

Review: Aiste Celkyte, The Stoic Theory of Beauty

REVIEWED BOOK

Celkyte, Aiste. 2020. *The Stoic Theory of Beauty*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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— Aesthetics is not a frequently investigated aspect of Stoic philosophy. One might even ask whether it makes sense to speak of a theory of aesthetics in connection with the Stoics at all, given that they treated beauty as something belonging to the category of indifferent things, and surviving fragments indicate they paid it little attention. Nevertheless, in her book *The Stoic Theory of Beauty* Aiste Celkyte tries to show that the Stoics did value beauty. This researcher, who works at Leiden University, tends to focus on Hellenistic philosophy, aesthetics, and epistemology in antiquity and on Galenic medicine.

Celkyte's aim is not only to show that the Stoics considered beauty and other aesthetic categories but, on the basis of available sources, also to reconstruct

a concrete theory of aesthetics that they held. At the outset, it should be noted that this is a difficult task, because any research on early Stoicism (which is the author's main focus) must deal with the fragmentary nature of what has survived of the authentic texts. It is therefore necessary also to rely on secondary texts, i.e. reports coming from later ancient authors who may have, consciously or unwittingly, interpreted the thoughts of the Stoics through the prism of various kinds of bias. Moreover, one must bear in mind that, in the course of the five centuries of its development, Stoic philosophy evolved significantly. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak about any sort of unified Stoic teaching.

The author deals with this challenge by limiting the subject of investigation

to the aesthetic ideas of Chrysippus of Soli, a representative of the old Stoa and the third head of the Stoic school. She has good reasons for choosing this particular thinker: Chrysippus was active in all areas of philosophy (which are naturally closely related in Stoicism) and, in comparison to other early Stoics, we have the greatest number of reports about his thoughts. Even so, one cannot reconstruct a comprehensive aesthetic theory based only on thoughts ascribed to Chrysippus, which is why the author often had to turn to the texts of Roman Stoics or texts that report on Stoic views in general. Given that the textual material used does not contradict Chrysippus' views and even seems to complement them (which is why one may surmise it may have been based on his views), this approach to reconstructing Chrysippus' views should be considered legitimate.

Celkyte's work was further complicated by the fact that the Stoics did not present their views on beauty as a whole (or, if they did, such texts did not survive). Their views are instead scattered throughout the corpus of their texts. To assemble these fragments into something one could call a theory of aesthetics, the author thus first had to deal with various areas of Stoic philosophy where terms she views as relevant to aesthetics appear. The book therefore looks into various metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and cosmological conceptions and tries to find in each of these areas clues to the nature of the Stoic conception of beauty.

After careful consideration of all the aspects of Stoic ethics, physics, and logic

which are viewed as relevant (although one could naturally debate which subjects should be included and which should be considered less important or even irrelevant), at the end of her book the author manages to present an almost surprisingly coherent aesthetic conception. Attentive readers can, however, already anticipate where the author is heading and which elements of Stoic philosophy will ultimately be included in the definition of beauty while they are reading the individual chapters. To wit, in each of Chapters 2 to 5 Celkyte investigates the issue of aesthetics in the context of one particular area of Stoic philosophy (beauty as a preferred indifferent in Chapter 2, the relation between beauty and goodness in Chapter 3, the relation between beauty and wisdom in Chapter 4, and beauty as a quality of the cosmos in Chapter 5). By linking all these aspects of beauty, Celkyte eventually arrives at a comprehensive definition of beauty which is presented in Chapter 6.

Celkyte calls the conception of beauty which gradually emerges from her investigations a functional composition theory because in her view the Stoic relationship to beauty has two crucial aspects: functionality and composition. In order for a thing to be called beautiful, the author claims, it must have a particular internal composition, structure, or proportionality. In other words, for the Stoics order is an essential precondition of beauty, while disorder or incongruence is not beautiful. But regarding the question of whether structure or proportionality is a sufficient

precondition, Celkyte's answer is a clear negative.

Especially in the area of ethics it is clear that something else must be present. Evil deeds may be internally well-structured, they may be in harmony with themselves, but even so, Celkyte notes, the Stoics would not call them beautiful. After all, in Stoic thought beauty is linked to goodness, as demonstrated in Chapter 3 of this monograph. A second essential precondition that must be met for a thing to be beautiful is its functionality, or rather functionality in relation to the goal of the thing in question. It is thus a teleological category: it characterises the extent to which the structure of a thing enables it to meet the goal for which it was created. Achievement of a goal as such does not make a thing beautiful. We learn that beauty is present only in things which are excellent, in other words, those that achieve their goal exceptionally well. Celkyte illustrates this concept using the example of a shield (p. 155): its goal or purpose is to protect a soldier in battle and since a bronze shield can protect its bearer better than a wooden one, it is more functional – and therefore excellent. Things which are excellent can be called beautiful, and that is why a bronze shield is more beautiful than a wooden one.

The last chapter, Chapter 7, is dedicated to situating the functional composition theory within a broader context of thoughts on beauty in antiquity. Celkyte arrives at two crucial findings: first of all, no Presocratic thinker or philosopher of the Classical Era formulated this theory

of beauty: the functional composition theory is therefore an original achievement; secondly, this theory had no adherents in philosophy aside from the Stoics themselves, but it was influential in the rhetorical and medical tradition. Celkyte closes this chapter by stating her conviction that aesthetics was part of Stoic philosophy and Stoicism therefore has a place in the history of aesthetics.

Celkyte's attempt to reconstruct a Stoic theory of beauty also has some limitations. Although the author, on the basis of meticulous research, arrived at a formulation of a functional composition theory of beauty and this theory seems consistent both internally and with what we know about Stoic philosophy, one cannot claim that the Stoics actually created this theory and intentionally upheld it. While there is no evidence to the contrary, we also have no evidence in support of such a claim. The author is aware of this predicament, which is also why she presents the functional composition theory of beauty merely as a conception of beauty that finds support in the surviving fragments and testimonies and is compatible with Stoic philosophy in general.

Despite this limitation, Celkyte has undoubtedly managed to grasp the subject of beauty in Stoic philosophy in a comprehensive manner. In doing so, she supplements the works of her predecessors who dealt with individual partial aspects of Stoic aesthetics or literary theory. Celkyte not only investigates various aspects of beauty and other aesthetic categories in Stoic texts but also sets them in the context of Stoic

physics, logic, and ethics. I believe that, at the very least, she has managed to demonstrate that aesthetic considerations were part of the philosophy of the ancient Stoics, even if a somewhat

marginal one. At the same time, with her courageous enterprise Aiste Celkyte opens up discussion of a subject that so far has received only a limited amount of attention from scholars.