interior sense perceive the other[6].

At first glance, this passage appears to align Berkeley with the moral sense tradition. Proper beauty – the beauty of visible, corporeal objects – is perceived by the eye, while moral beauty – the beauty of virtue – is perceived by an "interior sense". Read in isolation, this suggests a familiar early modern picture: just as colors are given to the external senses, moral qualities are given to an internal faculty of feeling.

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6 - *Alciphron* 3.3.

Yet such a reading is ultimately misleading. As we shall see, Berkeley introduces this formulation only to reject the moral sense model it seems to support. The distinction between proper and moral beauty is real, but it does not correspond to a division between sensation and feeling. Rather, it marks two domains in which a single underlying structure – proportion relative to ends – is instantiated.

To see this, we must first clarify what is meant by proper beauty. Berkeley's discussion makes clear that proper beauty is not restricted to works of art. On the contrary, its primary domain is nature itself. As the materials rightly emphasize, natural beings are not merely included among beautiful objects; they are paradigmatic instances of beauty. The opening scenes of Berkeley's dialogues, with their detailed descriptions of landscapes, are not ornamental but philosophically significant. They direct our attention to a world in which beauty is pervasive and structurally grounded.

Proper beauty, then, is not merely visual in a superficial sense. It is not reducible to color, shape, or immediate sensory appeal. Rather, it concerns the way in which objects are situated within a system of relations. A tree is beautiful in a forest not simply because of its form, but because of its role within a network of mutual dependencies: it shelters birds, supports growth at its roots, and contributes to the overall harmony of its environment. The same object, removed from this context, loses its beauty – not because its intrinsic features change, but because its relations do.

Moral beauty, by contrast, concerns the domain of action and character. Yet Berkeley insists that it is structurally analogous to proper beauty. As Euphranor puts it, moral beauty consists in:

«A beauty of the mind, a charm in virtue, a symmetry and proportion in the moral world»[7].

The key terms – symmetry, proportion, order – are the same. What differs is not the structure, but the domain of application. In the natural world, beauty arises from the coordination of physical parts; in the moral world, it arises from the coordination of rational actions. In both cases, beauty consists in fittingness within a system.

This parallelism is central to Berkeley's view. It allows him to unify aesthetics across domains while preserving the distinctiveness of each. Proper beauty and moral beauty are not two fundamentally different kinds of phenomena, but two expressions of a single principle: the principle that beauty consists in the ordered relation of parts to ends and to wholes.

7 - *Alciphron* 3.4

At this point, however, Berkeley introduces a competing account, represented by the character Alciphron. According to this view, moral beauty is grounded in a special faculty: "there is an idea of beauty natural to the mind of man," and "men's first thoughts and natural notions are the best in moral matters"[8]. On this account, moral beauty is not the object of reason, but of immediate intuition or feeling. It is apprehended through a moral sense that operates independently of deliberation. This position places Berkeley in dialogue with figures such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, for whom moral and aesthetic judgments are grounded in a distinctive affective faculty. It is worth noting that Berkeley does not simply dismiss this tradition. He shares with Shaftesbury the conviction that beauty is objective and not merely reducible to private whim, and with Hutcheson the recognition that aesthetic response can be immediate and not always the product of explicit inference. His disagreement concerns the ground of this objectivity: whether it lies in a divinely calibrated affective faculty, or in intelligible relations that are, at least in principle, accessible to reason.

The force of Berkeley's disagreement with the moral sense tradition becomes clearer when situated against Hutcheson's own account. Hutcheson famously grounds beauty in a special internal sense, such that objects are called beautiful "in virtue of their causing us to have a certain kind of pleasurable feeling"[9], and this connection between form and pleasure is itself contingent upon "some Constitution of the AUTHOR of our Nature"[10]. On this view, beauty is not intelligible through reason alone, but depends on a divinely instituted correspondence between our sensibility and the world.

Berkeley's objection can thus be seen as targeting precisely this contingency. If beauty depends on a merely given alignment between human feeling and external forms, then its normative force becomes unstable: what appears beautiful would lack any independent standard. By contrast, Berkeley insists that beauty is grounded in relations that can withstand rational scrutiny. The disagreement is therefore not merely about the faculty by which beauty is perceived, but about whether beauty itself is fundamentally affective or intelligible.

Berkeley's strategy is not to deny that beauty is sometimes felt, but to argue that this account fails to distinguish between apparent and real beauty. If beauty is identified with what pleases, then any pleasurable object would count as beautiful, and there would be no standard for correcting mistaken judgments. Yet Berkeley clearly wants to preserve such a standard. Not everything that appears beautiful is

8 - *Alciphron* 3.3.

9 - Kivy 2003, p. 112.

10 - Kivy 2003, p. 113.

truly so. This point marks the beginning of a decisive shift. While Alciphron treats the distinction between proper and moral beauty as a distinction between kinds of perception (external vs internal), Berkeley reconceives it as a distinction between domains governed by the same rational structure. Both kinds of beauty involve relations of proportion and order. Both require the apprehension of how parts are fitted to ends. And both ultimately depend on a system whose intelligibility exceeds immediate perception.

The distinction between proper and moral beauty, therefore, is not foundational but derivative. It reflects two ways in which a single underlying order is manifested. The eye and the mind do not disclose fundamentally different kinds of beauty; rather, they provide different modes of access to the same structure. This reinterpretation allows Berkeley to position himself against the moral sense tradition while preserving its insights. He agrees that beauty is not reducible to explicit reasoning in every case; we often recognize beauty immediately. But he denies that this immediacy is primitive. It is, instead, the result of a tacit grasp of relations that can, in principle, be made explicit. Beauty is not a brute feeling, but an intelligible relation that may be more or less clearly apprehended.

In this way, the distinction between proper and moral beauty becomes the starting point for a more ambitious claim: that beauty, in all its forms, is grounded in the rational structure of a world ordered by divine reason. The next section develops this claim by examining Berkeley's account of natural beauty in greater detail.

3. Natural Beauty and the System of the World

If Berkeley's distinction between proper and moral beauty establishes a shared structure, it is in his treatment of natural beauty that this structure becomes fully visible. For Berkeley does not begin with abstract definitions, but with a striking methodological move: he begins with experience itself, and in particular with the experience of natural beauty.

His philosophical dialogues famously open not with arguments, but with scenes. In the *Three Dialogues,* Philonous begins:

> Can there be a pleasanter time of the day, or a more delightful season of the year? That purple sky, those wild but sweet notes of birds, the fragrant bloom upon the trees and flowers, the gentle influence of the rising sun, these and a thousand nameless beauties of nature inspire the soul with secret transports[11].

11 - Dialogue I.

Similarly, The Minute Philosopher "began upon the beauty of this rural scene, the fine season of the year, and some late improvements which had been made the adjacent country by new methods of agriculture"[12]. These openings are not merely rhetorical or decorative. They perform an essential philosophical function. They direct our attention to a world in which beauty is not rare or exceptional, but pervasive and structured. What is at issue is not whether nature is beautiful, but how its beauty is to be understood.

This question is immediately deepened by Philonous' later remarks:

> Is there not something in the woods and groves, in the rivers and clear springs, that soothes, that delights, that transports the soul? At the prospect of the wide and deep ocean, or some huge mountain whose top is lost in the clouds, or of an old gloomy forest, are not our minds filled with a pleasing horror? Even in rocks and deserts, is there not an agreeable wildness? How sincere a pleasure is it to behold the natural beauties of the earth [...]. What delicacy, what beauty, what contrivance, in animal and vegetable bodies! How exquisitely are all things suited, as well to their particular ends, as to constitute opposite parts of the whole! And while they mutually aid and support, do they not also set off and illustrate each other? [...]. The motion and situation of the planets, are they not admirable for use and order? [13].

This passage reveals that Berkeley's account of natural beauty has a twofold structure: each thing is suited to its own end and each thing contributes to a larger whole. Beauty, therefore, is not merely local but systemic. It does not reside in isolated objects, but in the way those objects are integrated within a network of relations. The phrase "mutually aid and support" is especially important. It indicates that natural beauty is not additive, but integrative. The elements of nature are not simply juxtaposed; they are interdependent. Their relations form a structured system in which each part contributes to the functioning of the whole. This point is reinforced in *Alciphron* 1.16:

> Even the inanimate unorganized elements seem to have an excellence relative to each other. Where was the excellency of water, if it did not cause herbs and vegetables to spring from the earth, and put forth flowers and fruits? And what would become of the beauty of the earth, if it was not warmed by the sun, moistened by water and fanned by air? Throughout the whole system of the visible and natural world, do you not perceive a mutual connexion and correspondence

12 - *Alciphron* 1.1.

13 - *Dialogue* II.

> of parts? And is it not from hence that you frame an idea of the perfection, and order, and beauty of nature? [14].

Here Berkeley explicitly names what was implicit before: "the whole system of the visible and natural world." Beauty arises from the "connexion and correspondence of parts" within this system. It is not an intrinsic feature of individual things, but a relational feature of the whole.

At this point, however, Berkeley introduces a crucial philosophical clarification. The system described above is not directly given in sensation. While the senses present colors, sounds, and textures, they do not present relations of order as such. The recognition of harmony requires something more: "beauty is an object, not of the eye, but of the mind"[15]. To perceive beauty is to grasp relations – relations of dependence, coordination, and proportion. This requires intellectual activity. The senses provide the material, but the mind discerns the structure. This insight is central to Berkeley's view. It establishes that aesthetic experience is not merely sensory, but cognitive. Beauty is not simply felt; it is understood. This intellectual dimension also explains why Berkeley repeatedly links beauty with truth. Both involve conformity to a structure that is not of our making. Just as truth consists in the correspondence of ideas with reality, beauty consists in the conformity of parts to an order.

From this point, the theological implication follows naturally. If beauty consists in the perception of systemic order, and if that order is not produced by human minds, then it must be grounded in a higher source of intelligibility. The harmony of nature is not accidental; it is the result of a purposive structure instituted by God. In this respect, Berkeley's account stands in a complex relation to contemporaneous theological aesthetics. Hutcheson, for example, treats aesthetic experience as evidence of divine design: the striking correspondence between our sense of beauty and the order of the world would be "extremely unlikely" if it arose from chance, and is therefore best explained by a rational creator[16]. Yet for Hutcheson, this argument presupposes that beauty is first and foremost a matter of pleasurable response. Berkeley reverses this order of explanation. Beauty is not evidence for divine design because it pleases us; rather, it pleases us because it reflects an intelligible structure grounded in divine reason. The perception of beauty is thus not merely a sign of design, but a partial apprehension of it. What is revealed in aesthetic experience is not simply that the world is well suited to us, but that it is ordered according to principles that can be grasped, however imperfectly, by the

14 - *Alciphron* 1.16.

15 - *Alciphron* 3.8.

16 - Kivy 2003, p. 113.

intellect. Beauty, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon. It is a mode of access to divine order. Through the perception of natural beauty, finite minds apprehend – however partially – the intelligibility of creation.

4. Moral Beauty, Interest, and Rational Order

The transition from natural to moral beauty does not introduce a new structure, but a new standpoint. In the natural world, we perceive order; in the moral world, we are called upon to participate in and realize it.

Berkeley makes this parallel explicit by extending the language of proportion and system to the moral domain. Just as natural beauty arises from the coordination of parts within a whole, so moral beauty arises from the coordination of actions within a system of rational beings. As he writes in *Passive Obedience:*

> As without such a steadiness in nature, we should soon… see nothing but a disorderly and confused chaos; so if once it become current, that the moral actions of men are not to be guided by certain definite inviolable rules, there will be no longer found that beauty, order, and agreement, in the system of rational beings… but… darkness and violence[17].

The analogy is exact. Both the natural and moral worlds are systems, and both derive their beauty from the maintenance of order within those systems.

Yet the moral domain introduces a complication: the role of agency. Unlike natural objects, rational beings are not automatically coordinated. Their actions must be guided. This raises the question: how is moral beauty to be apprehended and realized?

It is here that Berkeley confronts the moral sense theory. According to Alciphron, moral beauty is "an object, not of the discursive faculty, but of ... the moral sense, being adapted to the perception of moral beauty as the eye to colors, or the ear to sounds"[18]. On this view, beauty is immediate and non-rational. It is something we feel rather than understand. This position is reinforced by the claim that: "interest is a mean ungenerous thing, destroying the merit of virtue"[19], and that beauty depends on a certain "je ne sais quoi"[20].

Berkeley's response is to show that this account cannot distinguish between apparent and real beauty. If beauty is simply what pleases, then there is no standard for correction. Yet such a standard is clearly required. He therefore

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17 - *Discourse of Passive Obedience*, Chapter XXVIII.

18 - *Alciphron* 3.5.

19 - *Alciphron* 3.3.

20 - *Alciphron* 3.5.

replaces the moral sense view with a rational account of moral beauty, grounded in judgment and interest properly understood:

> duty and virtue are in a fairer way of being practiced, if men are led by reason and judgment, balancing low and sensual pleasures with those of a higher kind, comparing present losses with future gains, and the uneasiness and disgust of every vice with the delightful practice of the opposite virtue[21].

Here, interest is not rejected, but transformed. It becomes a rational evaluation of goods across time and across levels of value. Moral beauty consists in the correct ordering of these goods – in aligning one's actions with what is truly best within the system as a whole. This account is reinforced in *Principles §CIX:*

> we should propose to ourselves nobler views, such as to recreate and exalt the mind, with a prospect of the beauty, order, extent, and variety, of natural things, hence, by proper inferences… to make several parts of the creation, so far as in us lies, subservient to the ends they were designed for[22].

This passage reveals the full structure of Berkeley's view. Moral action is not merely rule-following; it is the active realization of teleological order. To act beautifully is to make oneself and one's actions subordinate to the ends embedded in creation. Thus, moral beauty is not a matter of feeling, but of rational participation in divine order.

Berkeley's most explicit account of beauty appears in Alciphron, where Euphranor states:

> There is no beauty without proportion, so proportions are to be esteemed just and true only as they are relative to some certain use or end, their aptitude and subordination to which end is[23].

This passage establishes the central features of Berkeley's theory. Beauty is neither intrinsic nor merely formal, but essentially relational and teleological. Proportion is not simply a matter of symmetry or balance; it is a relation of fitness to an end. The crucial terms – *use, end, aptitude, and subordination* – all point to a normative structure in which objects are evaluated according to how well they fulfill a purpose.

It is worth pausing here to note the historical-conceptual weight these terms carry. The category of "teleology" – the orientation of things toward ends – has its roots in Aristotle's natural philosophy, where it characterizes the internal

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21 - *Alciphron* 3.5.

22 - *Of the Principles of Human Knowledge*, CIX.

23 - *Alciphron* 3.9.

directedness of natural substances toward their characteristic forms of flourishing. By the early modern period, however, teleological explanation had become contested: Descartes and his followers largely expelled final causes from natural philosophy, while thinkers such as Leibniz sought to rehabilitate them within a metaphysical framework. Berkeley's appeal to teleology thus represents a deliberate counter-movement within early modern thought, retrieving the Aristotelian insight that things are intelligible in light of their ends, while grounding those ends in divine rather than immanent nature. Similarly, the term "subordination" carries a specific conceptual history: in scholastic and early modern discussions of order, subordination typically denotes the hierarchical dependence of lower on higher principles – instrumental causes subordinated to final causes, parts to wholes. Berkeley inherits this hierarchical vocabulary but deploys it aesthetically, making subordination the very form in which beauty is apprehended. The term "system," finally, reflects the influence of seventeenth – and eighteenth-century natural philosophy and theology, where it denoted an interconnected whole governed by law – as in Newton's "system of the world." For Berkeley, the aesthetic and theological dimensions of this term converge: the world is a system in the scientific sense – ordered, lawlike, intelligible – and its beauty consists precisely in the perceptibility of that order to finite minds.

This account immediately rules out a purely subjectivist understanding of beauty. Berkeley's position can be further clarified by situating it within the broader eighteenth-century debate concerning the relation between beauty and utility. As Robert Clewis notes, this period is marked by competing models: some treat beauty and utility as independent, while others regard beauty as a "form or mode of perfection or goodness"[24]. Berkeley's view aligns most closely with this latter tradition. For Berkeley, beauty is not identical with utility in a crude instrumental sense, but neither is it independent of it. Rather, beauty arises from the fittingness of parts to ends – from what he calls their "aptitude and subordination." In this respect, his view anticipates later accounts of "purpose-based" or "adherent" beauty, in which aesthetic evaluation depends on an object's relation to a concept of its function or perfection. Yet Berkeley's account remains more deeply theological: the system of ends relative to which beauty is defined is ultimately grounded in divine reason. If beauty consists in relations of fitness to ends, then it cannot be reduced to the feelings of observers. At the same time, Berkeley's view is not a crude objectivism. Beauty is not a fixed property independent of context, since the

24 - R. R. Clewis, "Beauty and Utility in Kant's Aesthetics: The Origins of Adherent Beauty," in «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 56 (2018) n. 2, pp. 305–335, here p. 306.

same object may be beautiful in one setting and not in another. What matters is the relation between the object and a system of ends.

Consider, for instance, a tree. In a forest, the tree contributes to a harmonious environment: it provides shelter for birds, participates in ecological cycles, and stands in proportion to surrounding elements. Yet the same tree, if placed in the middle of a lecture room, would appear out of place. Its beauty depends not on its intrinsic features alone, but on its relation to an appropriate context. This example illustrates a crucial point: beauty is inherently systemic. It arises from the integration of parts within a whole. The notion of proportion presupposes a broader framework in which objects can be evaluated relative to ends. Beauty, therefore, is not a local property, but a feature of relational structure.

The teleological character of this structure raises a further question: what determines the system of ends? Berkeley's answer, I suggest, is theological. The order of nature is not self-explanatory; it reflects the rational activity of a divine mind. Proportion, in this sense, is an expression of divine order, and beauty is the way in which this order becomes intelligible to human cognition.

5. Subordination, Imperfection, and Divine Harmony

We are now in a position to state Berkeley's central claim in its most general form: beauty consists in relations of subordination within a system of ends. Parts are subordinated to wholes; wholes are ordered toward ends. This structure provides the standard for evaluating both natural objects and moral actions. A thing is beautiful when it fits – when it is appropriately related to its function and to the system of which it is a part. This explains Berkeley's emphasis on fittingness and use, as well as his claim that beauty is inherently relational. It also explains why beauty depends on thought: without the recognition of ends, there can be no basis for evaluating proportion.

Yet Berkeley's account goes further. It also addresses a problem that arises for any teleological theory of beauty: the problem of imperfection. If beauty consists in order, how are we to account for apparent disorder?

Berkeley's answer is: "blemishes and defects of nature are the not without their use," because "they make an agreeable sort of variety, and augment the beauty of the rest of the creation, as shades in a picture serve to set off the and more enlightened parts"[25]. Imperfections are not exceptions to order, but components of it. They contribute to the overall harmony of the system, much as contrast contributes to the beauty of a painting. This idea is developed more fully in *Siris:*

25 - Of the Principles of Human Knowledge, Chapter CLII.

> As for the blots and defects which appear in the course of this world, which some have thought to proceed from a fatality or necessity in nature, and others from an evil principle, that same philosopher observes, that it may be the governing reason produceth and ordaineth all those things; and, not intending that all parts should be equally good, maketh some worse than others by design, as all parts in an animal are not eyes: and in a city, comedy, or picture, all ranks, characters, and colours, are not equal or alike; even so excesses, defects, and contrary qualities, conspire to the beauty and harmony of the world[26].

Here Berkeley explicitly adopts a holistic perspective. Beauty cannot be assessed at the level of individual parts; it must be understood in relation to the whole. What appears defective locally may be necessary globally. This view has clear theological implications. It suggests that apparent disorder is compatible with, and even required by, a divinely ordered system. Human judgments of beauty are therefore limited by perspective. What seems imperfect to us may be perfectly ordered within the divine plan.

Beauty, in this sense, reveals not only the structure of the world, but also the limits of our understanding of it. Berkeley's texts suggest that beauty is not merely associated with order, but grounded in a specific kind of ordering – one that can be understood in terms of subordination, fittingness, and thought.

At the most general level, Berkeley's account of beauty is governed by a principle of functional coordination. As Euphranor explains:

> The parts, therefore, in true proportions must be so related, and adjusted to one another, as that they may best conspire to the use and operation of the whole[27].

This passage makes explicit what earlier discussions implied: beauty consists in the coordination of parts relative to a whole. The notion of "conspiring" to a use emphasizes that the relation is not merely structural, but teleological. Parts are not simply arranged; they are arranged *for the sake of an operation.* This allows us to distinguish two dimensions of aesthetic structure.

First, there is a vertical relation between an object and its end. As Berkeley states:

> A thing [is] perfect in its kind when it answers the end for which it was made[28].

An object's beauty depends on how well it fulfills its purpose. This relation establishes a standard of evaluation: the end determines what counts as proper proportion.

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26 - *Siris* 262.

27 - *Alciphron* 3.8.

28 - *Alciphron* 3.8.

Second, there is a horizontal relation among parts within a system. The parts must be "so related, and adjusted to one another" as to contribute to the functioning of the whole. This relation concerns coordination among elements that share a common end.

These two dimensions are inseparable. The suitability of parts to each other presupposes a shared orientation toward an end, and the realization of an end requires the coordination of parts. Together, they form a unified structure in which subordination is the organizing principle: parts are subordinated to wholes, and wholes are ordered toward ends. This framework allows us to understand why beauty is inherently relational. It is not located in isolated features, but in the way those features are integrated within a hierarchy of purposes. Beauty, in this sense, is the perception of ordered subordination.

Berkeley explicitly characterizes beauty in terms of fittingness: "the subordinate relative nature of beauty"[29]. This phrase captures the essence of his view. Beauty is both relative – depending on relations among parts and ends – and subordinate – structured by hierarchical ordering.

The notion of fittingness can be clarified through Berkeley's own examples. To recognize the beauty of an object, we must understand its use: recognizing beauty requires "knowing its use" and "comparing its figure with that use"[30]. This comparison is essential. An object's form is evaluated in light of its function. A chair, for instance, is beautiful not simply because of its shape, but because its shape is appropriate to its use. A door properly installed in a house is beautiful; the same door lying unused is not. The difference lies in its relation to an end. This example reveals that beauty is not a perceptual given, but a relational judgment. It requires the recognition of how an object fits within a system of purposes. Without such recognition, the object's beauty cannot be fully apprehended.

At this point, Berkeley introduces what may be the most philosophically significant element of his account: the role of thought. As he writes:

> without thought there can be no end or design, and without an end there can be no use, and without use there is no aptitude or fitness of proportion, from whence beauty springs[31].

This passage establishes a hierarchy of dependence: beauty depends on proportion; proportion depends on use; use depends on ends; ends depend on thought. The conclusion is that beauty ultimately depends on thought. Without

29 - Alciphron 3.9.

30 - Alciphron 3.8.

31 - Alciphron 3.10.

thought, there would be no ends, and therefore no basis for evaluating proportion or fitness. This emphasis on thought is consistent with Berkeley's broader philosophical commitments. As Stephen Clark (2005) notes, Berkeley repeatedly insists that "intellect and reason are alone the sure guides to truth"[32], even while recognizing the limits of demonstrative knowledge. The same structure appears in his aesthetics. Beauty is not reducible to sensation, but requires the activity of a rational faculty capable of discerning relations of order and purpose. At the same time, this rationalism is not purely secular. The "ends" on which beauty depends cannot be generated by finite minds alone; they presuppose a system of purposes grounded in divine thought. Berkeley's account of beauty thus mirrors his account of knowledge more generally: both involve the apprehension of an order that is not constructed by the human mind, but discovered within a world sustained by a divine intellect.

This claim has two important implications. First, it confirms that beauty is not a purely sensory phenomenon. While perception provides the materials of aesthetic experience, the recognition of beauty requires an intellectual grasp of relations. Beauty is, in this sense, an object of the mind. Second, it points toward a theological foundation. If ends depend on thought, and the system of ends that structures the world is not produced by human minds, then it must ultimately depend on a divine mind. The teleological order that grounds beauty is, therefore, an expression of divine thought. This move transforms Berkeley's aesthetics into a form of theological metaphysics. Beauty is not merely a feature of the world as perceived, but a manifestation of the rational structure imposed by God.

The emphasis on fittingness and thought allows Berkeley to avoid two opposing errors. On the one hand, he rejects formalism, the view that beauty consists in abstract properties such as symmetry or regularity. Such properties are insufficient because they do not take into account the relation between form and function. A perfectly symmetrical object may fail to be beautiful if it is not suited to its purpose. On the other hand, he rejects subjectivism, the view that beauty consists in the pleasure experienced by the observer. Pleasure may accompany the perception of beauty, but it does not constitute it. Without a standard grounded in relations of fittingness, there would be no way to distinguish between true and apparent beauty. By grounding beauty in thought and teleology, Berkeley provides an account that is both objective and intelligible. Beauty is not a matter of arbitrary preference, but of rational judgment.

32 - S.R.L. Clark, *Berkeley on Religion,* in K.P. Winkler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 369-404, here p. 374.

We can now see that the concept of subordination is not merely one element of Berkeley's account, but its unifying principle. This hierarchical structure is what gives beauty its intelligibility. To perceive beauty is to recognize this structure – to see how something fits within a larger system. From a theological perspective, this structure reflects the organization of creation itself. The world is not a collection of independent entities, but a system in which each part is ordered toward the good of the whole. Beauty is the mode under which this order becomes perceptible.

Berkeley's account of beauty is thus neither purely aesthetic nor merely descriptive. It is a theory of ordered relations grounded in thought and structured by subordination. Beauty arises from the fittingness of parts to ends and to wholes, and this fittingness ultimately depends on a system of purposes grounded in divine reason. By making thought essential to beauty, Berkeley transforms aesthetic judgment into a form of rational insight. To judge something beautiful is to understand its place within a hierarchy of ends. In this way, beauty becomes a bridge between perception and metaphysics, linking the experience of the world to its underlying rational structure.

The next section situates this account within a broader philosophical tradition by examining Berkeley's relation to ancient theories of beauty and his engagement with their methodological assumptions.

6. Berkeley, the Ancients, and the Ascent to Beauty

Berkeley's relation to the ancient tradition is further illuminated when placed within the emerging eighteenth-century discourse of the aesthetic. As Szécsényi emphasizes, early modern aesthetic experience was characterized by a renewed attempt to connect "the sensible and the transcendent," such that sensory experience becomes "the indispensable and constitutive framework" for apprehending higher realities[33]. Berkeley's account can be seen as a particularly sophisticated development of this tendency.

For while he begins from sensory experience – natural scenes, ordinary objects, and everyday practices – he treats these not as ends in themselves, but as entry points into a deeper intelligible order. The ascent from sensible beauty to intelligible beauty is thus not a departure from experience, but its fulfillment. In this respect, Berkeley both inherits and transforms the Platonic tradition: beauty remains a guide to intelligibility, but its object is no longer a transcendent Form, but the structured order of a divinely created world.

33 - E. Szécsényi, "The Aesthetics of the Invisible," cit., p. 732.

The account of beauty developed thus far – centered on proportion, order, subordination, and thought – places Berkeley within a broader philosophical tradition that extends back to ancient Greek philosophy. While Berkeley does not explicitly present himself as a systematic inheritor of this tradition, *Alciphron* contains clear indications that his view is both informed by and responsive to it. By examining these connections, we can better understand both the originality and the limits of Berkeley's position.

In ancient theories of beauty, Aristotelian τὸ καλόν is ἐπαινετόν (laudable), and Platonic τὸ καλόν is ἡδύ (pleasant) or ὠφέλιμον (profitable), and that beauty is perceived by "a reasonable mind" in relation to "true interest"[34]. This discussion situates Berkeley within a long-standing debate concerning the nature of beauty. In Aristotle, the beautiful is closely tied to what is worthy of praise, and thus to ethical evaluation. In Plato, it is associated with pleasure and benefit, but also with a higher intelligible order that transcends immediate perception. Both traditions agree, however, that beauty is not merely sensory, but involves a relation to reason and to value. Berkeley's position both appropriates and transforms these views. Like the ancients, he rejects the idea that beauty is purely subjective. Beauty is not simply what pleases, but what is worthy of rational approval. Yet he also recognizes a limitation in the ancient accounts. As Euphranor notes, the criteria of pleasure, profit, or praise are insufficient because they can conflict: different goods may be "canceled out" by greater goods, and thus cannot provide a stable foundation for judgment.

This problem leads Berkeley to a more robust conception of beauty, grounded not in isolated criteria but in the systemic relation of parts to ends. What ultimately matters is not whether something is pleasant or useful in a local sense, but whether it fits within the overall structure of a divinely ordered world. In this respect, Berkeley radicalizes the ancient insight that beauty is intelligible, by embedding it within a comprehensive teleological framework.

Berkeley's engagement with the ancients is not limited to substantive claims about beauty; it also extends to method. Euphranor explicitly expresses a preference for proceeding from particular cases rather than abstract generalities: he prefers particulars to generalities in discussing philosophical matters[35]. This methodological commitment is reflected throughout Berkeley's discussions of beauty. Rather than beginning with a definition, he invites us to consider concrete examples: landscapes, natural scenes, objects in use. These examples are not illustrative but constitutive of the argument. It is through them that we come to recognize the relations of

34 - *Alciphron* 3.4.

35 - *Alciphron* 3.8.

proportion and order that define beauty. This approach parallels Aristotle's method in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* where ethical concepts are clarified through reflection on particular cases, and Plato's use of examples in dialogues such as the *Symposium.* Berkeley thus situates himself within a tradition that treats philosophical understanding as emerging from engagement with concrete phenomena.

At the same time, Berkeley departs from the ancients by emphasizing the systemic integration of these particulars. The examples he offers – trees in forests, elements in nature, parts of a whole – are not isolated instances, but components of a larger structure. The movement from particular to general is therefore not merely inductive, but systemic: it reveals an underlying order that connects diverse phenomena.

Berkeley's engagement with Platonic themes is most evident in his reference to a "scale or ladder" by which we ascend to higher forms of beauty: a "scale or ladder" by which we "ascend to moral and intelligible beauty"[36] beginning from sensory experiences such as "the smell of a rose, or the taste of an apple"[37]. This passage unmistakably echoes Plato's *Symposium*, where the ascent from physical beauty to the contemplation of the Form of Beauty is described as a progression from particular instances to universal intelligibility. Berkeley appropriates this structure but reinterprets it within his own framework.

For Berkeley, the ascent is not from illusion to reality, but from partial to more complete apprehension of order. Sensory experiences provide the starting point, but they do not exhaust the content of beauty. Through reflection, we come to recognize the relations that underlie these experiences – relations of proportion, fitness, and subordination. The endpoint of this ascent is not an abstract Form, but the intelligible structure of the world as a whole. Beauty, at its highest level, is the perception of this structure. It is the recognition that the diversity of phenomena is unified by a system of relations grounded in divine reason.

By integrating these elements, Berkeley both continues and transforms the ancient tradition. Like Plato, he treats beauty as a guide to intelligibility. Like Aristotle, he emphasizes the role of rational judgment in aesthetic evaluation. But he departs from both by situating beauty within a theologically grounded system of teleological relations.

This transformation has two key features. First, Berkeley rejects the idea that beauty can be understood independently of function. While ancient accounts often emphasize proportion or harmony in abstract terms, Berkeley insists that these

36 - Alciphron 3.8.

37 - Alciphron 3.8.

must be understood relative to ends. Beauty is not merely formal order, but functional order. Second, Berkeley embeds this functional order within a comprehensive system governed by divine reason. The hierarchy of ends that structures beauty is not self-grounding; it reflects the purposes of a divine mind. In this respect, Berkeley's account is more explicitly theological than its ancient predecessors.

Berkeley's engagement with the ancient tradition reveals both continuity and innovation. By drawing on Platonic and Aristotelian insights, he situates his account of beauty within a long-standing philosophical framework. Yet by emphasizing teleology, subordination, and divine order, he transforms this framework into a distinctly early modern – and deeply theological – theory. Beauty, on this view, is not merely an object of perception or contemplation. It is a pathway to understanding the structure of reality itself. Through the ascent from sensory particulars to intelligible relations, we come to apprehend a world ordered by divine reason.

7. Conclusion

Berkeley's remarks on beauty, read in isolation, can appear occasional, rhetorical, or subordinate to larger concerns. Read together, however, they disclose a philosophically coherent orientation, one that gains in systematic appearance when read across the corpus as a whole. Beauty is not, for Berkeley, a peripheral topic appended to his metaphysics or moral theory. It is a privileged site at which those theories become visible. The central claim of this paper has been that Berkeley understands beauty as the intelligible manifestation of divine order: beauty is the mode under which finite minds apprehend the rational, teleological, and hierarchical structure of creation.

This conclusion follows from the convergence of several lines of argument. First, Berkeley's distinction between proper beauty and moral beauty does not divide two fundamentally different kinds of phenomenon. It identifies two domains in which the same basic structure is realized: in both cases, beauty consists in proportion, order, and fittingness within a system. Berkeley's aesthetics is therefore unified at a deeper level than the distinction between natural and moral beauty might initially suggest.

Second, this unity depends on Berkeley's qualified rejection of the moral sense theory. Alciphron's appeal to an interior sense, to "first thoughts and natural notions," to disinterestedness, and to a certain je ne sais quoi threatens to collapse beauty into mere feeling. Berkeley's resistance to this view reflects a more basic commitment: beauty must be capable of withstanding rational scrutiny. Just as truth survives the "strictest survey", so too does beauty. What this means,

importantly, is that Berkeley's disagreement with the moral sense tradition is not primarily one about faculty psychology – about which inner organ perceives beauty – but about the very nature of the aesthetic object. For Berkeley, the object of aesthetic judgment is not a quale of pleasurable feeling but a structure of relations, and it is that structure which makes the distinction between true and apparent beauty possible.

Third, the objective content of beauty is teleological. Berkeley's most explicit statements insist that there is no beauty without proportion, and that true proportion must always be assessed relative to some use or end. Beauty is therefore not a merely formal matter of symmetry or balance abstracted from function. Nor is it a fixed intrinsic property inhering in individual things regardless of context. It is relational through and through. A thing is beautiful insofar as it answers the end for which it was made and insofar as its parts are adjusted so as to conspire to the use and operation of the whole. This is why Berkeley's examples are so philosophically important. A tree in a forest, a door in a house, the elements within the visible world, and the various ranks and characters within a larger totality all illustrate the same point: beauty is not simply in the object, but in the object's fittingness within an ordered arrangement.

This brings us to the fourth and deepest feature of Berkeley's account: beauty is structured by subordination. The language of subordination is not ornamental in Berkeley; it names the basic form of intelligible order. Parts are subordinated to wholes; wholes are ordered toward ends; ends themselves depend upon thought. Once this sequence is made explicit, the metaphysical depth of Berkeley's aesthetics comes into view. Beauty presupposes proportion, proportion presupposes use, use presupposes end, and end presupposes mind. The upshot is that beauty is ultimately rooted in thought. Since the relevant system of ends is not constituted by human thought, it must finally depend upon divine thought. Beauty is thus not merely perceived by minds; it is grounded in the prior rationality of a world ordered by God.

From this perspective, Berkeley's descriptions of natural beauty take on their full significance. The opening scenes of the *Three Dialogues and Alciphron* are not simply literary flourishes. They are philosophical demonstrations of a world whose beauty emerges from "mutual aid and support," from "connexion and correspondence of parts," and from the way things are suited both to their own ends and to the whole. Natural beauty thus reveals the world not as an aggregate of independent items, but as a coordinated system. Because this coordination is not directly given in sensation, beauty must be "an object, not of the eye, but of the mind." Aesthetic experience is therefore cognitive as well as affective. It is a way of grasping the order that underlies the sensible world.

The same structure reappears, with an important modification, in the moral domain. Here the system is no longer one merely contemplated, but one in which rational agents must participate. Moral beauty lies in the rule-governed coordination of actions within "the system of rational beings." Its opposite is chaos, violence, and the breakdown of order. Berkeley's rehabilitation of interest is crucial here. What Alciphron dismisses as incompatible with virtue Berkeley reinterprets through reason and judgment. To balance lower and higher pleasures, present losses and future gains, is not to debase virtue, but to understand the hierarchy of goods in which beautiful action consists. Moral beauty is therefore not a spontaneous feeling of approval, but rational participation in the teleological order of creation.

Berkeley's treatment of imperfection confirms the same point from another angle. If beauty consisted only in local smoothness, symmetry, or immediate pleasure, then blemishes, defects, and contrary qualities would count straightforwardly against it. But Berkeley insists that such features may contribute to the beauty of the whole, just as shades heighten the force of light in a picture. This holistic view reveals both the strength and the modesty of human aesthetic judgment. We can genuinely perceive order, but only partially. We can recognize beauty, but not from the standpoint of the whole. What appears disordered to us may have its place in a larger harmony whose full rationale is visible only to the divine mind. In this respect, Berkeley's aesthetics approaches a theodicy of beauty: local imperfection need not compromise universal order, and may indeed be required by it.

Finally, Berkeley's engagement with Plato and Aristotle helps clarify the broader philosophical significance of this view. Like the ancients, he treats beauty as something accessible to a reasonable mind and as bound up with value rather than mere sensation. Yet he transforms that inheritance by giving beauty an explicitly teleological and theological foundation. The ascent from sensible particulars to intelligible beauty is, for Berkeley, not an escape from the world, but a deepened apprehension of the world as a divinely ordered whole. Beauty becomes a path to metaphysical insight, because it discloses the structure of reality itself.

Berkeley's theory of beauty, then, deserves to be understood as an integral part of his philosophy rather than an incidental aside. It gathers together themes that often appear separately in Berkeley scholarship: divine reason, the intelligibility of nature, the normativity of moral order, the relational character of qualities, and the cognitive role of perception. Beauty is the point at which these themes converge. To perceive beauty is to perceive more than pleasing surfaces; it is to discern the fittingness of things within a hierarchy of ends. To judge beauty truly is to recognize

that hierarchy as rational. And to recognize it as rational is already to glimpse the divine order that grounds it.

This account carries implications that extend beyond the interpretation of Berkeley himself. If beauty is conceived as the mode in which intelligible order becomes perceptible, then aesthetic experience is not a secondary or merely hedonic phenomenon – something that might be eliminated from a fully rational account of the world – but a genuine epistemic achievement. It reveals what argument and analysis can only approximate: the felt intelligibility of a structured whole. This may help explain why Berkeley so frequently begins his philosophical dialogues with aesthetic openings rather than definitions. The experience of beauty, for Berkeley, is not an ornament to philosophical inquiry but its natural threshold – the point at which finite minds first encounter, however partially, the order they will later seek to understand.

If this reading is right, then Berkeley offers more than an eighteenth-century contribution to aesthetic theory. He offers a philosophical account of how order becomes perceptible to finite minds. Beauty is not an embellishment added to an otherwise intelligible world. It is the sensible-intelligible form in which the world's intelligibility appears. In that sense, Berkeley's aesthetics is inseparable from his theology: beauty is the appearance of divine order to creatures whose understanding is finite, yet genuinely capable of truth.

AURORA YU
Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Diego
aurorayu@alumni.unc.edu