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## POETRY, PLATO, AND THE PROBLEM OF BEAUTY

Not all poems are beautiful. Some of the greatest poems focus on life's fiercest days. The idea that poems are pretty, or are supposed to be pretty, is false; poets probe into every aspect of existence, just as painters and composers do. There are paintings, concertos, and poems that are profoundly tragic—as there should be, because tragedy is part of the experience of life, and is therefore a meaningful subject of all art. To confine poets or other artists only to beautiful subjects would be an artistic absurdity, and artists would not tolerate it.

Having said that, we must also acknowledge that many poems are beautiful, and that beauty itself is the subject of some of the greatest poems.

Like tragedy, beauty is an important part of life. Many experiences that make life worth living are beautiful, and our sense of beauty is what motivates many intense human efforts. In our appearances, in our homes, in our possessions, in the things we go to see and hear, beauty is a powerful lure. Because of beauty, we are drawn to the lake, to the mountains, to the shore; we see beauty in our children's faces, in a sunset, in a tree. We also hear beauty in the wind, in Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto*, and in voices. Intellectually, we are moved by the beauty of clear concepts, of mathematics, of many forms of truth. Some things are both beautiful and sad.

We are so involved with the beautiful that we speak the word *beauty* without a thought, as an obvious concept, something that everyone knows.

And yet, do we know? Do we know what beauty is? Can we state, clearly, the difference between something that is beautiful and something that is not beautiful? If we have a beautiful landscape, a beautiful song, a beautiful dance, and a beautiful mathematical equation, what is the thing that they all share? What do they have in common that makes us call all of them *beautiful*?