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Preface

My favorite passage from Bernard Bolzano's writings in aesthetics appears toward the end of the essay on the arts, where he has taken up works that conjoin music with visual art. He remarks, "When children and young people hear cheerful music, do they not feel almost compelled to make a dancing movement and thus to create a visual work of art that changes as we watch? In this case, the musical artwork calls forth the visual artwork without further effort" (§38). That a child, moving to the groove, is the example that comes first to Bolzano's mind beautifully captures the spirit of his work, touching on why he ought to be on everyone's aesthetics must-read list.

Bolzano was born in 1781. His father had moved at an early age from Italy to Prague, where he was an art dealer. The household was severe: "the goddess of affection was banished forever . . . and in her place there ruled with an iron rod cold, commercial worry for the future and the strict observance of old house rules" (quoted in Rusnock and Šebestík 2019: 23). His parents set examples of "indefatigable" work, and Bolzano recalled, with a hint of regret, how he had to learn from second-hand descriptions what it was like to take a break. The work ethic was to pay dividends—Bolzano's collected writings now run to a hundred volumes—and he was an industrious student at Charles University in Prague. Enrolled in philosophy, he was won over by a reading of Abraham Kästner's *Foundations of Mathematics* to the overlap between mathematics and philosophy. He admired that Kästner took the trouble to prove what is passed over as already familiar: "he attempted to make clear to the reader the reasons upon which his judgment rested—this I liked the best of all" (quoted in Rusnock and Šebestík 2019: 27–28). It was to be a model for his own writing.

Yet Bolzano never wished for the life of the scholar engaged in abstruse meditations for their own sake. Despite his father's urging him to carry on the family business, he grappled from an early age with how

he might best serve the common good. For a person of his background, the priesthood was an appealing option, because the church provided education, medical care, and shelter for the indigent and infirm, performing functions of what we would now call an NGO. Although he was skeptical about the creed and spoke out against church abuse of power, Bolzano settled upon the view that religious belief is justified pragmatically. He would also have been aware that members of the clergy had more freedom of expression than the laity, albeit not much, by absolute measures, in the Habsburg Empire under Franz I.

Having been ordained, Bolzano was appointed professor of religion in 1805 and charged with delivering sermons and lectures on the "principles of Christian morality" to all undergraduates at Charles University. The newly created "Catechist" chair was part of a campaign on the part of Franz's reactionary administration to roll back the social reforms that had been introduced by Joseph II in the second half of the eighteenth century. The student body resented church and state control of the curriculum and attended Bolzano's inaugural lecture intending to drown him out with desk thumping, a form of applause (deplatforming is not a new thing). However, Bolzano was firmly on the side of building upon Joseph II's social reforms, and he had the courage to use what latitude he had to speak freely. He ended up charming his audience (Lapointe 2011: 2). Surviving the university's attempt to fire him a few months later, he continued to press for social reform as what we would now call a "politically engaged public intellectual," winning large audiences drawn from both town and gown.

Two features of Bolzano's reform agenda deserve attention.

For a start, Bolzano did not concoct abstract, utopian, or revolutionary schemes. Quite apart from the steady state injustice of social arrangements in early modern Europe, violent conflict laid much of the continent to waste with grim regularity throughout Bolzano's lifetime. He wrote that

> The frequent wars conducted with unprecedented brutality that swept over Europe from one end to the other have visited on us innumerable evils of all kinds. For centuries there have not been as many unfortunates who were robbed of their property, of their limbs, who crawl about gruesomely mutilated; there have not been as many mothers and

> fathers who mourn a beloved son who was to be their support in old age; or children who cry for their father and supporter. (quoted in Rusnock and Šebestík 2019: 24)

Violent revolution only made the poor worse off, and Bolzano was acutely aware of the impact on his own upbringing of the pervasive and justified fear of impending ruin that afflicted middle-class families. As a result, the reforms he pushed were targeted and incremental, exactly the ones that were implemented over the next two centuries (see Bolzano 2007). He championed a social safety net: schooling for all children, including health and sex education; free access to university, public libraries, and museums; universal health care; and parks with hiking trails. He also championed political rights: the vote for women and measures to protect Bohemia's ethnic and linguistic diversity. In his vision of social reform, Bolzano is closer to figures such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill than to his German contemporaries.

Added to this, Bolzano is an enlightenment reformer, with a twist. Social progress is fueled by knowledge and a respect for the facts. He recommended

> the appropriate development of the power of judgment in each individual citizen, as well as a certain stock of useful knowledge, especially healthy, correct concepts of everything having to do with virtue and happiness, attention directed toward the common best, direction and instruction in correctly judging whether something is beneficial or harmful for the common best, knowledge of the rights a people possess, and the ability to tell the difference between wise and unwise measures. (quoted in Rusnock and Šebestík 2019: 127)

The twist is that Bolzano sees enlightenment as more than what it takes to think for oneself; enlightenment is a social project. In an Easter sermon on enlightenment, he advises that we are "never to look upon the wisdom of other people as a threat" (Bolzano 2007: 58). Indeed, as Paul Rusnock and Jan Šebestík explain, he thought that the most important truths "enjoin various forms of cooperation among the members of a society, and are thus impotent unless they are shared" (2019: 128).

By 1818, the Austrian authorities had had enough. Bolzano was denounced as "the chief pseudo-prophet of our age" (quoted in Rusnock and Šebestík 2019: xxxii), and the following year he was suspended from teaching and publishing, pending an investigation for heresy. He was eventually acquitted, but the gag order remained in place for some time. Supported by his friend Anna Hoffman and her husband, he used the newfound time to write his most important work, including the aesthetics, completed just before his death in 1848.

The standard story of Bolzano's reception makes a pair of complementary moves.

Step one stresses how much Bolzano goes against the grain of nineteenth-century German-language philosophy. He was himself aware of his being out of place. He regarded Immanuel Kant as having derailed philosophy by replacing thinking about the world with thinking about thought about the world, and much of his own work endeavors to undo this error. A page-long footnote to the essay on beauty contains an exasperated tirade against "speculation" in G. W. F. Hegel, and in the essay on the arts he painfully admits that he writes "much too straightforwardly to satisfy the taste *of our time*" (§6). On every front—substantive, methodological, and stylistic—he is out of step with post-Kantian German philosophy (see the Appendix below). His work was pretty much forgotten, but because of his social advocacy, he was soon made and still remains a Czech hero.

Step two tells the story of his gradual discovery as a precursor to contemporary analytic philosophy. Alexius Meinong and Edmund Husserl absorb his work, Alfred Tarski and W. V. O. Quine credit his accounts of logical consequence and logical truth, and scholars give him the nod for anticipating key ideas in Gottlob Frege, including the anti-psychologism and the sense-reference distinction (e.g., Dummett 1991: vii). Indeed, Bolzano's influence on Husserl is arguably an early bridge between analytic philosophy and phenomenology (Lapointe 2011: ch. 11).

As accurate and exciting as this narrative may be, Bolzano's work is enriched by reading it in light of his commitment to social betterment, especially as that commitment is refracted by his modesty, empathy, power of observation, and trust in communicability as a basis for shared understanding. As a case in point, Bolzano's magnum opus,

the *Theory of Science* (2014[1837]), closes with a meticulous discussion of how to communicate what we know so as to maximize its social benefits. (Alas, science still struggles to shape public policy.) Given his thoughtful guidance on how to organize writing and how to use language and illustrations to convey ideas, Bolzano's late interest in aesthetics is no surprise.

So, even as the standard story applies to Bolzano's aesthetics, we should also read him for his vision of aesthetic activity as an engine of social progress.

Bolzano is not well known among philosophers working in aesthetics. In 1981, Peter McCormick penned the first study of the beauty essay in English, making a point of Bolzano's "extraordinarily persistent concern for conceptual clarity, argumentative thoroughness, and systematic development" (1981: 107). In her 2006 survey of Austrian aesthetics, Maria Reicher dubbed Bolzano a "forerunner of analytic aesthetics" (2006: 294). Yet the beauty essay did not appear in English until 2015, and the essay on the arts is translated for the first time here (French translations of both appeared in 2017). Paisley Livingston's 2014, 2015, and 2016 articles carefully step through the arguments and supply excellent conceptual background. Bolzano scholars have taken notice: Rusnock and Šebestík's book, *Bolzano, His Life and Work,* concludes with a chapter on the aesthetics, reviewing some short, early writings and providing a comprehensive summary of the second, historical half of the beauty essay, not translated here (2019: 570–78). Nevertheless, there is no entry on Bolzano among the 815 articles that comprise the second edition of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Kelley 2014), and he is not once mentioned in Paul Guyer's (2014) monumental, three-volume *History of Modern Aesthetics*.

In his concerns and in the styles of reasoning he brings to bear on those concerns, Bolzano is far closer to the mainstream of contemporary aesthetics than any philosopher of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, equaling Johann Gottfried Herder, especially as interpreted by Rachel Zuckert (2019). In writing about beauty and the arts, he eschews grandiose schemes, takes care not to dwell on outlier cases, and always hews close to the empirical reality of human action and cognition. Beauty and the arts are sites of engagement for everyone, from the dancing child to the artist who composed the music she

dances to. Seeing this, Bolzano sets out to illuminate what it is to be beautiful and what it is for any activity to aim at the beautiful. The form of his theories is immediately familiar to us now, and their content is largely revealed in the arguments he gives. These he sets out more explicitly than is often achieved even today, ordering them in his exposition according to their form—arguments from extensional adequacy, inferences to the best explanation, and tenability arguments all do their part.

Livingston correctly points out that Bolzano anticipates the processing fluency theory of beauty proposed by the psychologist Rolf Reber and his collaborators (Livingston 2014: 281–82; e.g., Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). In general, Bolzano would have found himself at home in the atmosphere of cognitivism and openness to psychology that has pervaded mainstream aesthetics since the 1960s. More particularly, he anticipates Mohan Matthen (2020) on aesthetic culture, Robert Hopkins (1998) on depiction, and Lopes (2014) on art media.

That Bolzano might resonate for us now is no small matter. The history of analytic aesthetics is dominated by writing on Kant and, to a lesser extent, David Hume. Both influenced subsequent thinking, and both have their partisans nowadays, but the views of neither appeal to your average philosopher working in the field. We badly need to excavate alternatives to the tradition of Hume and Kant. The dig is under way (e.g., Baumgartner and Pasquerella 2006, Copenhaver 2015, Lopes 2019, Zuckert 2019, Matherne 2020, Buchenau 2021, Whiting 2022). Bolzano is the kind of find who ought to motivate more exploration. Influence is not everything, and we should not let his having been overlooked be a reason to leave Bolzano on ice.

Above all, Bolzano has something new to tell us about aesthetics. To fully appreciate his message, we should look out for the role that beauty and the arts can play in the long struggle for a better future for us all. A key to social reform, for Bolzano, is learning, especially shared learning, and it turns out that learning is more intimately tied to beauty and the arts than appears at first.

Consider Bolzano's dancing child one last time. She does not merely dance along with the music. Her dancing along with the music constitutes, for Bolzano, a work of visual art—a work of the kind that

a theory of visual art had better shed light on. We must make sense of her as an artist alongside the artist who composed the music she dances to. The difference between them is just the obvious one, a difference in learning. As Bolzano will explain, beauty and the arts are symptoms of learning. A society where there is social improvement through enlightenment is one where beauty and the arts will thrive.

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