Beauty and the Good

Recovering the Classical Tradition from Plato to Duns Scotus

Edited by Alice M. Ramos
Beauty and the Good
Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy

General Editor: John C. McCarthy

Volume 62
Beauty and the Good

Recovering the Classical Tradition
from Plato to Duns Scotus

Edited by Alice M. Ramos

The Catholic University of America Press
Washington, D.C.
Contents

Acknowledgments vii
Abbreviations ix

Alice M. Ramos Introduction 1

1. D. C. Schindler Disclosing Beauty: On Order and Disorder in Plato’s Symposium 19

2. Eric D. Perl “All Men by Nature Desire to Know”: The Classical Background of Aquinas on Beauty and Truth 49

3. Michael Pakaluk The Obviousness of the Kalon in Aristotle’s Ethics 72

4. Mark K. Spencer Beauty and the Intellectual Virtues in Aristotle 93


6. Mary Beth Ingham The Light of Pure Character: Honestum, Decorum, and the Stoic Sage 136

7. Paige E. Hochschild Beauty as Form in Augustine’s De vera religione: The Implications of Moral Pedagogy for a Theology of History 160

8. Brendan Thomas Sammon Beauty and the Good in Dionysius the Areopagite 181

10. Martin J. Tracey  Beauty, Pleasure, and Happiness in Albert the Great’s *Super Ethica commentum et quaestiones*  236

11. Christopher M. Cullen, SJ  Bonaventure’s Aesthetic Imperative: *Pulcherrimum Carmen*  251

12. Mark McInroy  Manifesting Being: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Bonaventure and the Transcendental Status of Beauty  269

13. Daniel D. De Haan  Beauty and Aesthetic Perception in Thomas Aquinas  288


15. Alice M. Ramos  Beauty and the Real: Purifying Our Vision and Our Loves  347

Bibliography  371
Contributors  395
Index of Names  399
Subject Index  405
Acknowledgments

The work on this volume was initiated in 2015, but it has taken some time to bring it to completion. I am first of all indebted to the contributors for accepting the invitation to participate in this project on beauty and the good. Once I had a requisite number of contributors composed of senior and junior scholars, I put together a proposal to the Catholic University of America Press, which readily accepted it and issued a formal invitation. I am grateful to John Martino, acquisitions editor, for facilitating the initial steps of the submission process and for his encouragement, and also to Theresa Walker, managing editor, at CUA Press.

In order to produce a coherent volume, we met to discuss our essays in a workshop that was made possible by Boyd T. Coolman and was held at the Connors Center of Boston College, an idyllic place for philosophical and theological reflection on our topic. I am especially grateful to him and to all who attended the workshop for their gifts of time and talent. The two contributors who could not attend, being many miles away in Europe, made Skype and video presentations, which attested to their commitment to the project.

The inspiration for this project came after an invitation to present a lecture at the New York University Catholic Center in the series “The Art of the Beautiful,” sponsored by the Catholic Artists Society and the Thomistic Institute. From the questions posed after the lecture, I realized that the relation between beauty and the good is a topic that many people—not only philosophers and artists—find of great interest and that the topic seen from a Platonic and Thomistic perspective has contemporary relevance. The lecture, which appeared on the Catholic Artists Society website, was considerably revised so as to include it in this volume.

In addition, my favorably reviewed book Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective (The Catholic
University of America Press, 2012) dealt in part with the connection between the transcendentals and morality (the former providing the metaphysical basis for the latter), so the topic of the present volume also has its origin in this earlier work. After the publication of Dynamic Transcendentals, I wrote an article in Spanish on the transcendentals for inclusion in the online encyclopedia Philosophica. Although this article concentrates on the transcendentals in Aquinas, it begins with some of the sources of this doctrine—Aristotle, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Islamic philosophy—and also provides a brief treatment of the transcendentals in Neo-scholasticism and in modern philosophy. My idea therefore for a historical treatment of beauty and the good also had its source in this article for Philosophica.

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to work on the transcendentals—a topic well worth the expenditure of time and effort—and to all those who have provided moral support for the undertaking of this project. The two anonymous reviewers of the essays herein provided additional incentive for the completion of this project with their perspicacious comments and suggestions. I am especially appreciative of the editorial assistance I received from David L. Augustine, a Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology at the Catholic University of America, whose help was invaluable in finely correcting the manuscript and in preparing the index. I am also indebted to Clare Jensen, copy editor, for her meticulous work and many fine suggestions. I am grateful as well for discussions with students in aesthetics and ethics classes on the topic of this present volume. Finally, I am most appreciative to all the contributors to this project, who thought it a worthwhile endeavor and thus afforded encouragement along the way, and who gave so generously of their time and scholarship to make this volume possible. To them, in sincere and grateful friendship, I dedicate this volume.
Abbreviations

Arrha Hugh of St. Victor, De arrha animae
Conf. Augustine, Confessions
DA Aristotle, De anima
DN Dionysius the Areopagite, On the Divine Names
DV Thomas Aquinas, Quaestiones disputatae de veritate
EE Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics
GL Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord
In De anima Thomas Aquinas, Sententia libri de anima
In Div. Nom. Thomas Aquinas, In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio
In Ethic. Thomas Aquinas, Sententia libri Ethicorum
In Meta. Thomas Aquinas, In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio
In Sent. Bonaventure, Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi
Lament. Hugh of St. Victor, Adnotatiunculae elucidatoriae in threnos Jeremiae
Met. Aristotle, Metaphysica
NE Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
PA Aristotle, Parts of Animals
Phys. Aristotle, Physica
Poetics Aristotle, Ars Poetica
Pol. Aristotle, Politica
Sacr. Hugh of St. Victor, De sacramentis
ST Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae
Sym. Plato, Symposium
Vera rel. Augustine, De vera religione
Beauty and the Good
Introduction

In the last twenty years or more, there has been a growing interest among philosophers in the transcendentals and especially in beauty, as evidenced by Jan Aertsen’s magisterial work entitled *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas*. The interest is not, however, confined to medieval thought, as scholars working in ancient philosophy are also probing the meaning of Aristotle’s *kalon*, which appears so frequently in his ethical works, and are focusing as well on that wondrous topic of beauty and love in Plato’s dialogues. In addition, those engaged in modern and contemporary philosophy are producing studies on beauty and its relationship to the good.

However, the topic of beauty is receiving attention not only in philosophy but in other disciplines as well—in theology to name but one.


3. See *The Beautiful and the Good*, edited by Robert Fudge, in *Essays in Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (January 2016), published online by Pacific University, Oregon.
Alice M. Ramos

While Servais Pinckaers laments the neglect of beauty in theology, the twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar’s work is steeped in beauty and in the type of perception needed to experience the beauty of forms, namely spiritual perception. Balthasar’s thought is likewise influenced by the Church Fathers and by medieval philosophy, as manifest in his work on Gregory of Nyssa and his references to Pseudo-Dionysius, Saint Bonaventure, and others. There is a wealth of Christian thought to substantiate the importance of beauty in theology and philosophy alike. We can thus make use of the thinking of the past and be enriched by an experience of beauty that is more organic and complete than its modern and contemporary counterparts; it is possible, then, to reconsider the world from a higher level of wisdom. In so doing, we are reminded of that genial and humble statement of Bernard of Chartres that “we are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants.”

The works of Edgar de Bruyne and Umberto Eco on medieval aesthetics appeal to this higher level of wisdom from which we might be able to reflect on the world and present-day culture. These works are deeply indebted to Neoplatonism and to what can be called a Platonic-Christian wisdom. While medieval aesthetics thus conceived is grounded in ethical and theological thought, there has been an effort in recent scholarship to shift the grounding from the divine and the moral to pleasurable sensations or pleasing emotions and feelings; such a grounding makes of medieval aesthetics and its artifacts not a theological and moral project but rather a rhetorical project. These two groundings are not, however, mu-


6. Ibid.

7. See, for example, Mary Carruthers, The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Edgar de Bruynè’s Études d’esthétique médiévale, 3 vols. (Bruges: De Tempel, 1946); Umberto Eco’s Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, 15; and his Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

8. Carruthers, Experience of Beauty; see especially her introduction to this book. According to Carruthers, while modern audiences may enjoy the medieval arts, they are “put off by [the] religiosity of medievalist criticism,” which thus makes such scholarship unreadable for
Introduction

The goal of this book will be to make use of the thinking of the past, even if, as one art critic puts it, the Platonic-Christian worldview that began to disintegrate in the late Middle Ages is now a cultural given. There is nevertheless an integration of beauty and goodness in the Greek notion of *kalogathia* that is worthwhile for the contemporary mind to consider. This integration is also found in medieval philosophy, which attempts to establish the relationship of the beautiful to the true and the good. According to Umberto Eco, such an integrating enterprise is precisely “the opposite of what is accomplished nowadays.” It has been alleged that the modern discipline of aesthetics refuses truth and morality—a refusal that hearkens back to Immanuel Kant’s “Critique of the Aesthetic Judgment,” in which the traditional notion of the beautiful as harbinger of the good and as the manifestation of an order that exists and to which human reason may ascend is called into question; the beautiful, then, points to human autonomy and creativity. Modern science and the critique of metaphysics have given rise to this type of thinking, which rejects all suprahuman order behind the beautiful and reduces the significance of beauty and art to subjective and private enjoyment of a formal sort, to the pleasure of what Kant calls “the free play of the faculties.”

The modern age has led us to believe in the power of human reason and technology to remake the world in the image of man and has thus

---

these modern audiences (ibid., 8–9). Carruthers’s work has thus been considered “an exercise in polemic” against those who insist on seeing religious and ethical significance in medieval arts. See Rachel Fulton Brown’s review of Carruthers’s book in *The Medieval Review*, February 7, 2014.


10. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 28–29. In his chapter on Plato’s *Gorgias*, MacIntyre distinguishes between the beautiful and the good and also relates them one to the other.


lost the traditional view that ties beauty to being and truth. With truth’s shift to the subject in modernity, the aesthetic sphere then becomes autonomous. As the art critic Roger Kimball says, “When human reason is made the measure of reality, beauty forfeits its ontological claim and becomes merely aesthetic—merely a matter of feeling.” Kimball’s assessment of the modern turn and its effect on our understanding of the beautiful shows the displacement of what we have referred to here as the Platonic-Christian tradition, in which beauty as the radiance of being, as the desirability or goodness of being in its truth, delights the intellectual soul by being known. As Eric Perl, specialist in Neoplatonic philosophy, tells us at the end of his essay in this volume, the separation of beauty from truth had its origins in the later Middle Ages: “With the decline of classical intellectualism and the rise of voluntarism, exalting love over knowledge, will over intellect, the affective over the cognitive, … we find the beginnings of a corresponding decline of beauty from an ontological to a merely aesthetic category and the separation of beauty from truth, which is ultimately a collapse of the understanding of being as, most fundamentally, the intelligible, and of intellect as, in [Pierre] Rousselot’s words, ‘the faculty of being.’”

By returning, then, to ancient and medieval sources, and especially to the Greek intellectualist tradition in which Thomas Aquinas’s own thought is grounded, as Perl sees it, the essays in this book affirm the place of beauty in an integrated ontological order. Emancipated from that order, beauty conjures its own rival order, as is evident in modernity. This volume thus makes a singular contribution by stressing the convertibility of being with the beautiful, that is, not simply as that which is good, which pleases or is desirable, but as the good that is true and therefore intelligible to the intellect. Within this framework the beauty of moral action can be understood as that true good which attracts or pleases the rational agent by being known. Particular emphasis will be given in this volume to how the beautiful is seen and known and also to how the beautiful, in order to be cultivated in our lives, requires that we be morally well disposed. What we have said so far accounts in great part for the coherence of this volume, and so now it remains for us to give the reader an

indication of how each essay fits into the whole, complementing and, in some cases, further developing previous essays from a philosophical and theological standpoint.

To do justice to the richness of the essays in this book is hardly possible; what is said here in summary form will hopefully serve to whet the readers’ appetites for more, through attending to the essays themselves. For the most part, the presentation of these essays follows a historical timeline; this approach is worthwhile in order to see how much of medieval thought is influenced by, but also in a sense goes beyond, ancient, Stoic, and patristic sources. Although there is an emphasis on ethical concerns in this volume, there are also metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological questions raised and answered regarding the beautiful from a philosophical and theological framework. As was already noted, the wisdom of ancient and medieval thinkers as presented by the authors in this volume has much to offer the contemporary world in the revitalization of both beauty and the good, and so it is hoped that this volume will be a worthwhile contribution to further reflection on this topic.

A key text for Plato’s notion of beauty is the *Symposium*. By exploring both the form and content of this dialogue, D. C. Schindler argues that beauty is the principle of order not only because of its eternal and immutable character but also because of its presence in what is generated and corrupts. Beauty mediates between the transcendent and the immanent, between unity and multiplicity. It mediates by being ultimate—the ultimate goal which love desires and seeks in everything—and yet beauty also reveals itself as being present from the first. According to Plato, a true mediator is always first and last. It is this “intermediacy” of beauty that causes the soul’s movement beyond itself toward the realm of truth and toward the vision of beauty in itself.

While beauty is a transcendent form, it is unlike other forms that are invisible and can only be grasped by the mind; beauty can also be seen through bodily eyes. Transcendent beauty is present in beautiful things and in beautiful bodies, for if it were not, we would not fall in love. Beauty is not, however, totally present in the sensible and therefore we move toward the non-sensible realm, toward the beauty that is absolute. As Schindler says, “Beauty calls one ever further upward, paradoxically, by being already present below.”

The ascent up the “ladder of love” in the *Symposium* requires a dis-
ciplined detachment from the limitation of the particular manifestation of beauty in a body, with its features of proportion and light. Beauty may be referred to as “an inbreaking of the divine,” such that the light of the divine is discovered in the very sensible thing. Beauty is thus the manifestness of form, the appearance of being, and so the accessibility of form and being to sense experience and to reason, for only the human person who is embodied reason can perceive beauty.¹⁷

Schindler’s essay on Plato provides an entryway into Eric Perl’s study on Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of beauty, for Aquinas’s insistence on the relation of the beautiful to cognition and his explanation of the beautiful as good not simply by being pleasing or desirable, but by being true or intelligible, places him in the Greek intellectualist tradition which extends from Plato through Aristotle and Plotinus. In the Platonic tradition and in Aristotle, beauty is related to truth, to intelligibility, and to being. Reality is intelligible form; it consists in intelligibility and thus the true is the same as being. As Perl explains, “Beauty, then, must be understood as ‘luminosity,’ the reality of things which consists in their intelligibility, their manifestness to cognitive apprehension.”

Aristotle, too, associates beauty with intelligibility and knowledge. His Metaphysics begins thus: “All men by nature desire to know.” Man’s search for knowledge is possible because the form in a thing accounts for its intelligibility and is that which is given to cognitive apprehension; the form is also the thing’s beauty. The pursuit of the intelligibility of things is therefore the pursuit of beauty. The unmoved mover or god in Aristotle is pure form, pure reality, pure intelligibility, and so is the most beautiful and the best. The intelligible reality of things, their form, is divine since it is a share in what the unmoved mover is purely. And the conscious apprehension of form, of reality as intelligible, is pleasing.

Like Aristotle, Plotinus takes beauty to consist in intelligibility, for if a thing is intelligible, it satisfies “the gaze of awareness” and is thus beautiful. For Plotinus, being or reality is intelligible and the same as the beautiful. Intelligible reality is the beautiful, which is delightful to behold. The convertibility of being, then, not simply with the good but with the beautiful, is the hallmark of Greek intellectualism, which understands being as intelligible and pleasing to apprehend.

As we have seen, both Plato and Aristotle associate beauty with truth,

¹⁷. See Schindler’s reference to Plato’s Phaedrus in note 112 of his essay.
an association that is, according to Perl, rendered even more explicit in Plotinus, who identifies beauty as form and hence as being *qua* intelligible. But Plato and Aristotle also refer to the good, to moral goodness, as kalon, or beautiful. Several essays in this book seek to show the prominent place that beauty has in Aristotle’s ethics.

Michael Pakaluk points to the fundamental role that the kalon plays in Aristotle’s ethical treatises. Unlike other fundamental notions such as *eudaimonia*, virtue, goodness, and pleasure, which all receive some explanation in Aristotle’s writings, there is no comparable explanation of the kalon. For Pakaluk, then, this lack of explanation suggests that the notion of the kalon would have appeared obvious to Aristotle’s audience and thus not in need of an explanation. But for those of us who do not understand the obviousness of the kalon, an account is indeed necessary. Pakaluk aims to give such an account by examining three main presuppositions that Aristotle relied on in his treatment of the kalon.

First, Aristotle’s appropriation of the roles that the kalon has in Plato’s thought leads Aristotle to reinterpret them in a teleological manner rather than in a formal one. As Pakaluk says, “For Plato the kalon is the intelligibility of a form manifested in a radiant particular, which can somehow be possessed by virtuous action and which involves some kind of ingenious practical rationality. Aristotle appropriates these ideas but interprets them teleologically.” The kalon is regarded as the work of intelligence; since what is proper to intelligence is ordering, every virtue will be “a kind of ordering.” Second, Pakaluk refers to the experience of courage on the battlefield as a model of the kalon; here the kalon is described as “useless goodness,” insofar as usefulness and pleasure are subtracted from it. As Pakaluk sees it, this type of goodness “would be something structural and formal”; in matters of action the kalon would then be “intelligent skillfulness precisely as exhibiting clever design.” The virtuous man chooses, therefore, to conform himself to a plan or design governing his action; because the action realizes the intelligent design set forth in his plan, it is kalon. Third, in his consideration of the kalon as relying on the idea of “an antecedent reasonable plan,” Pakaluk proposes what he calls a rationalist interpretation of Aristotle’s ethics, which holds the main task in action to be a conformity to some kind of ordering, assisted and supported by the emotions. These presuppositions, as Pakaluk shows, made Aristotle’s choice of the word “kalon” both natural and fit-
ting, and moreover, it may be said that kalon, as it “shines forth” in virtuous action, is, in effect, an aesthetic notion for Aristotle.

The centrality of beauty in the Aristotelian account of moral virtue requires, according to Mark Spencer, that we be capable of knowing or perceiving beauty. Yet Aristotle does not give an explicit account of how we grasp beauty, perhaps due to the very obviousness of the kalon, as we see in Pakaluk’s essay. For Spencer, an account of how we grasp the kalon can be developed from what is found only implicitly in Aristotle’s writings. Spencer interestingly presents an Aristotelian account of the kalon as it is connected to contemporary phenomenological inquiries into our experience of beauty.

According to Aristotle, beauty can be apprehended by our powers of sense-perception, memory, imagination, and intellect, especially when these powers are acting in tune with desire and appetite. Unlike the other powers, the intellect must be habituated to grasp the beautiful as such, and it functions excellently only if this is in effect the case. This excellent functioning of the intellect can occur if each of the five intellectual virtues—that is, nous, episteme, phronesis, sophia, and techne—allows us to grasp different sorts of beauty. As with goodness, beauty is then said in different ways, and as with goodness, there is a supreme Beauty, whose contemplation, through wisdom or sophia, is the standard for all the virtues. In this highest contemplative act, we are, according to Spencer, most like God—the being that is beauty and actuality—and thus divinized, beautified, and actualized.

Not only does Aristotle hold that virtue is beautiful, but he also maintains that virtuous actions are done for the sake of the beautiful. This twofold dimension of the kalon is prevalent in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially in his discussions of temperance and courage, but it applies to other virtues as well. Jonathan Sanford’s essay shows how this account of the ontological and motivational role of beauty applies to the virtue of justice and to our proper disposition to the common good. Sanford finds echoes of Aristotle’s treatment of kalon in Aquinas’s account of *bonum honestum*, that good which is “deserving of honor on account of its spiritual beauty.”

18. ST II-II, q. 145, a. 2.
Sanford seeks to advance an interpretation of both Aristotle and Aquinas on beauty in relation to the virtues and to provide in particular an Aristotelian-Thomistic account of justice as a virtue—an account that, according to Sanford, is rarely found in contemporary philosophical literature on justice, which concentrates its attention on institutions rather than on character. Focus on the beauty of virtue—virtue that forgives character—permits us to see in turn the beauty of character that pleases with an admiration that encourages us to imitation and thus to bring about more virtuous activity and beauty. If virtue is deserving of honor, justice deserves even greater honor because of its connection to a greater good, the common good. Justice directs all acts of virtue to the common good, and the source of justice’s beauty is precisely its promotion of the common good. Just actions are moreover motivated by the overarching desire for human flourishing, which is sought for its own sake. In both Aristotle and Aquinas, justice and all virtuous activity are measured and inspired by God, who is supremely good and beautiful, and whose contemplation constitutes true flourishing and happiness. According to Sanford, the disagreements between contemporary philosophical accounts of justice and the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of justice are metaphysical and touch on important questions such as: What is a human being? What is the point of human life? How ought human life to be measured?

Aquinas’s reference to the bonum honestum is indebted to Cicero, whom he cites in articles on shamefacedness and honesty in the *Summa theologiae*. Mary Beth Ingham’s essay is a study of Roman Stoicism that shows how the pedagogical and ethical approach of the Stoics is one of self-reflection and moral conversion, with the aim of recognizing and appropriating the kalon. It is Cicero who lays the foundations of the Stoic moral program by distinguishing three indispensable principles: the good in itself (which is the bonum honestum), moral propriety in behavior or decorum (which in Greek is rendered prepon), and appropriate moral judgment or officium.

From these foundations and through reference to Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, Ingham draws out the special traits of the Stoic Sage as the person who lives in harmony with Nature (Logos) and whose

---

19. See ST II-II, qq. 144–45, which appear in Aquinas’s treatise on temperance.
character “shines forth in life,” as Cicero says, and “stirs the admiration of all around us because of its logical consistency and reasonableness in all its words and deeds.” Cicero’s thought influenced not only medievals such as Aquinas but also the Church Fathers, perhaps most notably St. Augustine. He credited Cicero’s *Hortensius* for his eventual conversion to Christianity; this text awakened within him the love for “the immortality of wisdom.”

There is good reason to speak of the beauty of Wisdom, as we shall see. Paige Hochschild’s essay makes clear the importance of beauty in Augustine’s early work *De vera religione*, in which he attempts to understand the goodness of creation in relation to the extraordinary goodness of God’s eternal beauty.

Hochschild distinguishes several types of beauty in Augustine’s work on true religion. First, she discusses intrinsic beauty, which regards the form of things; in this, Augustine is no doubt influenced by Plotinus for whom beauty is understood in terms of form. In linking creation to the action of the whole Trinity, Augustine nevertheless associates the Son, or the Wisdom of God, with form. As the “unformed form” and thus the supremely beautiful, God is the only source of the intrinsic beauty of things. Second, Hochschild refers to systemic beauty whereby the beauty of creation as a whole is seen and considered as the harmonious ordering of the parts of the whole. Third, the beauty of moral pedagogy, or the conformity of the human person to Christ as *Forma*, may be said to mark the spiritual progress of the person from the “old man” to the “new man.”
Not only is Christ form but he is also wisdom, that wisdom that disposes all things in the created order. As the human person conforms himself to Christ, to that principle of form, order, and harmony in the universe, he learns to love beautiful things according to their order in the whole and also brings about an interior re-ordering within himself that is systemic. Augustine’s Christological-ethical aesthetic also has a historical dimension which points to beauty as the economy of providence. As Hochshild puts it, “The role of Christ as forma for creation and for salvation locates the Incarnation as the fulcrum of historical time.” Providence works within history in a progressive way: the spiritual and intellectual progress of man is gradually brought about in time such that the beauty of God’s providential work will become visible in the beauty of all.

Also central to beauty’s place in the Christian theological tradition is the figure known as Dionysius the Areopagite, whose thought arises from a synthesis between Biblical thought and the Neoplatonic tradition. Dionysius provides the first systematically theological account of beauty, identifying it as one of the divine names, in his widely known and often referred to work On the Divine Names. Brendan Sammon’s essay points to the differences between Dionysius and the Neoplatonists. The main differences given by Sammon are the identification in Dionysius of the Supreme Principle, that is, God, with beauty, and Dionysius’s commitment to the doctrine of the Incarnation, which provides him with content for elaborating an understanding of beauty. Sammon shows how Dionysius brings together beauty and the good: beauty is coextensive with the good, but beauty “is the good insofar as the good is intensive, that is, insofar as the good intensifies itself into perceptible content.” This can be explained by saying that, for Dionysius, beauty identifies God in himself and is also the event whereby God as the good takes its most concrete form, that is to say, that beauty is the specific form that the good assumes in creaturely existence. God’s or beauty’s presence in the multitude of beings also points to the Incarnation whereby beauty itself descended into the universe to dwell among creatures. Not only is there a descent, however, but there is also an ascent, which is understood as the anagogical power of beauty. Beauty is therefore identified as the event whereby the divine unity communicates itself to a multiplicity of beings and also

22. We do well to recall here the doctrine of participation: since God is beauty and the good, the multitude of beings created by him are participants in beauty and the good.
gathers together “that diverse multitude into its unity without compromising either.” By locating beauty in the community of divine names, Dionysius provides a way of reflecting on the mystery of beauty and its relation to the good and also makes possible an understanding of how God’s presence may be recognized in what Sammon calls a public way; perhaps this may be compared to the way in which Augustine sees God’s providence becoming publicly visible throughout history and forming a unified whole or “single beauty.”

While Dionysius is certainly important within the Christian tradition for his discussion of God as beauty, Boyd Coolman sees the first Christian theological aesthetics in the work of Hugh of St. Victor. Although beauty is explicitly found in Hugh’s theology, it has been little noticed or explored by contemporary scholars in the field; according to Hans Urs von Balthasar, we are to look to Bonaventure as the quintessential aesthetic theologian. And yet, according to Coolman, all the distinctive criteria that Balthasar sets forth for a genuine Christian theological aesthetics are met in the theology of Hugh of St. Victor.

In his account of creation, Hugh argues that a fundamental feature of the created cosmos is beauty; God acts as an artist and through his wisdom imposes form on matter, thus creating things of beauty for the rational creature to perceive and experience. The beauty of creation is not an end in itself but is meant to facilitate the rational creature’s movement toward beautiful and beatific being; the rational creature’s being must therefore acquire a greater degree of beauty and must intensify its participation in beauty if it is to reach final beatitude. The human acquisition of pulchrum esse, which will be constitutive of the rational creature’s sanctification, requires that the human being cooperate with the sanctifying activity of the divine artist. The claim that God is beautiful and that beauty is a divine attribute is important here, for not only does God take delight in his own trinitarian Beauty, but he also delights in the beauty that he has created which is revelatory of his own beauty. God especially delights in the beauty of the rational creature. Rather than primarily place the experience of beauty in the human person, Hugh stresses God’s experience of beauty and thus develops “a profoundly theocentric theological aesthetics, as he executes a kind of ‘Copernican revolution’ in [his] reflection on beauty.”

After presenting, albeit summarily, the very rich theological treat-
ments of beauty found in Augustine, Dionysius, and Hugh of St. Victor, we turn to Albert the Great and his examination of Aristotle’s moral thought. While the kalon appears frequently in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as attested to in other essays of this book, Martin Tracey reminds us that Albert made use of Robert Grosseteste’s Latin translation of Aristotle’s work, which generally uses the same word “bonum,” or “good,” for both kalon and agathon; Albert refers to a number of Aristotle’s remarks about beauty, that is, the Latin pulchritudo, which reinforce some of his own moral-philosophical doctrines on happiness and pleasure. Aristotle’s discussion of happiness as the most beautiful, most useful, and most pleasant leads Albert not only to affirm that happiness is indeed beautiful but also to explain that beauty is a feature belonging to both bodies and minds and that pleasure, too, may be thought of in material and mental ways. If happiness as the best human activity is in effect most pleasant, then the pleasure accompanying happiness must be spiritual or intellectual.

For Albert, as for Aristotle, virtuous activity is beautiful; Albert stresses that the beauty of virtue is intellectual, not bodily. Like Aristotle, Albert advises that the person who would act virtuously should flee those occasions that would give rise to vicious pleasures and refrain from intense bodily pleasures. By using his reason to restrain his passions, the person will acquire virtue; this restraint will lead to the elimination of the passions, such that, according to Albert, it is possible for persons to attain divine virtue: “Divinely virtuous people attain a state in which they are no longer touched physically by passion.”

In his engagement with Aristotle’s moral thought, Albert finds numerous occasions to discuss pleasure; because pleasure is never without motion in this life, it is also never without lassitude and pain. Albert thus denies that the happiness of contemplative activity can ever be completely pleasant or fully achieved in this life.

As might be expected in a volume on beauty and the good, consideration is given to the arts and their beauty. Unlike Aquinas, who wrote no treatise on beauty or the arts, Bonaventure, a leading representative of the Franciscan tradition, articulated a theory of the unity of the arts in his *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, which is an important exposition on the mechanical and liberal arts. For Bonaventure, the arts have the potential to lead us back to God if the soul is awakened to the ways in
which God is present in them. In this awakening, beauty has a vital role, for it leads the mind to recognize the ultimate principle for the unity and glory of the arts. Christopher Cullen presents the basic elements of Bonaventure’s aesthetics and makes the case that Bonaventure’s thought provides the intellectual foundation for the artistic shift that is evident in the naturalism of the frescoes of the Upper Church in Assisi.

According to Cullen, there are reasons why the medieval world moved toward naturalism—reasons found in Bonaventure’s philosophy and theology: first, the exemplarism in Bonaventuran metaphysics, whereby nature reveals the divine, is expressive of God, and the very work of the artist, insofar as it depicts nature, also leads the human observer to find God; second, Bonaventure’s theory of hylomorphism, which includes corporeality in the definition of human nature; and third, the doctrine of the Incarnation, whereby the Second Person of the Trinity takes on human nature by becoming incarnate. With this naturalism, as Cullen sees it, “there is a new awareness of the human being as a creature fittingly corporeal and who, precisely in being corporeal, is the mediator in creation … uniting its disparate parts and returning them to God.”

Joined to this naturalism, there is also a deep appreciation for aesthetic experience insofar as the experience of beautiful things in nature and in art points us to the transcendent, the source of all beauty. The beautiful, whether in nature or in art, will thus awaken the mind in its journey toward God. Just as the splendorous light of natural beauty illumines our way, so too the art of the Upper Church at Assisi illumines the lives of the many wayfarers who enter its portals.

Bonaventure’s consideration of beauty as a transcendental property of being is taken up once again in this volume as it is creatively appropriated, synthesized, and extended by Hans Urs von Balthasar’s work in theological aesthetics. Mark McInroy demonstrates that, in contrast to some scholarly discussions that portray Balthasar as unconcerned with the question of the transcendentality of the beautiful, Balthasar does indeed enter into the medieval debates on the ratio pulchri, that is, on the conceptual distinction that beauty adds to being. Much of the medieval discussion on beauty holds to the convertibility of beauty with the good, but not with being as such. For Balthasar, however, beauty adds to being in the sense that it makes the depths of being itself, being as a whole, manifest to the senses.
As beauty manifests being, beauty’s role in metaphysics is especially significant: the manifestation of being through beauty leads us to wonder why there is being rather than nothing and also to wonder about the origin and ground of all being. Wonder is provoked by each instance of the beauty of being that we come in contact with, and yet, because of being’s inexhaustibility and mystery, it cannot be fully seized. As McInroy says, “Being-as-beauty resists appropriation.” Now, since beauty manifests being as such to the senses, then sense perception plays a crucial role in apprehending being, both in its material manifestation and in its immaterial depth. Balthasar thus develops the notion of a transcendental sense perception, as he calls it, which is capable of penetrating surface appearances in order to grasp the depths of being. In his engagement with medieval discussions about the conceptual distinction that beauty adds to being, Balthasar both draws and deviates from important influences on his thought such as Bonaventure. This engagement enables him to elaborate his own distinctive account of beauty, which maintains the transcendental status of beauty and elevates sense perception to special importance in our apprehension of being, both in its material and immaterial dimensions, thus providing contemporary philosophy and theology with a wealth of material in the continued discussions on beauty.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the beautiful is that which is pleasing to apprehend. As Eric Perl’s essay clearly shows, Aquinas’s understanding of beauty places him firmly within the Greek intellectualist tradition. Daniel De Haan’s essay also examines Aquinas’s description of beauty: *Pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*. According to De Haan, the meaning of this description as it relates to aesthetic perception and Aquinas’s doctrine of beauty is obscure. From Aquinas’s scattered remarks on beauty and perception, De Haan’s work provides a coherent account of beauty and aesthetic perception by arguing first for the transcendentality of the beautiful, maintaining—unlike Jan Aertsen, for whom beauty is not a transcendental (because it does not add a notion to being not already signified by truth and goodness)—that beauty does indeed “add a new notion to being, namely, a perfection of a cognition and appetition nexus that is not signified by cognition as such or appetition as such.”

According to De Haan, the beautiful, that is, the object of *id quod

23. *ST* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.
visum placet, is not a mere per se sensible. By referring to Aquinas’s interpretation of Aristotle’s De anima II.6, De Haan argues that the typical forms of beauty in nature and art are incidental sensibles. Aesthetic perception of beauty is, then, a special kind of incidental perception which involves our external senses, cogitative power, and intellect, together with our somatic, emotional, and volitional powers. (See the section titled “The Pleasure of Aesthetic Perception” in De Haan’s essay where he refers to the Ghent altarpiece of van Eyck and speaks of the incidental sensibles, that is, “the particular and universal intentions or meanings, perceived by cognition and intellection through our sensation of a scaffolding of wonderful per se sensibles.”) What is presented here is an interpretation of Aquinas’s description of beauty, where visum placet is understood analogically and as a metonym for the synchronized integration of our powers for apprehension and appetition. Our understanding of aesthetic perception and its object is thus enriched when the encounter with the beautiful engages the full array of human powers, focusing in particular on the operations of the cogitative power, the emotions, the intellect, and the will. De Haan’s essay ends with an interesting reference to wonder, as that which is presently needed to cultivate an aesthetics of everyday life.

In this volume of essays, the notion of the bonum honestum has already appeared, as found in Stoic thought and as appropriated by Thomas Aquinas. This notion of intrinsic goodness is also present in the Franciscan argument of Alexander of Hales for whom bonum honestum, or intrinsic goodness, can be understood as intelligible beauty. According to Mary Beth Ingham’s second essay in this volume, the thought of John Duns Scotus is influenced by this argument, thus offering us an aesthetic approach to moral reasoning and judgment in Scotus’s work.

The foundations for this approach are found first in Scotus’s presentation of truth as an auditory moral recognition and second in his emphasis on the will as the sole rational potency and, more importantly, as a vis collativa. With these foundations in place, Scotus holds that the morally mature agent has an immediate experience of moral goodness as beauty; the agent in question will experience the harmonic agreement or consonance of all the parts of a moral situation with the first practical

principle, which, for Scotus is *Deus diligendus est*.\(^{25}\) Through the examination of certain specific texts in Scotus, Ingham shows how the moral judgment of the good can be explained in terms of the intuitive experience of beauty as the harmony within the moral action. Ingham also points out that this sort of moral insight is similar to spiritual discernment, which is, as she puts it, “a penetrating awareness of all that is present in a situation that is morally relevant.”

In Ingham’s essay, the depiction of moral judgment as beauty in Scotus presents us with a well-integrated account of epistemological, logical, and moral reflection on the nature of the good and its rational perception as beauty. Moreover, the turn to beauty rather than the focus on freedom, which characterizes much of Scotist scholarship, serves to recontextualize the discussions centered on his voluntarism. Given Scotus’s moral approach as presented in Ingham’s essay, the notion of the moral agent is expanded such that the person is sensitive to the beautiful, recognizes it, and, through moral action, is able to contribute to beauty in the world. The importance of moral beauty and its harmonic resonance within the person is thus of undeniable importance.

Unlike the Bonaventuran conception of beauty in art as having the potential to awaken the mind to God, there are instances of contemporary art which have produced not only a flight from beauty and the good but also a desecration of beauty and a distortion of reality, especially the reality of the human person. My own essay in this volume deals with this phenomenon, contrasting the rich conception and experience of beauty in the Platonic-Thomistic tradition with occurrences in present-day culture of aesthetic iconoclasm, efforts to spoil beauty and to silence the voice, as it were, of beauty and the good.

There is, as I note in my essay, an assault on the “high culture” of Western civilization that may well be related to the decline of religious faith—a decline which is manifest in acts of sacrilege and iconoclasm. Rather than explore the relationship between culture and religious faith, my essay is intended to discuss how classical theism, which maintains that the natural desire in man for truth and ultimately for God is the origin of religion, can provide us with a better understanding of beauty both in nature and in the arts and perhaps with an antidote to the instances in our culture of

\(^{25}\) *Ordinatio* I, d. 17.
a flight from beauty. 26 The juxtaposition of these two very different conceptions of beauty seeks to emphasize the need for the recovery of a way of seeing and delighting in things that is in harmony with our rational nature. This task of recovery is one that artists seem particularly gifted and called to, if they are able to create works of real beauty—works that provide us with the opportunity to wonder and to marvel at the perfection of forms and that also put us in touch with truth and goodness. The production of such works has the potential to transform artists and spectators alike. Such a task requires, nevertheless, that we be willing to correct our vision and our loves through moral virtue, if we are to arrive at the fulfillment of our natural desire for truth and goodness, and ultimately for Absolute Beauty.

In ending this volume, then, with an essay that considers the flight from true beauty and the good in examples of contemporary art and culture, we seek to make more patent still the need to recover the wisdom of the ancients and the medievals. There is no doubt much work to be done in this direction, and the essays here are a formidable step in the recovery of beauty as an ontological category, inseparable from being and truth; these essays also provide a more robust understanding of the beauty of moral action and happiness, of the perception of beauty, and of the creation and return of rational beings and the universe to Absolute Beauty when everything will have optimized its beauty and goodness; and lastly, we are reminded here to consider the “moral potency” of art, that is, its capacity to transform us and to lead us toward or away from the supreme Beauty, the very object of all our desires. 27

26. In speaking of classical theism, I am referring especially to the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Plato, in whose work a metaphysics and theology of creation can be developed in order to explain the origin of religion in terms of man’s natural desire for truth and goodness.

1 Disclosing Beauty

On Order and Disorder in Plato’s Symposium

Plato’s Symposium is a thing of beauty. What I mean by this is not just the usual claim that Plato’s artistry reached a certain peak with this particular dialogue, which is his most dramatically rich composition.¹ More specifically, in the present context this statement means that the Symposium stands as a paradigm of beauty, that in its form and content, and indeed in the astonishing conjunction of the two, it gives expression to the essential constitution of this mysterious and fascinating reality.

For reasons we will explore, beauty is notoriously difficult to define. In spite of the centrality of beauty in Greek culture, a proper formulation of the essence of beauty is hard to come by in early and classical Greek thought.² The elusiveness of beauty on this score is something Socrates discovered in the dialogue known as the Greater Hippias. Although, on the sixth and final attempt of this dialogue, Socrates manages to propose a formulation that would enjoy a long history (it is typically, though improperly, taken to be the “Thomistic definition” of beauty),³ his de-

¹. See R. G. Bury’s opening statement in his classic commentary The Symposium of Plato, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1932), iii.

². The first text we have that indicates something like a statement concerning the nature of beauty is an early fragment that seems to be of a Pythagorean provenance: “Order and proportion are beautiful and useful” (Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker [Zurich: Weidmann, 1985], 1:469). As we will see, this became a standard association, even if it failed to rise up to the level of a strict definition (and even if there were other currents in ancient aesthetics).

³. As Aquinas puts it, “pulchra … dicuntur quae visa placent” (ST I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1). Not only is Aquinas clearly not presenting this as a definition (as Umberto Eco correctly observes
scription of beauty as what delights when seen or heard falls short of his goal in decisive respects. It leaves unspecified what would be the same in the very different experiences of seeing and hearing such that they could both be called perceptions of beauty, and it does not explain the difference between aesthetic pleasure and other types. Even if these particular deficiencies could be remedied, the description would still not account for the examples of non-sensible beauty that Socrates identifies in the dialogue. The Symposium takes an altogether different approach: instead of trying to say what beauty is, it shows it. In this essay, I intend to propose that Plato conceives beauty as a manifestation of order, most basically as the revelation of unity in what appears opposed. After suggesting in the introductory remarks how the theme of order emerges in the Symposium, I will explore the theme as it comes to dramatic expression in the structure of the dialogue (“The ‘Order Question’”), and then propose how this theme relates to the question of beauty, the essence of which Socrates presents in his recounting of Diotima’s speech (“Socrates and the Transcendence of Beauty”). Finally, I will reflect more generally on beauty as a coincidentia oppositorum in Plato and the classical tradition (“Beauty and the Coincidentia Oppositorum”).

The most obvious theme of the Symposium, of course, is love; the gathering at Agathon’s house to celebrate his recent victory may have passed into oblivion like all other such gatherings but for the common resolution (eventually abandoned!) to drink with moderation on this particular evening, and Phaedrus’s proposal—delivered through Eryximachus, another speaker present—that the evening be spent instead in rational discourse, presenting speeches on the nature of love, since this divine presence in human existence has thus far failed to receive its due praise from poets and other wise men. A secondary theme is beauty, as becomes evident in Socrates’s speech—or, more precisely, Diotima’s speech, delivered in Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, trans. Hugh Bredin [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986], 128), but even if he were, it would not qualify, insofar as it expresses not the nature or essence of beauty (by articulating the genus and specific difference) but simply its proper effect. Defining beauty thus would be like defining man as “that animal which, through speaking, makes sense.”

4. Greater Hippias 297e.
5. See Greater Hippias 298b.
Disclosing Beauty

21

through Socrates—in which the evening’s conversation might be said to culminate. Socrates presents beauty, in its conjunction with the good, as the proper object of love. If this is true, it implies that these two themes are not just separate items in a series but are rather intrinsically related, so much so that each theme could be shown to reveal something essential about the other: to understand beauty is to gain an understanding of the nature of love, since beauty represents the aim, as it were, that defines love, and to understand love is to gain insight into beauty, since love represents, as it were, beauty’s phenomenological correlate.

In addition to these two explicit themes, however, there is a third, which does not appear so evidently on the surface but which figures so regularly and pivotally in the dramatic narrative that it warrants mention as one of the dialogue’s central preoccupations. Perhaps we might call it a “meta-theme,” not principally a matter discussed directly but a matter constantly implicated in the particular way other matters are discussed or presented. This “meta-theme” is the nature of order. The basic notes of the theme are struck most obviously in the famous “ladder of love” that Socrates unveils to the initiates of the inner circle as a sort of summation of the speech he presents: it traces out the “correct order” one must follow in one’s disciplined pursuit of beauty in order to achieve the final view of beauty in itself. Indeed, one encounters the words “orthōs” and “cosmiōs” regularly throughout the dialogue. The theme is, moreover, directly implicated in the array of speeches that fill the action. What one scholar has recently dubbed the great “Order Question”—namely, the question whether there is some philosophical significance to the particular sequence of speeches presented in the dialogue—is prompted by the fact that Plato repeatedly highlights the importance of the order, and does so quite explicitly. Now it just so happens that beauty, too, is itself a matter of order, as the classical tradition has always recognized, and as Plato himself makes clear (as we shall see later on). If this is the case, we

7. After identifying beauty as the object of love, Diotima substitutes goodness for beauty when her examination of Socrates stalls (Sym. 204d–e). Scholars have rightly taken this to indicate a deep affinity between goodness and beauty, which is confirmed in other dialogues (see Republic 509a, Philebus 64e–67a, Greater Hippias 296e ff.). But this does not mean that goodness and beauty are simply identical: see F. C. White, “Love and Beauty in Plato’s Symposium,” Journal of Hellenic Studies 109 (1989): 149–57.


9. As mentioned in note 2 above, the first description of beauty we have connects it with
are led to wonder whether the themes of beauty and order reciprocally illuminate each other in this dialogue, just as the themes of beauty and love do. It is precisely this possibility that we intend at least to consider here, even if it is not the sort of thesis that can be demonstrated apodictically.

But right from the outset, we face an interesting challenge. If revealing proper order is central to the Symposium, there is a certain irony in the fact that the narrative of the dialogue presents a constant, indeed a relentless, disruption of order and reversal of normal expectations. There is no dialogue in the Platonic corpus that contains so many surprises, seemingly at every turn. This curious coincidence suggests that order is, paradoxically, not as simple as it may seem. What we discover in the Symposium is an almost overwhelming series of instances in which a norm is overturned, an order inverted, an expectation reversed, or things otherwise opposed are suddenly and surprisingly united. Paradoxes abound. Such surprises occur both at the level of concrete action and at the thematic or conceptual level. There are too many to enumerate fully, but it is good to mention some in order to give an idea of what I have in mind. Leaving aside the preface (which itself contains several surprises10), we find examples starting from the very beginning of the action. Socrates makes his appearance in the dialogue all “dressed up,” contrary to his custom,11 and he cites a saying from Homer about the “good going to the good,” but points out that Homer got it exactly backwards.12 Socrates also invites Aristodemus, who was left off the list, and the uninvited guest arrives before Socrates, who is ostensibly bringing him to the party.13 At the

order and proportion. Plato echoes this association, as we will see at greater length in this essay (cf. David Lloyd, “Symmetry and Beauty in Plato,” Symmetry 2, no. 2 [2010]: 455–65). Aristotle, too, claims that “beauty is a matter of size and order” (Poetics 1450b37, McKeon translation). What comes closest to a “definition” of beauty, which was formulated first by the Stoics (apparently by Chrysippus, the third scholarch) and cited by Cicero is “a certain symmetrical shape . . . combined with a certain charm of coloring” (see Tusculan Disputations, trans. J. E. King [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1950], IV, 13). Plotinus refers to this formulation as representing the most common opinion (“Legetai men para pantón . . .”) on beauty (see Ennead I.6.1).

10. The source, Apollodorus, who is mistakenly assumed to have been an eyewitness, actually heard the story secondhand. But even Apollodorus is not telling the story, but rather telling the story of him telling the story. The presentation is anything but straightforward.

party, the servants are instructed to play the host; contrary to custom, the guests banish the entertainment and moderate their drinking. Agathon, the object of celebration (who, incidentally, is giving the party in his own honor), happens to be sitting in the lowest place; the drinking and speech-making are meant to proceed in an “orderly” fashion, “from left to right,” but Aristophanes gets displaced through the random event of a fit of hiccups, and indeed this order gets further mixed up when Alcibiades unexpectedly enters, causing Agathon and Socrates to switch places. Eventually the whole descends into disorder.

There are also paradoxes and surprises at a more thematic level. The first speech presents love as the oldest of the gods, and the last speech before Socrates’s presents him as the youngest. Love renders family members like foreigners. Phaedrus identifies the woman (Acestis) as more courageous than the man (Orpheus), and the beloved (Achilles) as avenging the lover (Patroclus) (and also indicates that Aeschylus had got them confused). Eryximachus generally presents love as uniting what is opposed; Socrates reverses the culminating praise of love, which had identified love and beauty, by pointing out that love is defined precisely by an absence of beauty; while the other speeches present love as the beloved, Socrates presents love as lover. In general, the present are absent (Aristodemus, the eyewitness source of the account, leaves himself out of the recounting), while the absent are present (although women have been excluded from this circle of men—the flute-girls have been sent away to have their own conversation with the women in a separate room—Socrates sneaks Diotima in, as it were, and she turns out to de-

15. Sym. 176e.
16. Sym. 175c.
17. Sym. 185c.
19. Sym. 223b.
22. Sym. 179c.
23. Sym. 179d.
25. Sym. 186d.
27. Sym. 204c.
28. Sym. 176e.
liver the evening’s keynote address).\textsuperscript{29} Quite often, people speak \textit{in the place} of someone else: not only do we have the \textit{switching of places} between Aristophanes and Eryximachus because of the hiccups (and later between Socrates and Agathon on the occasion of Alcibiades’s intrusion), and Eryximachus speaking for Phraedrus, and Socrates speaking for Diotima, but the entire dialogue is framed as Apollodorus’s speaking for Aristodemus. And so forth.

There can be no question that the dialogue is concerned with order; the relentless disruption only serves to set the theme of order into relief, even if it does so precisely (ironically) by contrast. We proposed at the outset that the theme of order illuminates the theme of beauty, insofar as beauty is essentially a matter of order. If it is true that the \textit{Symposium} represents a paradigm of beauty (and it is true that the dialogue betrays an almost obsessive concern apparently to subvert order, or at least to subvert particular expectations of order), then we are led to wonder whether this dramatic logic of reversal, if we may call it that, discloses beauty in a particularly decisive or essential way. Why do we find contrast, and indeed antithesis, so aesthetically pleasing? Is there a connection between beauty and the \textit{coincidence of opposites}? And if there is, what is it, and what accounts for it?

\textbf{The “Order Question”}

The \textit{Symposium} presents a total of seven speeches, although even this rather straightforward fact has to be affirmed with some tentativeness for several reasons. Each of the reasons has some philosophical significance, as we will eventually see. First, Aristodemus and Apollodorus do not pretend that the speeches they recount represent an exhaustive list.\textsuperscript{30} Second, Alcibiades was not originally meant to give a speech, and so it is not clear whether his ought to be counted with the rest: not only does

\textsuperscript{29} Sym. 201d.

\textsuperscript{30} “Of course,” says Apollodorus, “Aristodemus couldn’t remember exactly what everyone said, and I don’t remember everything he told me” (Sym. 178a). Cf. Sym. 180c. It is curious that Aristodemus did not recall the speech he himself would have been required to give, presumably just before Erixymachus (Sym. 178c). On the significance of Aristodemus’s absence (and on an argument that he sits before Agathon rather than Erixymachus), see Paul O’Mahoney, “On the ‘Hiccuping Episode’ in Plato’s \textit{Symposium},” \textit{Classical World} 104, no. 2 (2011): 143–59.
it occur as a kind of after-thought, opening up a new round of speeches that never arrive rather than bringing the first round to a conclusion, but it is not even about the same topic, love, except incidentally (although most people admit it is *more* about love than initially appears). Finally, and most significantly, when Socrates presents his speech, standing in for Diotima, he insists it should not be compared with any of the others, which seems to suggest it shouldn’t be counted along with them. So, right at the outset, before we even get started with our investigation, we face a basic question: are we dealing with five speeches, or six, or seven, or an indefinite and indeterminable number?

The difficulty of answering the question in a clear way would seem to discourage one from seeking to draw any philosophical significance from the number. Does it make sense to look for a pattern if we cannot even be sure whether we have the whole group, or which members belong to it? This discouragement increases when we ask the question whether the particular sequence of this yet-to-be-determined number of speeches has any significance. The participants decide to give the speeches according to what is generally recognized the proper order, “left to right” (*epi dexia*), but this simply means according to where they happen to be seated, which seems quite random. To make matters worse, even this random order gets upset when Aristophanes succumbs to his hiccups. It is thus understandable why a reputed scholar would take the episode with Aristophanes to be Plato’s way of saying, “do not make too much of the order of the speeches!” It is understandable, and yet one

31. Scholars are virtually unanimous in suggesting that it *is* in the end a fitting final speech. Bury, for instance, makes a case for its role as responding to each of the previous speeches and thus bringing them to a certain conclusion (*The Symposium of Plato*, lx–lxiv). To say this, however, does not require going as far as does Martha Nussbaum, who claims it is the most important of the speeches in “The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato’s Symposium,” *Philosophy and Literature* 3, no. 2 (1979): 131–72.

32. Sym. 199b.

33. On the difficulties presented in the seating arrangement, Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan point out the emphasis Plato gives to the arrangement, which coincides with his confusing of the order in subtle ways. The point, they believe, is deliberately to leave gaps in our understanding. See Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan, *Plato’s Dialectic at Play: Argument, Structure, and Myth in the Symposium* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004), 26–28.

cannot rest altogether content with the dismissal once we recall the evident importance Plato goes on to give to order, and indeed to sequence specifically, elsewhere in the dialogue. So should we look for a pattern in the speeches or not? I propose that the best answer is “yes,” as long as we remain open to the pattern being an unexpected one. I want first to take the order of speeches simply as given in the text, and then to offer a suggestion at the end of the essay as to why the fact that this given order is the result of not only a fortuitous event but a positively ridiculous one is itself philosophically meaningful.

It would draw out our discussion too far to offer an exposition of each of the speeches as they occur; instead, I am going to presuppose a general familiarity with the speeches and simply point out the particular details relevant to our theme. My method, once again, will be suggestive rather than strictly demonstrative because of the limits of the context and indeed the nature of the subject matter.

There are two ways to approach the “Order Question,” both of which are indicated by the text itself. The first is a consideration of the trajectory of the speeches as a whole. The most obvious pattern to look for here is some form of ascent, since this is so plainly suggested by Socrates’s “ladder of love” and the various stages through which the novice is guided in his initiation into the great mystery of beauty. Is there an ascent discernible in the progression of speeches as they occur in the presentation? In his commentary, Bury characterizes a variety of perspectives on this question, beginning with a view that interprets the speeches as proceeding from the most trivial to the most significant. This suggestion may be plausible prima facie given the broadening and deepening of the experience of beauty in the “ladder of love,” and indeed given the importance of the ascent in Plato’s thought more generally, but the suggestion shows itself to be quite absurd secunda facie. Perhaps we could explain away Alcibiades’s speech, which, coming last and after Socrates’s, would by implication be the most philosophically significant, by simply excluding him from the list, but this hypothesis would force us to interpret Phaedrus’s speech as the most trivial, which it most certainly is not, and to take the utterly vapid speech by Agathon as the penultimate phil-

35. Foley presents evidence for this in “The Order Question,” 59.
36. Sym. 211c.
osophical exposition, surpassed only by Socrates’s own. Should we, then, abandon the theme of ascent as we look for a pattern?

I suggest not. It seems to me that, in one respect, there is indeed a kind of ascent exhibited in the speeches, even while at the very same time the speeches represent a perfect declension in another respect. The possibility of a simultaneous ascent and descent emerges once we make a distinction between form (by which I mean not only rhetorical style but also method and approach) and content (by which I mean the intelligible substance of what is being said about love). As a matter of form, the general claim Bury describes is right: there is clearly an increase in sophistication as we proceed from one speech to the next (at least until we get to Socrates’s). Phaedrus’s approach is merely “anecdotal” in a literal sense, which is to say that he simply recounts incidents, one after the other, from the Greeks’ common mythological store, without specific order, without a proper beginning or an end, without an effort to define his theme. Pausanias improves on this lack of precision by insisting on a fundamental distinction to help clarify what love is—in this case, a distinction between “vulgar” love, of the people generally (“pandemic”), and “noble” love, of heaven (“ouranic”), which represents love in its proper sense.38 Moreover, he offers reasons for the characteristic behavior of lovers, reasons founded on nomos, that is, culture or law. Next, Eryximachus, who accepts Pausanias’s basic distinction, advances the discussion by introducing a telos to love beyond customary praxis, showing the function love serves universally in nature and not only according to human culture.39 If knowledge is, as Aristotle says, always “of causes,” then Aristophanes appears to raise the discussion to a properly philosophical level by identifying the cause (to aition, Sym. 192e) of love, which accounts for its specific power (dynamis, Sym. 189c), and indeed locating that cause in the origin of human nature.40 Finally, Agathon makes the philosophical dimension explicit: while all the other speeches, he claims, presented the various effects of love, he intends first to distinguish what love is in itself—the nature of love (hypoios tis autos)—and only afterwards to elaborate the gifts love gives (tas doseis, Sym. 194e–195a). On the surface, then, there is a clear ascent toward the essence of the subject

38. Sym. 180d–c.
39. Sym. 186a, b.
40. Sym. 189d.
matter: from general notions drawn from the tradition, to a distilling of true and false according to actual human praxis, to a founding of this distinction in nature as such, to the identification of an original cause, to an isolation of what love is in itself, in distinction from its effects.

But, as we have already observed, Agathon’s speech is almost entirely devoid of philosophical interest. The most philosophical form turns out to have the least philosophical content. It seems to me that, in terms of content, we witness a fairly straightforward decline in quality from Phaedrus to Agathon. Phaedrus brings to light the divine dimension of love: love is a god, an ancient one, and reveals himself in the human sphere precisely in man’s willingness to sacrifice himself for his beloved, to go beyond the boundaries of this existence (into Hades) in pursuit of love. There is in love, in other words, an essential and radical transcendence of the self and indeed of the world tout court. With Pausanias, we have a properly human sense of love, the reality of love in the sphere of culture and custom and understood as the expression of what is most noble in human existence. Eryximachus, by contrast, focuses his discussion on what may be called the next level down, namely, the sphere of nature in its universal sense, and specifically corporeal nature. And just as there was a kind of shift rhetorically from a straightforward exposition to a more philosophical register in the move from the first three speeches to the last two, so too is there a shift in terms of substance: from an account of the divine, then the human, then the natural, we move to the sphere of empty sentiment. This judgment may seem misplaced with regard to Aristophanes’s speech, since his story possesses an undeniable power and has fascinated the romantic imagination throughout history. But we have to ask: is there any real truth to his story? Is the cause of love he proposes an actual cause that would provide a reason for love? Obviously human beings were not originally spheres, split by the gods and now seeking their other halves. The story is of course a complete fabrication, founded on nothing but our desire for union with another, and telling us nothing true about the nature of that union, and therefore nothing

41. It might be objected that Phaedrus’s speech is likewise based on “stories,” but there is a profound difference: he is referring to tradition, which is for Plato the appropriate mediation of what is divine. (See, for example, *Meno* 81a ff. On this theme in general, see Josef Pieper, *The Platonic Myths*, trans. Dan Farrelly [South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011].) Aristophanes, by contrast, is just “making stuff up.”
about the nature of love.\footnote{One can imagine presenting the story to someone with a skeptical bent: “We desire union with another human being in love; we are all searching for our ‘other half.’” “Why?” “Because we used to be a single sphere, and we got cut in two.” “I don’t recall having undergone that; I think I would remember such a thing if I had.” “Well, not us, but our forebears, the first humans.” “But then why do I have a desire for union?” “… No idea.”} Much more obviously, Agathon’s speech is full of fluff: as Socrates makes immediately clear, even to Agathon himself,\footnote{“It turns out, Socrates, I didn’t know what I was talking about in that speech” (Sym. 201c).} by posing a simple question, the young tragic poet has no idea what he is talking about but has simply said the most beautiful things he could think of.\footnote{See Sym. 198d–e.} Thus, in short, in the series of speeches, we have a move from relative poverty to completion considered in terms of form, and at the very same time a movement from fullness to emptiness in terms of content. The more a speech\footnote{“hodos anō katō mia kai hōutē” (Diels and Kranz, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, 60).} appears full, the emptier it actually is. In seeming to move closer to an understanding of love, we are actually moving further away\footnote{Sym. 199b; cf. Apology 18a.} in reality. The way up and the way down, Heraclitus once wrote, are one and the same.\footnote{Paradox.} Paradox.

Socrates’s speech represents a dramatic reversal of these two movements. He confesses here, as incidentally he did in the\footnote{Socrates’s speech represents a dramatic reversal of these two movements. He confesses here, as incidentally he did in the Apology, that he is incapable of giving his speech a beautiful form like the others did, but can only present love, so to speak, in its naked truth. If there is an inverse relation between puffy style and genuine substance, between ostentation and reality, between appearance and being, Socrates’s speech represents the most perfect expression of the nature of love precisely in his unwillingness to dress it up. We have here more than the usual distinction between seeming and being. Instead, there is a perfect opposition: it is the absence of appearance that coincides with the presence of reality. One might take this opposition to be an expression of contempt for outward appearance, an instance of the “typical Platonic dualism” between soul and body, the intelligible and the sensible, but we will see below how this would be a profound misunderstanding. As people often observe with a certain sarcasm, Socrates’s speech actually turns out to be rhetorically brilliant, even in his rejection of rhetoric. And I think there is no inconsistency in this at all. But to show why, it is necessary to dig a little deeper, which we will do in the next section. For now, it is important to see the complex relationship Socrates’s speech has to the other} Apology, that he is incapable of giving his speech a beautiful form like the others did, but can only present love, so to speak, in its naked truth.\footnote{If there is an inverse relation between puffy style and genuine substance, between ostentation and reality, between appearance and being, Socrates’s speech represents the most perfect expression of the nature of love precisely in his unwillingness to dress it up. We have here more than the usual distinction between seeming and being. Instead, there is a perfect opposition: it is the absence of appearance that coincides with the presence of reality. One might take this opposition to be an expression of contempt for outward appearance, an instance of the “typical Platonic dualism” between soul and body, the intelligible and the sensible, but we will see below how this would be a profound misunderstanding. As people often observe with a certain sarcasm, Socrates’s speech actually turns out to be rhetorically brilliant, even in his rejection of rhetoric. And I think there is no inconsistency in this at all. But to show why, it is necessary to dig a little deeper, which we will do in the next section. For now, it is important to see the complex relationship Socrates’s speech has to the other}
speeches. His speech is not simply a part of the ascent (or descent) as just a further step in a gradual progression. Instead, his speech interrupts the movement. As we recall, Socrates asks that his speech not be compared to the others; it is not simply relative to them. At the same time, it is clear that the interruption is an elevation to an altogether new level (which we will discuss in the next section). The reversal of the movement turns out to bring a certain fulfillment. This gesture of reversal-as-fulfillment is reinforced when Alcibiades comes quite literally pouring in to the gathering. The heights are brought low; Alcibiades’s ribaldry desecrates the sacred rites into which Diotima had introduced Socrates and, through Socrates, the other speakers present— and, strangely, the foreign intrusion brings about what is generally recognized as a fitting conclusion to the whole evening.

The second approach to the “Order Question” is suggested by the scene at the end of the Symposium. Plato sometimes gives an indication of the central theme of a dialogue by leaving some clue at the beginning and the end, especially in his more clearly composed pieces. Given that the Symposium is widely regarded as Plato’s literary masterpiece, we ought to be particularly attentive to its final scene. The last moment before Socrates departs finds him alone with Aristophanes and Agathon, after all the dust from Alcibiades’s intrusion has settled, “trying to prove to them that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy: the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet.” The two poets are being paired together in relation to Socrates, the philosopher. Socrates is here mediating between writers of opposed genres, perhaps just as love mediates between gods and mortals: we have in this little episode an illustration of unity-in-opposition. Because of Aristophanes’s hiccups, the two poets ended up speaking immediately one after the other earlier in the evening. While each represents a genre opposed to the other, scholars have often noted that they cannot in fact so easily be divided from each other. Although Aristophanes is ostensibly the comic poet, the

---

47. As is well known, not long after the evening depicted in Plato’s Symposium, Alcibiades was charged with profaning the mysteries (Phaedrus and Eryximachus were likewise implicated and exiled, while Alcibiades ended up defecting to Sparta). See Debra Nails, “Tragedy Off-Stage,” in Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception, ed. J. Lesher, D. Nails, and F. Sheffield, 179–207 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2006).
48. Sym. 223d.
49. Sym. 202d–e.
story he tells of the radical division of man, his being turned to face the wound at the heart of his existence, is profoundly tragic, while the tragic poet Agathon presents an altogether ridiculous image of eros, dancing lightly on the souls of men with his soft, soft feet.\textsuperscript{50} While they seem to be opposed, there is in reality a deeper connection between them, though it is perhaps only in the philosophical poet Plato that this unity comes to a perfect expression.\textsuperscript{51} In any event, the importance that Plato gives to this unity-in-opposition by placing it as a kind of conclusion to the evening’s events prompts us to look for this pattern in other speeches. Is it not fitting that we should look for “coupling” as a pattern in a dialogue on eros? Can we find other examples of such pairings?

In fact, a second comes to view in the relation between Pausanias and Eryximachus, who follow one after the other just as did Aristophanes and Agathon. What comes to expression in the juxtaposition of these two speeches is the classic Greek couplet \textit{nomos} and \textit{physis}, custom (or law) and nature, which itself is founded on the distinction between \textit{soul} and \textit{body}. This couplet, not incidentally, is one the sophists were known to drive apart.\textsuperscript{52} As mentioned above, in his speech Pausanias is especially concerned to clarify the distinction between \textit{noble} love and \textit{vulgar} love. What is it that defines the noble? Pausanias answers this question by appealing to nomos, a word that echoes regularly in his speech:\textsuperscript{53} “We can now see the point of our customs (nomos): they are designed to separate the wheat from the chaff, the proper love from the vile.”\textsuperscript{54} Eryximachus, on the other hand, goes in precisely the opposite direction, though he begins his speech by registering his agreement with Pausanias. According to Eryximachus, the doctor, love, is not simply a phenomenon of human souls (\textit{tais psychais tōn anthropōn})—as we might think if we had only Pausanias’s speech—but occurs \textit{in the bodies} (\textit{tois sōmasi}) of all animals and plants, and indeed in everything that exists in the cosmos.\textsuperscript{55} In

\textsuperscript{50.} Sym. 190e, 195e.
\textsuperscript{53.} For example: Sym. 181a, 181b, 182a, 182b, 182c, 183a, 184b, 184c, 184d.
\textsuperscript{54.} Sym. 184e (Nehamas and Woodruff’s translation of this passage is rather free).
\textsuperscript{55.} Sym. 186a.
a word, love belongs to “the nature of bodies” (*hē ... physis tôn sōmatōn*) simply.\(^{56}\) It is important to note that Eryximachus offers his speech as providing a *telos* that was missing in Pausanias’s account: connecting nomos to physis gives nomos a purpose and for that reason brings it to its *completion*.\(^{57}\) At the same time, Eryximachus’s own speech runs the danger of what we might call a “reductive materialism” if separated from the soul and its nomos: Eryximachus detaches love from its essential connection with beauty,\(^ {58}\) describes what Socrates will present in terms of the mysterious interpenetration of fullness and poverty as a medical process of “repletion and evacuation,”\(^ {59}\) and includes not only man but also the gods in the interplay of cosmic forces.\(^ {60}\) The “opposed” speeches of Pausanias and Eryximachus ought not to be separated.

If Aristophanes and Agathon, and Pausanias and Eryximachus represent pairs, it would seem to leave Phaedrus by himself in the initial group of speakers. Does he pair up with anyone? Our first thought might be to link him to Socrates, but as I have already mentioned and for reasons we will explore in the next section, Socrates does not “pair off” with anyone in particular (as Alcibiades complains with evident frustration). In any event, it is not clear what sort of unity-in-opposition one can find in the respective speeches of Phaedrus and Socrates. The more obvious partner turns out, surprisingly, to be Alcibiades. Unlike the other pairings, this one is not expressed in contiguity, since Phaedrus and Alcibiades lie at the opposite ends of the dialogue (which means, interestingly, that theirs is the only pair actually mediated by Socrates, until the end when Socrates converses with the two poets). I said Alcibiades “turns out” to complete the couplet pointedly, since the fittingness is not exactly what one normally would expect. Alcibiades bursts in on the conversation in an unexpected way, and does not appear to take part in it at all, but changes the topic—although as we observed above, his speech “turns out” to provide just the right conclusion. What connection could there possibly be

---

\(^{56}\) *Sym.* 186b.  
\(^{57}\) *Sym.* 186a.  
\(^{58}\) *Sym.* 186a.  
\(^{59}\) *Sym.* 186c–d (W.R.M. Lamb translation from the Loeb edition: *Plato, Lysis; Symposium; Gorgias* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996]).  
\(^{60}\) *Sym.* 186d. We might compare the shortcomings here to Plato’s critique of the “harmony” theory of the soul in the *Phaedo*, which likewise betrays a reductive materialism. As Socrates explains there, a harmony between elements presupposes a principle of unity that transcends those elements (*Phaedo* 92a–95b).
between Phaedrus’s speech and Alcibiades’s? There are in fact quite a few, but I will highlight just the most obvious. Both of the speeches present love as divine and as inspiring the heroism of great self-denial, though they do so in radically different ways. Phaedrus points to heaven, Alcibiades brings everything down to earth. As I indicated above, Phaedrus’s speech concerns the divine character of love, its “transcendence,” which evokes a movement beyond oneself, the self-transcending act of sacrifice. Alcibiades’s speech concerns the divine, too, but in this case the divine has become perfectly immanent: the gods are not in heaven, but are hidden, marvelously, inside of this particular man, Socrates. An extraordinary beauty bursts through an ordinary, even ugly, outward appearance, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. In both speeches, there are tales of heroic self-denial, although in Phaedrus’s speech the sacrifice is made by the one moved by love, whereas in Alcibiades’s speech, Socrates, who exhibits supra-human feats, is himself the object of love. If the lover, for Phaedrus, is moved to give up his life, Alcibiades, the lover, refuses to give up anything! One of the more dramatic differences between the two speeches is that Phaedrus is recounting stories drawn from an ever-distant mythical past, while Alcibiades is recounting actual historical events that he himself witnessed, and is in fact describing as an incomparable hero someone present, a man standing actually before his listeners. If these opposites are separated, Phaedrus would run the risk of romantic idealism, while Alcibiades would (and in fact did) face the danger of a collapse into mere immanence, into the raw “realism” of unbridled self-interest.

The point in all of this is not principally to draw the moral lesson of why we need to integrate opposites, and what problems arise if we do not. Such an investigation would be eminently worth pursuing further, but our particular interest in the present context is aesthetic, so to speak. The argument thus far is that there are two ways of reading the order of the speeches, both of which represent a different version of the coincidence of opposites. The first way is according to the theme of ascent and descent: in this case, the succession of speeches reveals an ascent in

philosophical style coincident with a descent in philosophical content; in other words, the better the speeches become in appearance, the worse they become in reality. The second way is according to the theme of erotic coupling: in this case, we discover three significantly situated pairs of speeches, each representing contrasting realities that nevertheless betray at least a reciprocal relation to one another, if not a dependence (nomos/physis, comedy/tragedy, heaven/earth). The question we face now is what the coincidentia oppositorum has to do with beauty. In order to begin to respond to this question, it is necessary to return to Socrates, and to explore more closely what is unique about him, his speech, and his particular way of characterizing love and the beauty that represents its defining object.

Socrates and the Transcendence of Beauty

As we have already observed, Socrates asks that his speech not be compared to any of the others. His “exceptional” character is reinforced, moreover, by Alcibiades, who claims that there is no “likeness,” no comparison, between Socrates and any other figures in history.63 These other characters may be measured against each other to reveal a comparative strength or ability, each as relative to the others, but Socrates stands alone. I have suggested that he does not represent a relative degree of difference from the others; he is not simply the next step up (or down) in a continuous movement. Instead, he is absolute, which is to say that he stands in discontinuity with the preceding movement. Whereas the other speeches have a proper place on the line, so to speak, Socrates’s place cannot be “pinned down” in relation to the others: “all of a sudden you’ll just turn up out of nowhere where I least expect you!”64 Plato gives special emphasis to Socrates’s “placelessness.”65

Now, it just so happens that something similar can be said regarding beauty itself, which Socrates presents at the peak of his own speech. After having laid out carefully the steps of ascent in the experience of beauty,

63. Sym. 221c–d.
64. Sym. 213c.
65. Near the beginning of the dialogue, Aristodemus loses track of Socrates, who ends up in a rather strange place—on a neighbor’s porch rather than at the party where he is supposed to be: “He was directly behind me, but I have no idea where he is now” (Sym. 175a).
Diotima suddenly presents the reality itself (τὴν φύσιν καλὸν, Sym. 210e) to view. This beauty is incomparable (just like Socrates himself): Diotima says that the knowledge gained here is “of such a beauty . . .” (kalου τοιοῦδε, Sym. 210d). In their translation, Nehemas and Woodruff cleverly express the paradox of putting beauty “in a class by itself” by breaking off the sentence. The point is that beauty in itself is absolute, separated off, not relative to anything else but itself, as Diotima makes clear in the oft-cited climax of erotic ascent. If this revelation of non-relative beauty comes, in one respect, suddenly (έξαιρης) and completely out of the blue, in another respect it arrives at the end of a particular sequence. Socrates had affirmed at the outset of his speech that love is a desire, and specifically a desire for beauty. This desire does not reach satisfaction at once, but instead entails a pursuit that follows an intelligible order. As is well known, the order is a movement from the sensible to the non-sensible and from the more particular (and exclusive) to the more universal (and comprehensive): from one body to two, to bodily beauty in general, to the beauty of the soul, to customs and laws, to knowledge, and then to the vision of beauty, itself-by-itself-with-itself (aut’ auto kath’ auto meth’ aut’ ou, Sym. 211b).

But it is important that we avoid reading these steps in a banal way, as if each step was “partial” in the sense of being “merely a part,” each of which is meant to be accumulated along the way until one managed to gather up beauty as a whole. This model would take for granted a notion of the soul as something that is empty at the beginning and that fills up in a continuous ascent toward final completion; moreover, it would picture the form of beauty as nothing more than a collective whole. Both presumptions represent a misunderstanding: eros is not simply emptiness, a mark of the deficiency of the soul, which therefore seeks completion by addition (this is, incidentally, the hole in Aristophanes’s wholeness theory). Instead, eros is a paradoxical unity of poverty and plenty,
emptiness and fullness. It is not often noticed that, while Socrates begins his explanation of the desire that constitutes love by insisting on the soul’s lack of, and need for, beauty, halfway through the speech he perfectly reverses the picture: our desire, he says, is due to our being overfull, our being pregnant and needing to give birth. In this case, beauty ceases to be the direct object of desire and becomes instead the medium: we desire to beget and give birth in beauty (tēs gennēseōs kai tou tokou en tōi kalōi, Sym. 206e).

Just as the movement up the ladder is not simply an incremental increase, so too is the beauty that the soul seeks not something that presents itself in parts from the beginning that converge to form a whole at the end. To be sure, there is some kind of growth, and thus a genuine ascent, in the movement up the ladder, but it is crucial to be attentive to the full breadth of the paradox operative here, which can be illuminated by reference to other dialogues. In the Phaedrus, Plato distinguishes beauty from every other form by saying it is the brightest, or most perfectly manifest (ekphanestaton, Phaedrus 250d) of the spiritual realities. He explains what he means by saying that, while the other forms are by their nature invisible, and able to be grasped only by the mind (which, as the Phaedo especially reveals, is generally characteristic of the forms), beauty is a transcendent form that even as such can be seen through the bodily eyes. This is an extraordinary point that is worth dwelling on. With other forms, a particular kind of inadequacy impels us to a deeper level of inquiry: we recognize a pair of sticks as “equal,” though we know we could not have derived the understanding of equality from these sticks or any other similar pairs of physical objects. The explanatory incompleteness prompts us to consider the matter from a higher perspective, to “recollect” a non-sensible truth. An even more obvious example can

69. As is well known, Eros is the child of Poros and Penia, conceived and born on the feast day of Aphrodite (beauty) (Sym. 203b–d).
71. Note that this does not contradict the claim that desire is based on a lack; it simply renders that point more paradoxical: the “lack” in this case is being too full, so that what is missing is a discharge of the superabundance. It is also worth noting that the Greek verb “tiktein” can refer either to the male or female role in reproduction. The simultaneity of these opposite roles in the verb is a happy coincidence, and reappears in the constant reversal of lover and beloved that Plato eventually brings to light. See Sym. 222b; cf. Phaedrus 255c–d.
72. Phaedo 79a; Phaedrus 250d–e.
be seen in the role Plato gives to contradiction in dialectic.\textsuperscript{73} As Plato points out, the same is nevertheless different from other things, and what is different is the same as itself, and this prompts a deeper reflection.\textsuperscript{74} In general, whenever we have one name for two different things, this “contradiction” compels us to penetrate beyond this opposition to seek what unites them and so warrants a single signifier. Note that Plato does not as a matter of course in these cases employ the language of the passion of eros, the soul’s growing wings, and things of this nature.\textsuperscript{75} What accounts for that violent trembling and bursting forth in the soul in the \textit{Phaedrus} is the fact that the \textit{senses themselves} grasp what necessarily exceeds the senses: it is genuinely \textit{beauty} that the lover \textit{sensibly perceives} (as distinct from \textit{thinking} equality while physically seeing sticks that strive after, but fall short of, that equality). It is apparently just this physical expression of what cannot be contained in the physical expression that distinguishes beauty, and the properly erotic desire it instills, from the universal desire for the good that characterizes all things at all times.\textsuperscript{76}

It is crucial to see that it is \textit{beauty qua beauty} that is present \textit{in the body};\textsuperscript{77} as we said above, what the lover perceives is not just a “part” of beauty, which would then call for completion through being re-joined with the other parts, or an indirect allusion to the intelligible form of beauty, which would be grasped only by moving away from the signifier and arriving at the signified. To be sure, Plato does use the word “recollection” in the description of beauty in the \textit{Phaedrus}, which does indeed imply that beauty is not simply “here” in the present experience, but lies in a realm “beyond” (“\textit{ekei}”), to which the mind is recalled by seeing the particular instance.\textsuperscript{78} But this is just the paradox that makes beauty unique, that makes it beautiful. Even while being “elsewhere,” beauty is nevertheless immediately \textit{before us}. In the \textit{Phaedo}, Plato describes beauty as genuinely \textit{present (parousia)} in the beautiful thing (and also uses the

\textsuperscript{73} A clear account of this is given at \textit{Republic} 523b–524d.

\textsuperscript{74} See \textit{Sophist} 244c ff.; \textit{Parmenides} 129a ff.

\textsuperscript{75} An exception is 490a–b in the \textit{Republic}, although Plato is simply presenting the love of wisdom here without specifying the precise method.

\textsuperscript{76} Gabriel Richardson Lear refers to the “standing desire for the good” which is activated by beauty (“Permanent Beauty,” 113). Plato draws an analogy between creativity in the general and in the strict (“poetic”) sense, and love in the general and in the strict (“erotic”) sense (\textit{Sym.} 205b–d).

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Sym.} 210a.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Phaedrus} 249c–250e.
The intriguing word “koinōnia” to describe the relation between the image and the reality.\textsuperscript{79} The transcendence of beauty does not prevent it from being really immanent in the body. Eryximachus was right, in this sense, to see the power of love as reaching all the way down into the most basic dimensions of nature. But Eryximachus was wrong to miss the fact that this power is related, even at this basic level, to transcendent beauty.

This presence of beauty in its completeness even in the relative instance, the image, has two implications. First, it means that the movement from the lower to the higher, the ascent up the ladder, is not exactly a movement from the imperfect or incomplete to the perfect or complete. Instead, the movement is driven (if that is the correct word here) by a fullness that overflows. We are reminded here of the “empty” desire that turns out to be a pregnancy seeking to give birth and produce. This implies that it is the perfection of the experience of beauty, rather than the imperfection, that opens one to seek more beauty and to seek it more deeply. The longing for more (poverty) coincides with a perfect satisfaction (wealth). The “properly initiated lover” genuinely falls in love with the beauty of a single body (\textit{“henos auton sōmatos eran”}),\textsuperscript{80} which is to say that he encounters the fullness of beauty in this one body.\textsuperscript{81} To fall in love means to devote oneself in a complete way, to orient the whole of one’s existence to the beloved, as the \textit{Phaedrus} shows. If transcendent beauty were not present in its completeness in this one body, the lover would not fall in love, but would simply relate to the body as an object of self-interest, to be negotiated in its relativity to other such objects, as we see in the critique of Lysias in the \textit{Phaedrus}. But the very beauty that he encounters therein is not itself exhausted by its presence there. Even if beauty is present as a whole, it is not wholly present: \textit{totus sed non taliter}.\textsuperscript{82} This means that the experience of beauty opens up to a further encounter and an increasingly deep and proper relation to it in itself. It is important to see that there is no opposition in principle between the par-

\textsuperscript{79.} \textit{Phaedo} 100d.
\textsuperscript{80.} \textit{Sym.} 211c.
\textsuperscript{81.} It is interesting to note that, even at this initial stage, the love is not what one would call a merely sensual love: even directed to a single \textit{body}, the lover is inspired to “engender beautiful ideas therein” (\textit{Sym.} 210a--b). The higher beauty, in other words, is already present at the very outset.
\textsuperscript{82.} This is a scholastic phrase, often used to explain the extent of the human soul’s eschatological knowledge of God. See, e.g., Aquinas, \textit{ST} I, q. 12, a. 7, obj. 3.
ticularity of beauty and its universality—unless it be precisely the sort of opposition beauty serves to bring to coincidence. The classic complaint that Plato has no place for particular loves, but relentlessly uses the individual as a mere stepping stone for the egocentric enjoyment of abstract beauty in solitude, is altogether superficial for all the apparent support in the text.\textsuperscript{83} Each instance of beauty is irreplaceable, because each is, like the person of Socrates most evidently, incomparable with everything else. And that is because beauty in its absoluteness, its non-relativity, appears in the particularity and relativity of the appearance. Beauty calls one ever further upward, paradoxically, by being already present below.

The second implication is that beauty will always make its appearance, so to speak, “all of a sudden.” The word “\textit{exaiphnēs}” is a crucial one in the \textit{Symposium}, as scholars regularly observe.\textsuperscript{84} The reason for its suddenness is precisely its completeness, or its “all-at-once-ness,” which is another way of describing its presence qua (transcendent) beauty in the body (or in the soul, or in knowledge, etc.). There is a certain paradox in the way Diotima describes the highest mysteries of the love of beauty: on the one hand, the lover passes gradually through stages, mastering each before proceeding to the next, and on the other hand the destination arrives, so to speak, out of the blue. There is a simultaneous continuity and discontinuity. This paradox seems to belong to the nature of beauty and follows from what we have been saying. If beauty is present “\textit{totus sed non totaliter}” at each stage, each disclosure will have a completeness in itself, which makes it discontinuous with what preceded, even if what precedes then turns out to have a necessary place in that disclosure. Once again, beauty does not come together in a mere piecemeal fashion, accumulating from below, but arrives at each moment in some sense “from above.” This is why it makes sense for Plato, in the \textit{Phaedrus}, to describe the experience of beauty as coming with a deep


shudder, and to say that one is “seized” (embrithesteron) by love, which implies the onset of a relation to something bigger than oneself.85 The ascent is thus not a simple logical progression, wherein each step would be necessarily entailed by the precedent, which would represent a sufficient condition for what follows from it. At the same time, the movement is not mere discontinuity; there is a genuine fittingness to the progression that becomes apparent with each disclosure. We might say that a “training” for beauty is required—Socrates insists on the proper stages and proper guide86—even if this training is (paradoxically, once again) a preparation, a readying of oneself, for what exceeds one’s expectations. This preparation involves an inevitable discipline and ascesis, as Plato shows elsewhere,87 since it involves an adherence to beauty above and beyond the particularity of its manifestation.88 In this respect, it is the very experience of beauty itself, as we have been describing it, that opens one up to further and deeper experiences of beauty, insofar as the experience of beauty, even in its most bodily aspect, evokes a kind of awe and reverence.89 There is an extraordinary coincidence in beauty of rest and restlessness, a satisfaction and longing, that corresponds to its paradoxical unity of transcendence and immanence.90

If the paradox of beauty has implications for each higher moment in the ascent, increasingly preparing one for what cannot be prepared for, it also has implications for the earlier stages. Beauty casts a new, retrospective light on the “life before,” and it belongs to its very essence to do so. Beauty not only disorients in the abruptness of its manifestation, it also re-orientates. Although beauty arrives in a decisive sense “out of the blue,” Plato never associates beauty with disorder. Beauty remains, for him, a principle of order—perhaps the principle of order. But precisely as the principle of order, it transcends any particular order in which it is manifest. No given order exhausts beauty so that it could be reduced to

85. Phaedrus 251a, 252c.
86. Sym. 211b–c.
88. We might compare the fidelity to beauty to the holding fast to conviction through various tests and trials, which Plato accords to thumos as its proper virtue (Republic 429a ff).
89. See Phaedrus 251a.
90. Friedrich Schiller refers to beauty as simultaneously inspiring a docility or gentleness of spirit and a tensed energy, a readiness for extreme action (On the Aesthetic Education of Man [New York: Dover, 2004], 81–90).
that instance of order. Beauty, we recall, is absolute, which means that it is not itself relative to other things, but things are instead relative to it. The manifestation of beauty therefore inevitably entails a kind of shifting of the fundamental point of reference, so that the prior order gets recast, so to speak, in an altogether fundamental way. Gabriel Richardson Lear is thus right to observe that beauty interrupts the normal course of things and, through this interruption, re-interprets what preceded it. Plato clearly wants to emphasize the fact that those who are touched by beauty through an encounter with Socrates are immediately caused to reevaluate their lives. They see that the things they previously considered of supreme importance are actually trivial, and even foolish. This reevaluation belongs to the experience of beauty generally: “When [the lover] grasps this,” namely, that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same, “he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and despise it.”

In relation to our description of the ascent of love, we might say that, while one does not move from the lower to the higher as a reaction to imperfection, a repulsion away from what is lacking, but rather as a being opened up through an excess of perfection, it is nevertheless true that, from the more ample experience of beauty to which one has now been opened, one can see the earlier experience as less ample. The discontinuity of the sudden epiphany of beauty is not, however, the elimination of continuity; instead, it is the establishment of a more comprehensive continuity by virtue of having introduced a higher point of reference, a point of which those still on the “other side” are necessarily ignorant: “I used to think that what I was doing was important, but in fact I was the most worthless man on earth.... I’m sorry for you and your friends because you think your affairs are important when they’re really totally trivial.”

The reason continuity remains even with the discontinuity is that the lower levels do indeed present beauty in its fullness (totus), even if not yet

91. Richardson Lear, “Permanent Beauty,” 113.
92. Sym. 210b.
93. Sym. 173a–d. See also Sym. 216b–c. It is interesting to note that the observation regarding one’s “reevaluation” as a result of the experience of beauty comes at the beginning and the end of the dialogue. We might compare Plato’s description on this point to Phaedrus 252a, in which Plato says that the lover, struck by beauty, “forgets mother and brothers and all friends, neglects property and cares not for its loss, ... despising all the customs and proprieties in which it formerly took pride.”
fully (*totaliter*). The ascesis of the ladder’s ascent requires one to detach oneself not from the beauty of the particular body but from the limitation of its particular manifestation; it is the identification of beauty with this limitation, and not the beauty itself, that comes to appear as foolish.

It is the continuity in discontinuity that gives beauty its characteristic grace. The epiphany of beauty is neither crudely violent (sheer discontinuity) nor mundane (sheer continuity); instead, it arrives with a surprise that both confirms and elevates. A certain playful mood suffuses the *Symposium*, as it does all of Plato’s writings to some degree. In his Letter VI, Plato writes that the most important matters ought to be approached in a spirit of playful seriousness or serious play—in light of the *Symposium* we might say “tragically comic” or “comically tragic.” If supreme beauty were simply the highest rung of the latter, its pursuit would have a gravely scientific tone: progress would occur through the rigorous application of a technique, and could be marked according to a rigid and simplistic hierarchy. But it is precisely the absoluteness of beauty that relativizes the hierarchy, without in the least abolishing it. Each step is indeed a step forward, but the seriousness of the progress is always a light-hearted one, since the properly initiated lover is, in a certain respect, already at the end all along the way. The pursuit of beauty is indeed a science (*epistēmē*, Sym. 210d; *mathēma*, Sym. 211c), but it is a *joyful science* (*fröhliche Wissenschaft*).

We now arrive at a point that is decisive for our general argument. If beauty itself is indeed absolute, and so not a mere stage on the ladder of ascent, the beauty at the end turns out to be one and the same as the beauty at the beginning. In this respect, it connects these extremes; the first and the last are no longer separated from each other by a determinate distance, but are now “immediately” united, because each has an immediate connection to a unity that transcends them in their difference from each other. Thus, the speakers each began their speeches by com-

96. Letter VI, 323d. Agathon also points out his own efforts to “mingle” *spoudē* and *paidia* (*Sym. 197e*).
97. “Hierarchy,” a word coined by the Neoplatonist Dionysius the Areopagite, is obviously fundamental to Plato’s thinking.
menting on the previous one, suggesting how they would make an incremental improvement on what was lacking in the speech just given. But, although Socrates too begins by engaging with claims Agathon, the prior speaker, had made or assumed, he proves to be in direct dialogue, so to speak, with each of the others. The transcendent perspective he introduces is precisely what allows him to mediate between perspectives that would otherwise seem opposed. Just as Socrates mediates between the comic and tragic poet, so too does the absolute beauty he reveals mediate between the soul (Pausanias) and the body (Eryximachus), without confusing them with each other. Most dramatically, Socrates, who not only speaks about love as do the others but in a certain sense “incarnates” the love of which he speaks, effects a unity between the speakers at the furthest extremes. Beauty is not only divinely transcendent but immediately present here and now, “in the flesh,” without ceasing to be “from above.” Thus, beauty mediates precisely by being ultimate, and revealing itself to be already present from the first. As Plato explains in the Timaeus, a true mediator always turns out to be both first and last.

BEAUTY AND THE COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM

It seems to me that the notion of beauty as absolute, and thus as mediator, opens up the possibility of beginning to respond to the question that

98. In addition to the direct engagement with Agathon (Sym. 199c ff.), Socrates makes a more or less explicit reference to Aristophanes (Sym. 205e), correcting his story; he emphasizes the role of both body and soul in love (and thus corrects both Eryximachus and Pausanias, Sym. 206b) by revealing that there is a unity beyond this difference as well as beyond the difference between two types of eros; and he offers an explanation for Phaedrus’s claims about the desire for immortality (directly referring to Phaedrus’s own examples, Sym. 208d).

99. This is evident also in the Phaedrus, in which beauty is identified as the one form that speaks directly to both body and soul at once: it appeals, indeed, to the soul in all of its dimensions, from the most sensible and appetitive to the most intelligible and contemplative (Phaedrus 250a ff.).

100. What love wants is not beauty, Diotima says, but reproduction and birth in beauty (Sym. 206e).

101. “Beauty itself” is revealed as the ultimate goal in everything love seeks (Sym. 211a).

102. Timaeus 31c–32a. In his introduction to The Symposium of Plato, R. G. Bury describes what he calls the “Problem of Beauty,” by which he means the apparent inconsistency in the fact that Socrates presents beauty in some places as an end and in other places as a mere means (to immortality, for example) (ibid., xlvi–xlvii). He then goes on to say that we ought not to insist on philosophical rigor in the speech of a prophetess, but our argument has revealed that this position is not at all a betrayal of philosophical rigor.
set our reflections in motion, namely, why is the phenomenon of reversal and unity in opposition so pervasive in the *Symposium* that we can think of it as the hidden theme of the dialogue? This question prompted us to wonder whether there is a particular connection between beauty and the coincidence of opposites. The connection between beauty and antithesis and contrast has been noted in the classical tradition—for example, by Augustine in the *City of God*—but without a clear explanation of why such a connection should exist. Plato himself does not reflect on the matter in any explicit way; as we have been proposing in this essay, Plato does not seek to define or explain beauty in the *Symposium*, but only to display it in a paradigmatic way. Because unity-in-opposition is so basic to the *Symposium*, there is good reason to think that this “logic,” this particularly dramatic form of order, is not simply an instance to be enumerated with others but is somehow expressive of the very essence of beauty. Again, Plato does not address any of this explicitly, but we may be able to shed light on the matter by drawing on resources outside of this particular dialogue.

As we mentioned at the outset, Plato tends to associate beauty with order on the one hand, using terms like “measure,” “proportion,” “perfection,” and “self-sufficiency.” On the other hand, he connects beauty with radiance, characterizing the phenomenon of beauty with light, brightness, manifestness, and the like. Can we draw any connection between these two aspects? According to Thomas Aquinas, order is the manifestation of unity in multiplicity; it is what unity looks like, so

---

103. *City of God*, XI.18: “For what are called antitheses are among the most elegant of the ornaments of speech. They might be called in Latin ‘oppositions,’ or to speak more accurately, ‘contrapositions.’ … As, then, these oppositions of contraries lend beauty to the language, so the beauty of the course of this world is achieved by the opposition of contraries, arranged, as it were, by an eloquence not of words, but of things” (Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods [New York: Modern Library, 2000], 361–62).

104. He does indeed affirm that the properly initiated lover “ultimately comes to know what beauty itself is” (*gnōi auto teleutōn ho esti kalon*, *Sym.* 211c–d). This follows Plato’s usual formulation when he seeks a definition (although this does not mean knowing a definition is equivalent to knowledge of the thing itself: *Letter VII* clearly suggests otherwise [342a–c]). In any event, Plato makes no attempt at offering any sort of definition in the dialogue.

105. See *Philebus* 65b, 66b; *Timaeus* 87c.

106. *Phaedrus* 250b, 250d.

107. According to Ronald Schenk, Plato is following two different traditions, namely, the aesthetics of light (which he refers to as Homeric) and the aesthetics of measure (which he refers to as Pythagorean) (The Soul of Beauty: A Psychological Investigation of Appearance [Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1992], 84–85).
to speak, when spread out. We have order, rather than a mere multitude, when many parts all bear a relation to a single principle that is thus common to them.\textsuperscript{108} We might think of order either as unity differentiated or difference gathered up into a unity. What gives a whole measure and proportion is precisely the unity that pervades the parts, making them one: proportion (\textit{ana-logia}) is an intelligible relation (\textit{ratio} or \textit{logos}) of many to a transcendent unity that lies, so to speak, “above” (\textit{anō}) them. It is not an accident that Plotinus, for his part, defines beauty in just this way.\textsuperscript{109} Plato himself describes the vision of intelligible beauty as “seeing that the whole is bound to itself in kinship” (\textit{idein hoti pan auto autōi suggenes estin}).\textsuperscript{110} This wholeness is intelligible, rather than merely sensible, precisely because the unity is not itself one of the sensible parts; if it were, it would be unable to pervade them all. Only a mind can gather up the multiplicity into a proper unity; as we learn in the \textit{Phaedrus}, this is just what defines intelligence.\textsuperscript{111} In this respect, while beauty does indeed have a special connection with sense experience, only a creature with \textit{reason}, only man, who is embodied reason, can perceive beauty.\textsuperscript{112}

If beauty in general appears to be a unity-in-difference, what is the significance of the coincidentia oppositorum in particular? According to Aristotle, opposition (\textit{anantia}) represents “perfect difference” (\textit{teleia diaphora}).\textsuperscript{113} It is difference in its most complete sense because, unlike a non-oppositional difference such as the difference between red and blue, opposition traverses the whole of a particular genus. It comprehends the whole because its terms represent the furthest extremes within that particular order. Thus, hot and cold are the extremes of temperature: all particular instances of temperature without exception fall between hot and cold; by contrast there are indefinitely many colors that fall outside of the

\textsuperscript{108} On the connection between goodness and order in Aquinas, see \textit{Summa contra Gentiles}, bk. 2, chap. 39.7, and bk. 2, chap. 41.2. On the need for a transcendent principle for there to be order, see \textit{ST} II-II, q. 26, a. 1. On the ordered diversity in creatures as a reflection of God’s absolute simplicity, see \textit{ST} I, q. 47, a. 1.

\textsuperscript{109} See Plotinus, \textit{Ennead} I.6.2.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Suggenes} suggests that the component parts of the whole all have a common origin, that is, they refer to a single transcendent cause (\textit{Sym.} 210c).

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Phaedrus} 249b–c.

\textsuperscript{112} We recall the reference to seeing and hearing in the “definition” of beauty in the \textit{Greater Hippias}, and the significance of sight in beauty in the \textit{Phaedrus}. Nevertheless, Plato also says in the \textit{Phaedrus} that only the soul that has feasted on (invisible) \textit{truth} is able to perceive beauty. A creature without intelligence would not be sensitive to beauty.

\textsuperscript{113} Aristotle, \textit{Met.} X.4.1055a4–18.
difference between red and blue. Now, if beauty is unity-in-difference, and opposition is perfect difference, the coincidentia oppositorum would seem to represent a kind of perfect beauty, a complete manifestation of beauty, within the particular order in question. In this regard, the coincidentia oppositorum stands out as a paradigm of beauty.

But there is more to say. The coincidentia oppositorum comes in a variety of forms. At the very lowest level would be mere physical contiguity of things otherwise unrelated.\textsuperscript{114} We might think here of the mere happenstance of the placement of the couches. A somewhat more profound coincidence of opposites would be the “harmony” described by Eryximachus, in which opposed things are conjoined, even while their opposed features remain opposed. It is not an accident that the model of this balance of opposed elements is drawn from the physical sphere—the bow and lyre in Heraclitus’s case, and medicine and health in Eryximachus’s.\textsuperscript{115} The highest form, and so the paradigm of the paradigms, so to speak, is the coincidence in which the opposites turn out to be each other in a certain respect. Thus, it is not simply that poverty and plenty are united, for example, by being balanced over-against each other; instead, the very poverty of love turns out to be its wealth, while the “wealth” of love (as in Agathon’s conception) turns out to be utterly impoverished. The emptiness of desire turns out to be the fullness of pregnancy; death turns out to be life; “disorder” turns out to be a greater manifestation of order. The ascent in rhetorical form turns out to be a descent in philosophical content. To return to the example given in the first section that we said required explanation, the total absence of rhetorical display or of outward form in Socrates’s speech turns out to be the most brilliant presentation of truth. The lack of “show,” in other words, turns out to be the fullness of appearance. And so forth.

As we suggested before, the transcendence of beauty implies a gracefulness and play that relativizes the seriousness of logical progression, although without in the least giving up order.\textsuperscript{116} Instead, beauty represents the inexhaustible ability to expand order, and to give a proper place even

\textsuperscript{114}. Unrelated things present a certain kind of opposition—x and not-x—but this is so indefinite as to leave the intelligence more or less indifferent.

\textsuperscript{115}. The externality of the coincidence is given special emphasis by Eryximachus; see Sym. 187a–b.

\textsuperscript{116}. Note that we have a good reason for the ambiguity about the total number of speeches delivered at Agathon’s celebration (cf. Sym. 178a).
to what initially appears to be a foreign intrusion. The doors are shut on the closed circle of men so that they can display their wisdom to each other in peace, but Socrates manages surreptitiously to introduce a woman’s voice—a woman specifically identified as a foreigner (xenē, Sym. 211d)—into the conversation, and it is precisely her wisdom that reveals the proper order of all the rest. This “arrival from above” is dramatically reflected, acted out as it were in its perfect opposite pole, with the dramatic intrusion of Alcibiades who turns out to deliver a speech that brings a perfect conclusion to the evening. It seems that we have, here, a rather illuminating explanation for Aristophanes’s fit of hiccups: this absurd disruption of order turns out to be the very thing that puts the speakers in their proper place. Felix culpa! What appears to be an accident is revealed to be essential. And that is simply beautiful.

Let us make a final observation. Richardson Lear has drawn our attention to the temporal aspect of beauty, or more precisely to the fact that beauty’s absolute transcendence of time implies that it cannot be captured definitively in any single temporal moment, and so is possessed only in the constant movement forward of fruitfulness. Even at the highest point, the lover does not cease generating, but in fact genuinely generates for the first time. In the language we have been developing here, we might say that the immanent image of transcendent and eternal beauty has its paradigm in the dramatic form that we have been highlighting in the Symposium. Beauty is order. But it is not order in a merely static sense; beauty is, rather, order that is always newly arriving (neos aei gignomenos, Sym. 207d), order that has the inexhaustible capacity constantly to renew itself and endlessly to reassert itself, not in the resentful mode of tyrannic imposition through force but in a grace-filled reversal (peripateia) that is a discovery (anagnōrisis). The formal evening of conversation about love at Agathon’s house begins with the setting of rules: the speeches were to proceed from left to right, because this is

117. To follow this argument out to the very end, we would have to work through the distinction between the disruption of order that does not allow itself to be integrated. See Gorgias 507e–508a, in which Socrates identifies the sort of man that refuses “community” (koinonia) in principle, and thus cannot be integrated into friendship with the gods or men, or indeed into the “world-order” (kosmos) simply.
118. For more on this topic, see my “Plato and the Problem of Love,” esp. 220.
119. Richardson Lear, “Permanent Beauty,” 121.
120. Sym. 212a.
121. Aristotle, Poetics 10.
the proper order. The rule they follow is not just a matter of custom (nōmos), but is fundamental to the nature (physis) of things.\textsuperscript{122} When Alcibiades arrives, he disrupts the natural order and changes the theme of the conversation, insisting on praising Socrates instead of love and causing Socrates and Agathon to switch places. After he speaks, the order ends up dissolving altogether. But at the end of the night, when the apparent disorder introduced by Alcibiades had spent itself, and the guests were “gone,” in one way or another, Socrates was left standing with the comic and tragic poets, discussing their ultimate unity—calmly, quietly, and almost without witnesses\textsuperscript{123}—passing the cup, now once again, from left to right.\textsuperscript{124} Order has been restored. When these, too, finally fell asleep, Socrates departed, leaving behind the night of extraordinary events to spend the day “in his ordinary fashion.”

\textsuperscript{122} Reeve presents the movement from left to right as the expression of the perfect motion of the “circle of the Same” (“A Study in Violets,” 142–43).

\textsuperscript{123} Aristodemus, the original source of the report, had fallen asleep, but awoke just in time to catch sight of the final scene (Sym. 223c).

\textsuperscript{124} Sym. 223b.
The main features of Aquinas’s all-too-brief discussions of beauty are well known. He regularly treats the beautiful in connection with the good, explaining that “‘beautiful’ and ‘good’ are the same in a subject, for they are based on the same thing, that is, on form … but they differ in meaning [ratione]…. For ‘good’ properly pertains to appetite, since good is what all things desire…. ‘Beautiful,’ however, pertains to a cognitive power, for those things are called beautiful which please when seen [quaec visa placent].”¹ Thus, the meaning that the term “beautiful” adds to that of “good” is “a relation [ordinem] to a cognitive power.”² Or again, “the beautiful is the same as the good, differing in meaning only. For since good is what all things desire, it belongs to the meaning of ‘good’ that in it the appetite is brought to rest, but it belongs to the meaning of ‘beautiful’ that the appetite is brought to rest by its being seen or known [aspectu seu cognitione] … and thus it is clear that ‘beautiful’ adds, beyond ‘good,’ some relation to a cognitive power, so that what simply satisfies appetite is called ‘good,’ but that, the very apprehension of which pleases, is called ‘beautiful.’”³

I do not propose to enter into the debate as to whether or not “beau-

³. *ST* I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.
tiful” in Aquinas is a fourth transcendental, in addition to the canonically recognized “one,” “good,” and “true.” This appears to be little more than a dispute over a technicality, having more to do with the precise criteria for “transcendentality” than with the nature and status of beauty. It cannot reasonably be denied that for Aquinas, since “beautiful” is convertible with “good,” it is therefore convertible with “being”; in other words, that every being, in that it is a being, is beautiful. Any being, in that it has some form in virtue of which it is anything at all, is in some way “pleasing when seen,” that is, it offers some satisfaction to the soul “by its being seen or known,” and is therefore beautiful. Nor can it be denied that “beautiful” expresses a meaning distinct not only from that of “being” but also from that of either “good” or “true” taken separately, since it expresses a relation to a cognitive power that is not expressed by the former, and a relation to an appetitive power that is not expressed by the latter. If all of this is granted, then it seems to matter little whether we say that “beautiful” is the “final integration” that comprehends all the other transcendentals, or the “original unity” out of which “true” and “good” are analyzed, or not a distinct transcendental at all but rather “the extension of the true to the good.” The meaning, nature, and significance of beauty remain the same in any case.

4. To these De veritate adds “thing” and “something distinct” (Thomas Aquinas, Quaestiones disputatae de veritate [Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1970], 1, 1, resp.).

5. Thus Jan Aertsen remarks, “The question as to the transcendentality of the beautiful is only answered when it has become clear that beauty expresses a general mode of being not explicated by the other transcendentals” (Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 351). He concludes that it does not, and therefore that beauty is not “a distinct transcendental.” This phrase occurs many times: 343, 344, 350–51, 353, 354, 359. It appears that Aertsen’s concern is not to deny that beauty is coextensive and convertible with being, but only to deny that it expresses anything “not explicated by the other transcendentals.”

6. Aertsen criticizes Umberto Eco’s claim that the texts of Aquinas cited above demonstrate that for him “beauty is identified with being simply as being,” observing correctly that in these passages “the beautiful is not identified with being, but with the good” (Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals, 346–47). But since “good” is convertible with “being,” it follows that even if the beautiful is not “identified with being simply as being,” it is nonetheless convertible with being as good. Once again, Aertsen’s point appears to be only to deny that beauty is a distinct transcendental, not to deny that it is convertible with being.


Aquinas’s accounts of “beautiful” as signifying a relation of being at once to appetite and to cognition are expressions of the interpenetration of knowledge and love, of intellect and will, that runs throughout his thought. “Beautiful” expresses not merely that which is loved, but that which is loved in and by being known, not merely that which the will takes as its object, but that which the will takes as its object through cognitive apprehension. But within this interpenetration, Aquinas invariably assigns priority to intellect and its act, knowledge, over will and its act, love, insisting that all love both begins and ends in knowledge. Love is necessarily directed toward some good, but any good can be loved only if it is apprehended: as the ancients say, ex visu amor.

A good thing is the cause of love as its object. But a good thing is not an object of appetite, except insofar as it is apprehended. And therefore love requires some apprehension of the good that is loved. And on this account the Philosopher says (Ethics 9) that bodily vision is the beginning of sensitive love. And likewise the contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the beginning of spiritual love. So therefore knowledge is the cause of love for the same reason as the good, which cannot be loved unless known.10

So, in responding to the argument that will is a higher faculty than intellect because it moves the intellect to act, Aquinas explains:

The intellect moves the will first and by itself. For the will, as such, is moved by its object, which is the apprehended good. But the will moves the intellect as it were accidentally, that is, insofar as understanding [intelligere] itself is apprehended as a good, and so is desired by the will, from which it follows that the intellect understands [intelligit] in act. Even in this the intellect precedes the will; for the will would never desire to understand [intelligere] unless the intellect first apprehended understanding as a good. And again, the will moves the intellect to operating in act in the way in which an agent is said to move; but the intellect moves the will in the way in which an end moves, for the understood good [bonum intellectum] is the end of the will.11

Likewise, we attain our end in an act of cognitive apprehension:

At first we will to attain an intelligible end; but we attain it through this, that it is present to us by an act of the intellect; and then the delighted will rests in the

10. ST I-II, q. 27, a. 2, resp.
end that is now possessed. So, therefore, the essence of happiness consists in an act of the intellect; but the consequent delight pertains to the will. In this respect Augustine says that happiness is “joy in truth.”

The ultimate end of man, therefore, is an act not of will but of intellect, not to love God but to know God. But the good that arouses desire by being apprehended is, precisely, the beautiful; and the good that satisfies desire by being apprehended is, again, the beautiful. Indeed, God as known in the beatific vision most perfectly fulfills the description of beautiful things as those which “please when seen,” or, better, which satisfy desire “by being seen or known.” All love, then, is first aroused and finally satisfied not by the good simpliciter but by the apprehended good. It must follow that not simply the good, but more precisely the beautiful, is the archê and telos, the principle and end of the soul’s entire trajectory, from the initial arousal of desire through the encounter, by way of sense, with any good thing, that is, any being, to its ultimate satisfaction in the intellectual vision of God, the very source of being itself.

Such an understanding of beauty places Aquinas squarely in a philosophical tradition that extends from Plato through Aristotle to Plotinus and Augustine. In his magisterial study *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, however, Jan Aertsen not only denies that beauty in Aquinas is a distinct transcendental, but also claims that “what is new in medieval thought on beauty, compared to Greek thought, is this emphasis on the relation of the beautiful to knowledge (cognitio, apprehensio).” In fact, however, the relation of beauty to knowledge is fully evident in the thought of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. As Aristotle observes in the *Poetics*:

A beautiful thing … must not only have [its parts] ordered, but must also have magnitude. For the beautiful lies in magnitude and order. Wherefore a very small thing would not be beautiful, for the view [theoria] [of it] is confused, coming about in an almost imperceptible time; nor would a very large one, for the view would not take place all at once, but its unity escapes the viewers and the whole [escapes] from the view.


13. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, 356. See also ibid., 359: “In the Middle Ages the place of beauty shifts in the direction of ‘the true,’ which in the order of the transcendentals precedes the good.”

Although order makes a thing beautiful, the thing is not beautiful unless it can be seen to have such order. Throughout the Platonic tradition (including Aristotle), being is that which is intelligible, and the very words for “being” or “reality” (to on, ousia) already carry this connotation. Hence both Plato and Aristotle identify being as form or “look” (eidos), that which is given to the gaze of awareness. The word eidos, in turn, already has the sense not simply of “look” but of “good look,” or beauty, as do the Latin equivalents forma and species. Thus in Latin formosus and speciosus mean “beautiful,” as in the Vulgate rendering of Song of Songs 1:5, Nigra sum sed formosa, “I am black but comely. . . .”

Throughout this tradition, beauty thus consists fundamentally in the intelligibility of being, its givenness to cognitive apprehension. If we were thinking in philosophical Greek it would be wholly unnecessary to construct an elaborate demonstration that being, precisely as the intelligible, is therefore also the beautiful. Indeed, just because this understanding of beauty is, so to speak, built into the very words used by Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, the attempt to extract it from their texts and subject it to discursive exposition may seem at once tortuous and superfluous. Nonetheless, Aertsen’s remark not only demands a response but also offers an occasion for articulating with some precision the relationship of beauty to truth, to intelligibility, and therefore to being, in the Greek philosophical tradition.

PLATO

The close association of beauty with both goodness and truth in Plato’s thought scarcely calls for demonstration, but the exact meaning of these terms, and the relationship among them, demands close attention. Plato very frequently uses the word “true” (alēthes) in such a way that it clearly

15. Thus when Augustine describes how all sensible things proclaim that they are not God but that God made them, he concludes, “My question was my gaze; their answer, their species.” Augustine, Confessionum libri XIII, ed. Lucas Verheijen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), 10.6.9. A translator must decide whether to render species as “beauty” or as “form,” when in fact it means both at once. Most opt for “beauty,” but thereby fail to convey the point that the beauty of things just is their form or intelligibility and as such their very being. Thus it is their share of intelligibility, their species, that shows them to be created, that is, dependent for their being on God, who just as pure form, purely intelligible, is at once being itself and beauty itself. Augustine’s Latin says all this in the single word species.
means “intelligible.” What is “true” is what is not latent (a-lēthes), concealed, unnoticed, but rather is patent, evident, out in the open, there to be known. The truth of things, in this sense, consists in the forms that they have and display, the intelligible characters or “whatnesses” in virtue of which they are what they are and so are anything at all. These forms are therefore at once the truth and the reality (ousia) of things. “Have you ever seen any of these [that is, the just, the beautiful, and the good] with your eyes?—In no way…. I am speaking about all things such as largeness, health, strength, and in one word, the reality [ousias] of all other things, what each thing is. Is what is most true [alēthestaton] of them contemplated through the body…?” 16 Here, as elsewhere in Plato, the term ousia signifies not merely “reality” in a vague, unspecified sense, but, more precisely, “reality-as-intelligible-form.” And since reality consists fundamentally in intelligibility, it follows that to alēthes, the true, is the same as to on, being or that-which-is. 17 Likewise Plato describes a sensual soul as one that is “bewitched by the body and by its appetites and pleasures so that nothing seems to be true [dokein einai alēthes] except the corporeal, which one can touch and see and drink and eat and use for sexual enjoyment.” 18 For such a soul, what “seems to be true” is what is given, manifest, patent to it, which it therefore takes as at once the real and the desirable.

Thus, in Plato’s analogy of the sun to the good in the Republic, the analogue of the light provided by the sun, in virtue of which the eye can see and visible things can be seen, is “truth and being”. “When [the soul] fixes itself upon that which truth and being [alētheia te kai to on] shines on, it has thought and known this and appears to have intellect.” 19 The phrase “truth and being,” governing the singular verb “shines,” signifies intelligibility, represented in the analogy by light. The central point of the analogy is that just as anything is visible, and the eye is able to see, in virtue of the light provided by the sun, so anything is intelligible, and the soul is able to understand, in virtue of the “truth and being” provided by the good, which must be understood as the integration or “binding to-

17. See, for example, Phaedrus 247c5–e3.
gether” of a multiplicity of parts into a whole with an identity of its own. In that sense the good is the principle or source of intelligibility, of “truth and being,” as the sun is the source of light. “Say, then, that this, which provides truth to the things that are known and gives power to that which knows, is the idea of the good.” Having said this, Socrates then adds, “Thus while both, knowledge and truth, are beautiful, it is other and still more beautiful than these.” Knowledge, that is, intellectual apprehension, and truth, that is, being qua intelligible form, are beautiful, and the good, as their enabling principle, is therefore a still greater beauty.

In the image of the divided line that follows, Socrates says that the sections of the line are arranged in terms of “clarity and unclarity [saphēneiai kai asapheiai],” or of “truth and not [truth].” He summarizes the image by saying that the sections, representing higher and lower modes of cognition, “share in clarity [saphēneias] as far as the things in them share in truth [alētheias].” Here again, therefore, “truth” signifies the presentation or availability of things to cognitive apprehension. Likewise, in the cave parable, the prisoners believe that the shadows of artifacts are “the true” because this is all that is given to their awareness, all that is manifest to them, and is therefore what counts for them as reality. The degrees of reality expressed in the parable by shadows, puppets, reflections, and real things outside the cave are levels of truth, of patency, of clarity. But then, in explaining the parable, Plato returns to the theme of beauty: “It must be concluded that . . . the idea of the good is itself the cause to all things of all things right and beautiful [orthōn te kai kalōn], in the visible giving birth to light and its principle [kyrion], and in the intelligible itself [being] the principle [kyria] that provides truth and intellect.” Here “right and beautiful” takes the place of “truth and being” as what is provided by the good, the analogue of light provided by

---

20. For this understanding of the good, see Rosemary Desjardins, Plato and the Good: Illuminating the Darkling Vision (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 101–2, 105–12. In Plato, see, e.g., Phaedo 99c1–6; Republic 442e2–423c4, 443d1–e2; Timaeus 31b8–c4, 32b3–c2.
22. Republic 508e4–6.
the sun. Beauty, then, must be understood as “luminosity,” the reality of things which consists in their intelligibility, their manifestness to cognitive apprehension. As the principle of intelligibility, of “truth and being,” the good is therefore the “brightest of being” and as such an “unmanageable beauty.”

The treatment of goodness, truth, and beauty in the Philebus is closely aligned with that in the Republic. Early in the dialogue, Socrates and Protarchus agree that neither a life of pleasure alone, without any cognitive apprehension, nor a life of knowledge alone, without any pleasure, is worthy of choice. They conclude that a mixture of pleasure and knowledge constitutes the best life. Already this suggests Aquinas’s account of the beautiful as that which is not simply pleasing, but pleasing by being seen or known, and not merely cognitively apprehended, but pleasing in being so apprehended. After extensive discussion of the nature of mixtures, toward the end of the dialogue Socrates sets out “to try to learn what then in this [mixture], in man and in everything, is the good.” He then observes, “That into which we do not mix in truth could never truly come to be or, once generated, be.” Since “truth” here enables anything to exist, it clearly signifies once again not simply “authenticity” or “genuineness” but rather, as in the Phaedo, Phaedrus, and Republic, the reality of things as their intelligibility. Upon asking

29. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 482: “Radiance,’ then, is not only one of the qualities of the beautiful but constitutes its actual being…. The proportionateness of the thing does not simply let it be what it is but also causes it to emerge as a harmonious whole that is proportioned within itself. This is the disclosure (aletheia) of which Plato speaks in the Philebus and which is part of the nature of the beautiful. Beauty is not simply symmetry but appearance itself. It is related to the idea of ‘shining’ (scheinen: also, to appear)…. Beauty has the mode of being of light.”
33. Philebus 21a8–22a6.
34. Philebus 64a1–2.
35. Philebus 64b2–3.
“what then in the commixture might we judge to be at once most honor-
able and, above all, the cause of its becoming such a dear disposition to-
all?”37 Socrates then explains, “every combination which does not some-
how possess measure or the nature of proportion of necessity destroys
its components and above all itself, for such a thing will not be a com-
bination but truly an uncombined collocation, bringing disaster to what-
ever things are contained in it.”38 Any mixture is good, then, in virtue
of measure or proportion, which constitutes it as one thing rather than
merely a multiplicity of items that are juxtaposed but not integrated into
a greater whole. Such integration-by-proportion, which is the goodness
of the mixture, renders it at once beautiful and true, that is, intelligible.

Now the power of the good has taken refuge for us in the nature of the beau-
tiful; for measureliness and proportion in every case turn out to become, of
course, beauty and virtue…. And we said that truth is to be mixed with them in
the combination…. If then we cannot capture the good in one idea, then tak-
ing it with three, beauty and proportion and truth, let us say that such a one as
this we would most rightly hold responsible for the things in the mixture, and
through this, being good, it becomes such.39

As in the Republic, therefore, goodness, consisting in unification-by-pro-
portion, is the principle of intelligibility, which is not only the “truth and
being” but also the beauty of things. Here again, therefore, we find that
beauty is one with truth in the sense of intelligibility.

In Socrates’s palinode in the Phaedrus, beauty holds a central place
as that which arouses love.40 But Socrates does not mention beauty in his
initial account of the soul’s contemplation of intelligible reality, which
here again is called both “reality” or “being” (ousia, to on) and “the true.”
The only forms he refers to by name are justice, moderation, and knowl-
dge. In view of the importance of beauty later in the speech, this omis-
sion already suggests that beauty will have a special status rather than
being just one form among and alongside others.41 In explaining how

37. Philebus 64c5–7.
38. Philebus 64d9–e3.
39. Philebus 64e5–65a5.
40. Phaedrus 247c3–e5.
41. The later statement that beauty “stands with moderation on the holy pedestal” is clearly
meant simply to highlight the close association of true beauty with the virtue of moderation
(Phaedrus 254b6–7).
the experience of beauty stimulates love, Socrates describes this special status:

In the likenesses here [i.e., at the sensible level] of justice and moderation and the other things that are admirable to souls there is no light [pheggos] .... But beauty was radiant to see [idein lampron] then [i.e., in the intellectual vision of true reality], when with the fortunate chorus they saw the blessed sight and vision .... Concerning beauty, as we said, it was with them, and was radiant [elampeni]; and having come here [i.e., to the level of sense] we take possession of it shining most brightly through the brightest of our senses.42

Just as in the Republic beauty is identical with “truth and being,” or intelligibility, represented analogously by light, so here beauty is luminous or “radiant,” both at the level of intellectual apprehension and at the level of sense. Thus Plato observes that beauty is the way in which intelligibility is immediately given to the senses. We do not, by sense perception alone, see a person as just, moderate, or wise, and therefore as good in these ways: such a conclusion requires a discursive judgment based on observation of the person’s behavior. But that which is beautiful strikes us as pleasing and desirable immediately upon being seen. Every virtue is an intelligible “measure” in some way, but beauty is, once again, the way in which such measure shows up not only in souls but even in bodies, at the level of sense. “Vision is the sharpest of the senses that come to us through the body, but wisdom is not seen by it. It would produce terrible loves, if such a bright image of it were presented coming into sight, and likewise the other beloved things [i.e., justice, moderation, etc.]. But as it is, beauty alone has this lot, that it is most manifest [ekphanestaton] and most desirable [erasmiōtaton].”43 All the forms mentioned in the Phaedrus are ways of being good, and would therefore arouse love if they could be seen; but this is the “lot” of beauty alone.44 Here Plato comes very close to Aquinas’s distinction in meaning between “good,”

42. Phaedrus 250b1–3, 5–9; 250c8–d3.
43. Phaedrus 250d3–e1.
44. On these passages in the Phaedrus, see Gadamer, Truth and Method, 481–82. Unlike Aertsen, Gadamer recognizes the continuity of medieval scholasticism with Plato on precisely this point: “The fact that we have been able to refer several times to Plato … is due to this feature of the Platonic view of beauty [viz., beauty as “radiance” or “shining”], which is like an undercurrent in the history of Aristotelian and Scholastic metaphysics, sometimes rising to the surface, as in Neoplatonic and Christian mysticism and in theological and philosophical spiritualism” (ibid., 486)
signifying that which is desirable *simpliciter*, and “beautiful,” signifying that which pleases or is desirable through being seen or cognitively apprehended.

ARISTOTLE

Unlike Plato, Aristotle seldom, if ever, uses the words *alēthes* and *alētheia* to express ontological patency, evidence, or intelligibility. As a result, the intimate connection or virtual identity of beauty and truth is perhaps less obvious in his work. In his own way, however, Aristotle associates beauty with intelligibility and with knowledge no less closely than Plato. We have already seen his observation that a thing whose good order cannot be perceived therefore cannot be considered beautiful. Similarly, in his discussion of the nature of mathematical knowledge in *Metaphysics* XIII, Aristotle distinguishes between the meaning of “good” (*agathon*) and that of “beautiful” (*kalon*) thus: “Since ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’ are different, for the former is always in action [*praxei*] but the beautiful is in immovable things as well, those who assert that the mathematical sciences say nothing about beautiful or good are wrong…. The chief forms of the beautiful are order and proportion and determinacy, which the mathematical sciences reveal above all.”45 This implies that the special sense of *kalon*, as distinct from *agathon*, is that of an end or good that consists fundamentally in the formal principles of order, proportion, and determinacy, and which is therefore attained or possessed by knowledge or contemplation (*theōria*) as distinct from action (*praxis*).46 The discovery of beauty in what is known by mathematics thus connects it with knowledge, with cognitive apprehension: as in Aquinas, “beautiful” is not simply synonymous with “good,” signifying “desirable,” but means rather “pleasing to behold or contemplate.”

It is often argued that the word *kalos* in Aristotle does not always have the sense of “beautiful,” but sometimes means rather “noble,” “fine,” or even simply “good,” so that not every occurrence of this term is to be taken as a reference to beauty.47 But this reflects a misunderstand-

47. See the references in Mirus, “Order and the Determinate,” 509n31.
ing of how words relate to their meanings. To be sure, the Greek word kalos has a range of senses that overlaps but does not precisely coincide with that of the English word “beautiful.” But this does not imply that it simply has the meaning “beautiful” in some places and not in others. Rather, the word carries its full range of senses with it in each use. Thus, if the specific meaning of kalos as distinct from agathos is something like “admirable” in the sense of “pleasing to behold or contemplate,” then it brings this connotation with it when Aristotle uses it instead of or in addition to agathos elsewhere. This is precisely what translators try to convey by translating kalos in the context of Aristotle’s ethics, for example, not simply as “good” but as “noble”—a term which, deriving from Latin nobilis, originally has the sense of “standing out to be noticed, to be seen or known.” The overlapping connotations of “beautiful” and “noble” expressed by the word kalos thus bring us once again to the notion of the beautiful as that which is “pleasing when seen.”

Aristotle’s Metaphysics opens with the declaration “All men by nature desire to know [eidenai].”48 His use of the term eidenai rather than some other term for knowing or understanding is significant, for it relates to idein, seeing, and to eidos, form in the sense of “look.” For Aristotle as for Plato, the form in a thing is its intelligibility, that in it which is given to cognitive apprehension, to the gaze of awareness. But as such it is also the thing’s beauty. Thus Aristotle continues, “A sign [of this] is the delight in sensations. For even apart from their use they are delightful in themselves, and above all others that which is through the eyes. For not only so that we may act [prattōmen], but even when we are not going to take any action [prattein] we prefer seeing, so to speak, above all the others.”49 Simply being aware of reality, by way of sense perception, is intrinsically delightful. Since Aristotle here expressly distinguishes this delight from any utility with regard to action, it can only be the delight that is found in the contemplation of the beautiful. If cognitive apprehension as such, without regard to any practical utility, is intrinsically pleasing, then being itself, as that which is apprehended, is beautiful. Indeed, to say that the mere awareness of being is delightful and to say that being is beautiful are simply two ways of saying the same thing.

The search for knowledge, then, beginning with sense perception and

culminating in intellectual contemplation of the divine first principle on which “the universe and nature depend,”\[50\] is a pursuit of the intelligibility of things, and as such a pursuit of beauty. It begins, as Aristotle more than once observes, with what is least knowable in itself but most knowable to us, that is, changeable, sensible things, and proceeds to what is most knowable in itself, that is, changeless, purely intelligible reality, which is therefore, as we shall see, most perfectly beautiful. “The way [of knowledge] must be from the things that are more knowable and clearer [sa-

plesteron] to us, to those which are clearer [saphestera] and more know-

able by nature. For the same things are not knowable to us and [knowable] absolutely.”\[51\] Here Aristotle adopts the Platonic term saphes, with its con-

notation of clarity or shining and therefore, implicitly, at once of intelligi-

bility and of beauty.\[52\] Thus at the end of Physics I, having reached the conclusion that all changeable things are composites of form and matter, Aristotle refers to form—form in general, the form in anything—as “di-

vine and good and desirable [theiou kai agathou kai ephetou].”\[53\] Form is divine in that, for Aristotle as for Plato, it is the ousia, the intelligible re-

ality of the thing, in virtue of which it is what it is and so is anything at all, and as such it is the thing’s share in what the unmoved mover or god is purely. Form is good in that, as the thing’s actuality, it is not only the formal but also the final cause, the completion, perfection, or fulfillment (entelecheia) of the thing: “The what it is [that is, the formal cause] and that for the sake of which [that is, the final cause] are one,”\[54\] and again, “The what it is, that is, the form [morphē], is first of all [causes], for it is the end and that for the sake of which.”\[55\] And form is desirable in that as the thing’s end, fulfillment, or perfection, it is its beauty. So Aristotle goes on to remark that matter desires form “as the female the male and the ugly the beautiful.”\[56\] Thus in Parts of Animals, he expressly identifies the for-

---

52. It has been suggested that the word saphes is etymologically related to words for “sponge,” so that its sense is primarily “(wiped or scrubbed) clean” and only secondarily “clear.” See Edwin D. Floyd, “The Etymology and Meaning of Greek Sapha ‘Completely, Cleanly,’” www.pitt.edu/~edfloyd/saphes.html. If this is correct, then the term is particularly appropriate in this context: that which is most saphes is that which is pure of any matter, any unintelligibility, and is therefore perfectly intelligible or “shining.”
54. Phys. II.7.198a26
56. Phys. II.7.192a1–2.
mal-final cause, to hou heneka, with the beautiful, to kallon,57 and later remarks, “That which is not by chance but for the sake of something occurs especially among the works of nature; and the end for the sake of which they are constituted or come to be holds the place of the beautiful.”58 So too in *Metaphysics* XIII, after explaining how mathematics treats of the beautiful, Aristotle adds, “And since it is evident that these, I mean, for instance, order and determinacy, are causes of many things, it is clear that [the mathematical sciences] would speak of this kind of cause, that is, the cause in the mode of the beautiful.”59 “The cause in the mode of the beautiful,” since it consists in order and determinacy, clearly means the formal cause. The form or formal cause in a thing, then, as its intelligibility, is not only the thing’s end or good but also its beauty, in virtue of which it is delightful to behold or contemplate.

The beauty of things, then, is their *ousia* in the sense of form, that which is intelligible in them. Thus in *Metaphysics* VII, when Aristotle raises the question “What is being?” which he then says is the question “What is *ousia*?”60 he answers that *ousia* is neither matter, nor the composite of form and matter, but form itself, precisely as that which is intelligible or knowable in things. He then observes:

It is agreed that there are some realities [*ousiai*] among sensible things, so that we must first seek among these. For it is useful to proceed toward what is more knowable. For learning comes to be thus for all, through the things that are less knowable by nature to those that are more knowable. And this is the task ..., from the things which are more knowable to oneself, to make the things which are knowable by nature knowable to oneself. But the things which are more knowable and primary to some people are often scarcely knowable and have little or nothing of being. But nonetheless, one must try, from the things that are barely knowable but known to oneself, to know the things that are completely knowable ....61

This immediately recalls the ascent out of Plato’s cave, from culturally mediated sense-experience, represented by shadows on the cave wall,

which is what we initially take as true and real but is in fact least knowable and least real, to purely intelligible, divine reality, represented by real things outside the cave. For Aristotle as for Plato, ousia is form because this is what is “most knowable,” that is, intelligible, “by nature.”

Aristotle’s discussion of ousia or form by itself as that which is “most knowable by nature,” and his express identification of it with the beautiful, may be found in his account of the divine unmoved mover in *Metaphysics* XII. Here he reaches the conclusion that “there is something that moves without being moved, being eternal, reality [ousia], and actuality.” The unmoved mover, then, is ousia itself, pure reality-as-intelligible-form, with no admixture of unintelligibility, or matter: “The first essence does not have matter, for it is fulfillment.” Aristotle then explains how it causes motion without being moved: “It moves in this way: the desirable and the intelligible [to orekton kai to noëton] move without being moved; the primaries of these are the same.” Here as in the *Physics*, form or ousia, the intelligible as such, is intrinsically desirable. This identity of the desirable and the intelligible points directly to Aquinas’s understanding of “beautiful” as signifying neither desirable simply nor intelligible simply, but both at once. And in fact Aristotle immediately proceeds to identify such a cause of motion as beautiful: “For the apparent beautiful [to phainomenon kalon] is the appetible [epithumēton], and the real beautiful [to on kalon] is what is willed [boulēton].” Regrettably, the word kalon in this passage is often translated as “good” and rarely as “beautiful.” In view of Aristotle’s express distinction between the meanings of agathon and of kalon in *Metaphysics* XIII, this is profoundly misleading. Since the divine unmoved mover is purely intelligible and immaterial, it must be attained or possessed, like that which is known by mathematics, not by action but only by contemplation, by being known. Hence its desirability can only be that which is expressed by kalon rather than by agathon, since according to Aristotle the latter refers specifically to goodness in action and not in immovable things. The unmoved mover is desirable, and so causes motion, qua intelligible, which is to say, as beautiful. Thus Aris-

64. Met. XII.7.1072a26–27.
tote continues, “We desire [scil., anything] because it seems good [dokei], rather than it seeming good [dokei] because we desire it; for intellection is the beginning. Now intellect is moved by the intelligible; and one series is intelligible in itself, and of this the first [member] is reality [ousia], and of this that which is simple and in act .... But the beautiful, that which is in itself choiceworthy, is in the same series.”67 Hence, as Aristotle goes on to say, the unmoved mover “moves as loved.”68 Here, rather exceptionally, Aristotle uses the word “erōmenon,” with its Platonic resonances, rather than one of the words he himself ordinarily uses to express desirability, such as epheton or orekton, and thus evokes Plato’s discussions of the beautiful as that which arouses love.

Having characterized the unmoved mover as at once desirable and intelligible, that is, as beautiful, and so as causing motion by being loved, Aristotle describes its life:

On such a principle, then, depend the universe and nature. And its way of life is such as the best that we have (and for a short time; for that is always in this state, which is impossible for us), since its activity is pleasure. And for this reason waking, sensation, intellection, are most pleasant .... But intellection in itself is of what is best in itself .... But intellect thinks itself by participation in the intelligible; for it becomes intelligible in touching and thinking, so that intellect and the intelligible are the same; for intellect is what is receptive of the intelligible, that is, reality [tou noētou kai tēsousias]. And it is in act in possessing.69

In thinking, that is, in apprehending himself, the unmoved mover or god possesses “the intelligible, that is, reality.” Here the identity of ousia, reality, with to noēton, the intelligible, becomes fully explicit. But to contemplate “the intelligible, that is, reality” is supremely pleasant. As Aristotle here observes, conscious awareness as such—“waking, sensation, intellection”—is pleasing. This pleasure is not that which accompanies any action, but is rather that of contemplation, and is therefore that which lies in the possession, by knowledge, of the kalon or beautiful. So too, in the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle observes that intellect (nous) in us is that which “has thoughts concerning beautiful and divine things [kalōn kai theiōn]” and that its activity is contemplative, and then argues

that this is “the most pleasant of activities according to virtue.”70 “The intelligible, that is, reality,” then, is the beautiful, as that which affords pleasure in and by being seen, known, apprehended. The form in anything, which is that thing’s share of “the intelligible, that is, reality,” is its beauty. Hence the unmoved mover, as pure form, pure reality, purely intelligible, is the “most beautiful and best.”71 In short, beauty for Aristotle consists in ousia in the sense of form, of reality-as-the-intelligible, which just as intelligible is pleasing or satisfying to conscious apprehension.

The account of the unmoved mover at the culmination of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* thus recalls the opening line, “All men by nature desire to know.” Knowledge, for Aristotle, is not an extrinsic relation between “subject” and “object,” but rather a transformation of the knower such that the act of knowing is the same as that which is known.72 The desire to know, therefore, is a desire to possess or be one with “the intelligible, that is, reality.” Ousia, reality-as-intelligible-form, is “the primary desirable and intelligible,” and as such is the beautiful. Our delight in sense-perception, already implying that the sensible as such is beautiful, is thus a dim shadow or echo of the god’s pleasure in knowing that which he himself is: “the intelligible, that is, reality,” that which is at once and identically “the desirable and the intelligible” and which “moves as loved,” that is, as beautiful. This is a pleasure that we can imperfectly taste just insofar as we live the divine life of contemplation. The desire to know is satisfied by reality-as-knowable, and this satisfaction is the pleasure that pertains to the contemplation of the beautiful. The opening words of the *Metaphysics* can thus be seen proleptically to indicate the intertwining of love and knowledge, of will and intellect, of the good and the true, that finds expression in Aquinas’s understanding of the beautiful as that which satisfies desire “by its being seen or known.”


71. *Met.* XII.7.1072b33. This phrase occurs in the context of Aristotle’s response to the argument of Speusippus and the Pythagoreans that the “most beautiful and best” is found not at the beginning but only at the end of a process of development. But it plainly applies to the unmoved mover, which, Aristotle is arguing, is first in the order of explanatory principles.

In Plotinus the understanding of beauty as intelligibility, and hence the convertibility of the beautiful with being, becomes fully explicit, and may therefore be presented more briefly. In treatise 1.6, having raised the question “What is this [that is, beauty] which is present in bodies?” Plotinus immediately reformulates the question thus: “What is it, then, that moves the visions of beholders and turns them to itself and draws them and makes them enjoy the sight?” The question “What is beauty?” thus becomes the question, “What is it about a sensible thing such that it is attractive and delightful to behold?” From the outset, then, like Aquinas, Plotinus takes “beautiful” to express a relation to awareness. His conclusion that the beauty in bodies is their share in form follows from this understanding of the meaning of “beautiful.” After criticizing the theory that beauty consists strictly in proportion, he sets out to develop his own explanation of the beauty of bodies by returning to the same starting point: “Taking it up again, let us say what indeed is the first beauty in bodies. For it is something that becomes perceptible even at the first glance and the soul speaks as understanding and recognizing it, and accepts and as it were is fitted to it.” At this point the question “What is beauty?” has become the question, “What is it about bodies such that the soul, upon perceiving them, responds in this way?” Plotinus answers by appealing to his doctrine that the soul, in that it is a rational principle, depends on and derives from intelligible reality or the forms, and so possesses them within itself. “We say that [the soul], being in nature what it is and coming from the superior reality among beings, when it sees something akin or a trace of what is akin, it rejoices and is excited and is borne back toward itself and recalls itself and the things that are its own.” Sensible things are beautiful, that is, attractive and delightful to the soul that beholds them, just in that they too share in form. “But how are both those things [that is, intelligible realities] and these things [that

75. Plotinus, 1.6.1, 17–19.
76. Plotinus, 1.6.1, 1–5.
77. See, for example, Plotinus, 5.1.3, 13–18 and 5.1.11, 1–8.
78. Plotinus, 1.6.2, 8–11.
Aquinas on Beauty and Truth

is, sensible things] beautiful? We say that these things [are beautiful] by participation in form."79 Bodies are beautiful, then, by having and displaying some form, some “look,” some share of intelligibility, and so are pleasing to the soul as an intellectually informed power of apprehension. This enables Plotinus to explain the beauty of light and color, which the theory of beauty as proportion could not account for: “The simple beauty of color [comes about] through shape and mastery of the darkness in matter by the presence of light, which is incorporeal and formative principle and form.”80 Just in that color is the primary visible, since whatever is seen is some color just as whatever is heard is some sound, color is a form, a look, something given to cognitive apprehension, and as such is pleasing to the apprehending soul, that is, is beautiful.

Since bodies are beautiful by participating in form, without which they would not be anything at all and which is therefore their share of being, it follows that what is beautiful per se, not by participation, is pure form, that is, intelligible reality or being itself. This means that beauty is not a form, one form among others that a thing may participate in, but rather form in general, form as such, any and every form.81 Plotinus develops this conclusion more fully in treatise 5.8, where he aims to show how we may “behold the beauty of the true intellect and that world,”82 that is, the intelligible reality which is the content of, and thus one with, intellect. He proceeds by adopting a Platonic and Aristotelian account of art, in which the artist gives form to a raw material according to an idea or paradigm that he has in his mind. The artwork is more beautiful than the raw material, then, in virtue of the image in it of the artist’s idea or thought-content.

Let there be, if you will, two lumps of stone set near each other, one unshaped and without a share in art, the other already mastered by art into a statue of a god or some man…. The one which has been brought by art to beauty of form will appear beautiful not by being stone—for then the other would be beauti-

80. Plotinus, 1.6.3, 17–19.
82. Plotinus, 5.8.1, 1–3.
ful likewise—but by the form which art has put in. The matter did not have this form, but it was in the craftsman, not insofar as he had eyes or hands, but in that he shared in art.83

This again says, therefore, that the sensible thing’s beauty is its share in form, that is, in intelligibility, the image in it of purely intelligible idea. Plotinus then turns from works of art to natural things, asking “What then is the beauty in these?”84 and arguing that it is not their matter, but rather, “Is not [beauty], then, in every case form, coming from the maker to that which comes into being, as in the arts it was said to come to the artworks from the arts?”85 The “maker,” in the case of natural things, is not a human artist but rather soul itself, which informs and thus makes sensible things according to the ideas that it receives from intellect.86 Soul’s making of the sensible cosmos, in that it is a giving of form as an image or expression of the ideas that it possesses within itself, is thus analogous to a human artist’s making of an artwork. Both in works of art and in natural things, then, the form that makes them what they are, which is their intelligibility and as such their being, is their beauty. Plotinus goes on to observe, “It is another indication [scil. that beauty is form] that we do not yet see what is still outside, but when it comes to be within, it influences [us]. But it comes in through the eyes being form alone.”87 Here again, taking it for granted that “beautiful” signifies a relation to cognitive apprehension and expresses a way in which a thing “influences,” that is, delights and attracts us, he argues that since what enters into awareness is not the thing’s matter but its form, it follows that its beauty must consist in the latter. His conclusion is that since the beauty of bodies, and indeed of soul itself, is the logos, that is, the expression or image in them of intelligible form, it follows that the beautiful per se is that of which such logos is an expression, intelligible reality or intellect itself. “Wherefore it [that is, the beautiful per se] is not a logos, but is the maker of the first logos which is the beauty in psychic matter; but this is intellect.…”88
In short, beauty for Plotinus consists in intelligibility. Just in that a
ting, which is to say just in that it is
thing has some share of intelligibility, which is to say just in that it is
anything at all, it offers some satisfaction to the gaze of awareness and
thus is beautiful. And because “being” (to on) or “reality” (ousia) means,
precisely, that which is intelligible, therefore, as Plotinus expressly con-
cludes, being is the same as the beautiful:

For where would the beautiful be, deprived of being [tou einai]? And where
would reality [he ousia] be, deprived of being beautiful? For in falling short of
the beautiful it would also fall short of reality. Wherefore being is desired be-
cause it is the same as the beautiful, and the beautiful is beloved because it is
being. What need is there to enquire which is the cause of which, since it is one
nature?

Just as form, as look, as that which is given to apprehension, being is that
which is beautiful, that is, delightful and attractive to behold. This is pre-
cisely why the One or Good for Plotinus is not, strictly speaking, beau-
tiful: the beautiful is the intelligible, and the One is not intelligible but
rather the source of intelligibility, and as such “greater than beauty [mei-
zon e kata kallos].” Plotinus expresses this variously by calling the One
“a beauty above beauty,” “a beauty that makes beauty,” “the principle and
limit of beauty,” “the really beautiful or rather the super-beautiful [hy-
perkalon].” Thus Plotinus says of purely intelligible reality:

Who, then, will not call beautiful that which is beautiful primally and as a whole
everywhere whole, so that no parts fall short by being deficient in beauty?… Or
if this is not beautiful, what else is? For that which is prior to it [that is, the One,
which is prior to intelligible reality] does not even wish to be beautiful. This is
what first comes into vision [thean] by being form and that which is beheld by
intellect, and is delightful to see [agaston ophthenai].

Intellect or intelligible reality, the second level in the sequence that starts
with the One, is the first level of intelligibility, the first level that “comes
into vision,” and as such is properly the beautiful, that which is “delight-

89. At 5.5.5, 14–15, Plotinus explains that in his usage to einai signifies the same thing as
ousia, reality-as-intelligible-form.
90. Plotinus, 5.8.9, 38–43.
91. Plotinus, 5.8.13, 11–12; cf. Plotinus, 5.5.12, 33.
92. Plotinus, 6.7.32, 29–30, 32, 34.
ful to see.” In these words, *agaston ophthēnai*, we find, all but verbatim, Aquinas’s description of beautiful things as those *quae visa placent*, which please when seen.

The treatment of beauty that we find in both Plato and Aristotle, and most fully articulated in Plotinus, is an expression of their common understanding of being as that which is intelligible. The very words for “being” in this tradition—*to on, ousia*—carry in themselves the note of intelligibility, which thus accounts for the identification of being as form and, therefore, as beauty. Throughout this tradition, form in things is their “truth and being,” their *ousia* or reality in the sense of intelligibility, and as such it is their beauty. The beautiful is being *qua intelligible* and in that sense “shining,” standing forth to be seen or known, and thus pleasing, satisfying, desirable to behold: “All men, by nature, desire to know….” Sensible things are beautiful just to the extent that they have and display some form, some intelligibility, and the beautiful proper is being or *ousia* itself just as the purely intelligible: Plato’s “truth and being,” Aristotle’s unmoved mover, Plotinus’s intellect which is one with intelligible reality.

There is then nothing new in Aquinas’s insistence on the relation of the beautiful to cognition or apprehension, his understanding of “beautiful” as meaning not simply good, that is, pleasing or desirable, but good by being true, that is, intelligible. On the contrary, it is an expression of what Pierre Rousselot aptly called “the intellectualism of St. Thomas,” and as such places him firmly in the Greek intellectualist tradition, extending from Plato through Aristotle and Plotinus, and mediated to Aquinas principally by Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. The convertibility of being (*on, ens*) not simply with good (*agathon, bonum*) but with beautiful (*kalon, pulchrum*) is a hallmark of such intellectualism precisely because it expresses the understanding of being as that which is intelligible and as such delightful to apprehend. It is in the later Middle Ages, with the decline of classical intellectualism and the rise of voluntarism, exalting love over knowledge, will over intellect, the affective over the cognitive, that we find the beginnings of a corresponding decline of beauty from an ontological to a merely aesthetic category and the

---

separation of beauty from truth, which is ultimately a collapse of the understanding of being as, most fundamentally, the intelligible, and of intellect as, in Rousselot’s words, “the faculty of being.”\textsuperscript{96} But for Aquinas, not in distinction from but rather in continuity with the Greek tradition, “beautiful” in its convertibility with being still expresses the desirability of being in its truth, its intelligibility, its standing forth to delight the intellectual soul by being seen or known.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 20.
The Obviousness of the *Kalon* in Aristotle’s Ethics

There are two problems in Aristotle’s ethics in connection with the notion of the *kalon*—the “fine,” “noble,” “admirable,” “honorable,” and “fair”—which arise because of the following feature of Aristotle’s ethics. On the one hand, the *kalon* plays a significant and fundamental role. In the very opening lines of the *Eudemian Ethics*, we find:

The man who at Delos set forth in the precinct of the god his own opinion composed an inscription for the forecourt of the temple of Leto in which he distinguished goodness, beauty [the *kalon*], and pleasantness as not all being properties of the same thing. His verses are: “Justice is fairest, and Health is best/ But to win one’s desire is the pleasantest” *Theog.* 255f. But for our part let us not allow that he is right; for Happiness [*eudaimonia*] is at once the most pleasant and the fairest [most *kalon*] and best of all things whatever.¹

Here, the *kalon* is regarded as end-like (or goal-like, *teleion*, *NE* I.7.1097a25–30), since it is handled coordinately with two other end-like objects of human striving, pleasure and goodness;² moreover, it is presumed that the *kalon* is found within a teleological ordering, as is implicit in the use of the superlative to stand for what is most end-like in such a sequence. The *kalon* similarly plays a significant role in Aristotle’s various discussions of the virtues. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he goes so far as to say that “the actions carried out through the virtues are all

². See *NE* VIII.2.1155b20–21.
of them both kalon and done for the sake of their being kalon;” making the kalon both the object and motive of virtuous action. Yet, on the other hand, although Aristotle investigates and attempts to explicate such fundamental notions for his ethics as eudaimonia (NE I.7–8), virtue (NE II.1–2), goodness (NE I.6), and pleasure (NE VII.10–14; NE X.1–5), he says nothing comparable in any ethical treatise by way of explaining the kalon. Neither does he anywhere say he will give an account, or that an account is necessary, in any of the treatises attributed to him, nor are there any signs that he gave such an account somewhere that was then lost. It seems rash to say that no account of kalon could have been given: the kalon is a fundamental notion; the other notions mentioned above are also fundamental; and in various disciplines Aristotle never shies away from attempting to explicate something because it is fundamental.

So the one problem is why the kalon would have appeared obvious and as not needing an account, and the other is what sort of account Aristotle would have given to inquirers, like us presumably, who did not find the notion obvious and asked for an account. The path to finding the answers to both the questions is the same: show what Aristotle was presupposing in his treatment of the kalon. Accordingly, in this essay I examine what I regard as the three main presuppositions that Aristotle relies upon: (1) a cluster of conceptions of the kalon that he inherits from Plato; (2) a particular application of the notion of the kalon that he takes from the experience of the virtue of courage (specifically as shown on the battlefield by soldiers under orders), which virtue he could presume his audience would be familiar with and which served for him as a paradigm of the kalon and how it functions in other virtues; and (3) some fundamental ideas for ethics that he sets down in the function argument, which ideas are characterized in one way in the function argument but which plausibly could be redescribed in another way in his treatment of individual virtues. My task in what follows is to show how the material that Aristotle presupposes for his account would have made his choice of the term kalon natural and appropriate. At the same time, it will become clear to what extent kalon is an “aesthetic” notion for Aristotle.

3. Ethica Nicomachea, ed. I. Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), VI.1.1120a24. Translations from the Greek texts in this essay are mine, unless otherwise noted.
4. NE I.7.1097b22–1098a20.
ARISTOTLE’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE PLATONIC INHERITANCE

Under this heading, I will consider three distinct roles that the kalon plays in Plato’s philosophy and argue that Aristotle appropriates all three. Ultimately, Aristotle puts them together into a coherent framework while reinterpreting them in a teleological manner rather than in a formal one.

The first Platonic notion of the kalon is, we might say, the kalon as the radiant appearance of an intelligible form. To approach this notion, consider that in various dialogues of Plato, when Socrates wishes to draw his interlocutor’s attention to the forms, typically his first example is of the kalon. For example, in the famous Ultimate Argument of the Phaedo, in the reply to Cebes, Socrates explains what he means by a “second voyage” through introducing the principle that “it is by the kalon that anything is kalon.” The kalon serves as his stock example. Now the Phaedo is not in any sense about the kalon. Nonetheless, in the Cyclical Argument, too, one finds the same thing, and the kalon is the formal characteristic that is mentioned first: “Let us then see as regards all of these whether they come to be in any other way than opposites from opposites, if they have opposites, as for example the kalon is opposite to the aischron, and the just to the unjust, and a myriad other things like that.” The Recollection Argument similarly begins: “If, as we are always going on about, there is something which is kalon, and good—and every substance such as these—and all matters falling under perception we trace up to that kind of being.”

The kalon leads first in other dialogues as well. For instance, Socrates asks Theaetetus, when an example of a pure concept, immune from contradiction, is wanted: “Try to remember if you have ever said to yourself that the kalon is actually aischron, or the unjust just.”

Indeed, in the Parmenides, Socrates is so definitely presumed to use the kalon as his first and stock example, that the character Parmenides


6. *Phaedo* 70e1–4. The opposite of kalon for a Greek speaker was aischron, “ugly,” “base,” “ignoble.”


is even depicted as picking up on Socrates’s habit: when he warns that Socrates needs more training before he attempts to define the forms, he speaks of this as the attempt “to define what the kalon is, and the just, and the good,” putting kalon first.9

These examples are small in number but telling. They show, I believe, that Plato regarded the kalon as the best notion or form for illustrating the relationship between sensible particulars and forms generally. But what does this amount to? It means such things as that, for Plato, an object’s being kalon looks to be something borrowed from another and not originally or inevitably possessed; the kalon strikes us as a kind of radiance, or manifestation, that is, it represents something else qua making an appearance; yet the kalon is received by us not as some kind of a dumb or brute impression but rather as intelligible, and indeed, therefore, as capable of standing in as proxy for anything that is intelligible at all. That is why the kalon shows best how we “trace things up” to the Forms and, as described in the Symposium, in the famous scala amoris, it also shows best how we ourselves can follow them upwards as well, if we are instructed in how to do that.10

Aristotle, of course, does not straightforwardly embrace the Platonic metaphysics of a Form as sharing its intelligibility with particulars. Nonetheless, he seems influenced by Plato’s giving a privileged place to the kalon. What else could explain his propensity to take kalon, no less, as a stock predicate for testing syllogisms in the Analytics (e.g., Analytics 49b18–19), along with pedestrian predicates such as leukon (“white”) and anthrōpos (“man”)? Aristotle evidently assumes with Plato that kalon is not only an unproblematic but also a paradigmatic predicate. Or, again, consider whether it would be natural for someone unaffected by Plato’s view to write, as Aristotle does, that in the forbearance that a good man can show in the midst of adversity, the kalon shines forth (dialampei), revealing his greatness of soul.11 Why should it be natural for him to speak of this predicate in this way—and only this predicate? In this particular case, he wants to refer to something as radiant, and as involving the dis-

11. NE I.10.1100b30–32.
closure of something typically inaccessible or hidden, and he finds it natural to use the word *kalon*.

The second notion of the *kalon* in Plato is that of *an attractive good, higher than usefulness or pleasure, which can be acquired through action*. Plato famously relies upon this notion in Socrates’s first refutation of Polus in the *Gorgias*.\(^{12}\) There Socrates is concerned to argue that someone who appears to be better off by doing something *aischron*, in fact puts himself in a worse position, because the good he loses, and the harm he endures, in doing the *aischron* action, is far worse than whatever other good he might gain. A similar passage is found in the *Alcibiades I*, where Socrates looks at the converse situation, that is, of someone who does something *kalon* at the cost of certain goods, and there the argument is that the *kalon* he gains is far greater than what he loses. Aristotle is clearly indebted to both discussions in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.8, where he argues that a friend who gives up any kind of useful good to a friend invariably gains for himself in each case something *kalon* of correspondingly greater value. But *Nicomachean Ethics* III even contains a passage parallel to one in the *Alcibiades*. First, the *Alcibiades I*:

Do you maintain such things as these, that for example many men who in warfare, precisely because they come to the aid of a comrade or neighbor, receive wounds and death, while there are others who do not do so, as they ought, and get away healthy?… Isn’t courage an evil for them as regards their death and wounds? So then, the aiding in warfare of one’s friends, insofar as it is *kalon*, you refer to as simply *kalon*, as regards the goodness of the courageous action? And these men obtain these things by acting well and in a *kalon* manner?\(^{13}\)

Then, the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

If this sort of thing holds too in the case of courage, then: death and wounds will be painful for a courageous man, and not sought after, but he faces these things because it is *kalon*, or because not doing so is *aischron*. And the more he has of the other virtues [literally “virtue in its entirety”], and the more he is *eudaimōn*, to that extent, he will be more greatly pained by death. That sort of man most deserves life; and he is aware of being deprived of the greatest goods;

---


and this is something painful. But for all that he shows courage—even more courage, presumably—because he chooses for himself the kallon in warfare in exchange for those things.\textsuperscript{14}

In both passages, the same pair of evils is mentioned, death and wounds (thanatos, traumata), and these evils are faced or received (elabon, hupomenei). One passage says that to show courage is in that respect “bad” (kakēn), while the other says what would thereby be implied, namely, that the agent in showing courage is “unwilling” (akonti). Both passages say that the person doing this courageous action obtains (ktōntai, hairetai) the kallon in warfare.

Plato’s line of thought in the Alcibiades, which Aristotle clearly shares, is that we cannot be admirers of the heroic action (in particular, of rescuing a comrade as one should) for no reason at all, and that, if we are drawn to it, then there must be something good about it (as that is simply what a good is, an end). But the very same good which we admire, and in a sense acquire by wondering at it, is that which the agent of the deed directly acquires, presumably to a greater degree, in the act itself. In fact, that the agent pursues and acquires such a good explains his motivation. Finally, the worth of the goods he gives up testifies to the greater worth of the good he reasonably acquires in exchange.

So, we have seen the kallon for Plato as a formal manifestation that draws upward, and the kallon for Plato and Aristotle as a genuine good acquired by doing deeds that we generally admire. In both of these understandings, the kallon is presented as something intelligible but not yet as analyzable. However, there is a third notion of kallon in Plato, in which the kallon is analyzed as, so to speak, goal-directed intelligence at work. This third view shows up in passing in many places, as, for example, in the Timaeus: “All that is good is kallon, and the kallon is not void of due measure; wherefore also the living creature that is to be kallon must be summetron.”\textsuperscript{15} Or, again, in the Gorgias, Plato gives an account of the kallon specifically in relation to virtue.\textsuperscript{16} Socrates says there, “if you wish to

\textsuperscript{14} NE 1117b2–9.

\textsuperscript{15} Timaeus 87c. Plato, Timaeus, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925). In such contexts, summetron means “proportionate,” not “symmetrical,” and indicates a relationship where various parts fit one another for some purpose.

\textsuperscript{16} In my analysis of these passages in the Gorgias, I assume that we can take what Plato says there about the kosmon as applying equally to the kallon.
consider painters, housebuilders, shipbuilders, or any of the other craftsmen, you’ll find that each places each thing that he deals with in a certain order, and, if one thing is different from another, he forces each to be adapted and to fit in, until he’s made it so that the whole work is put in order and is beautifully arranged.” In the Gorgias, Socrates is mainly concerned with refuting Callicles’s brazen affirmation of unlimited libido as the principle of a good life. Therefore, he wishes to insist that every virtue is itself a kind of ordering, which accordingly manifests principles of limitation and boundedness. A virtue equips the thing that has it to be “lawful” (nominom) and able to fit within a larger order. That is why, Socrates says, moderation (sôphrosunê) is the most fundamental virtue, because the orderliness and comeliness (kosmia) that someone has when he acquires moderation implies that he has the other cardinal virtues as well.

In the Cratylus, Plato arrives at this third notion of kalon from a different direction. The Cratylus contains a discussion of the origin of words and proposes various etymologies. In that context, giving an etymology of kalon, Socrates says that it derives from to kaloun, that is, from the “name conferring power.” One may in general, he says, refer appropriately to the works of a power, with a name derived from the name of that power. Hence, we apply the term kalon to any product at all which results from thought and reasoning. The kalon means, he says, “that which is the work of intelligence, whether of gods or of men.” To be kalon is to evince intelligent design.

It is important to emphasize that Plato does not conceive of naming as the arbitrary application of some random spoken sound to a thing. Rather, naming is an action that can be correct or not. To name something correctly, Plato thinks, is to exhibit, reveal, and show the sort of thing that the named thing is. Indeed, when a name is correctly given,

17. Gorgias 503e4–504a5. Note in passing that the principle for establishing the virtues as in themselves choiceworthy (the project of Republic II-IV) is set down here: one needs a distinction of parts, with a due ordering, which stipulates where each is supposed to go and how its going there contributes to some ordering of the whole.
18. Gorgias 506e1.
19. Cratylus 416c–d.
20. Cratylus 416c4. Plato, Cratylus; Parmenides; Greater Hippias; Lesser Hippias, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921). That is why the kalon, Plato says, is also the epaineton, “the praiseworthy,” because when we praise something as kalon, we are praising the intelligence and reasoning responsible for it.
21. Cratylus 422d, 428e.
he says, there is even a reciprocal clarification: the name clarifies the nature, and the nature makes the name clear as well. 22 This can be seen in the earliest names, which name through imitation, such as when someone points his hand upward to show (dēloun) the sky above: in that case, the direction of the pointing of one’s hand clarifies the location of the sky, and the sky’s location clarifies the intention in the extension of the hand. 23 Thus, a name or picture turns out to be “correct” or not, and furthermore “true” or not, depending on whether it “renders in return to each thing (apodidōi) that which suits it and is like to it.” 24 The likeness of a truthful name, of course, cannot be found in its being an exact reproduction, because then it would simply be the same thing as what is signified and fail to clarify it at all; thus, it must be a likeness which “matches” the thing (prosēkon, Cratylus 432e). 25

All of this is to say that Plato is prepared to think of “naming” on the pattern of a just transaction. When a name is truthful in the act of naming, something is received from the thing to be named—its nature or a likeness thereof—while something is correspondingly “given back” in return to the thing named by the conferral of a name, which, because it is “like” what was received, is “suitable” to it (prosēkon, and see also Cratylus 431b). In another place, Plato says additionally that a name is like a just distribution, since to give the correct name to a thing is to choose and assign, out of various available alternatives, that name to the thing that is due to it. 26 It should hardly be surprising, then, that Plato presumes that ethical realities may appropriately be called kalon or aischron, if the original task of the power of assigning names (to kaloun) already has an implicitly ethical character and is either just or unjust in its operation.

It is this third notion of the kalon which is most important for Aristotle, and the other two notions for him should be understood in relation to it, as may be seen in a famous passage from Parts of Animals I.5:

22. Cratylus 429c.
23. Cratylus 423a1.
24. Cratylus 430c.
25. Such a name, Plato adds, is a likeness in which “the intrinsic quality is present,” which suggests that a name works by making it so that something immanent in the named object, which is therefore hard to see, is made explicit through something simpler, which draws attention to just that immanent thing (Cratylus 433a).
Of things constituted by nature some are ungenerated, imperishable, and eternal, while others are subject to generation and decay. The former are excellent beyond compare and divine, but less accessible to knowledge. Having already treated of the celestial world, as far as our conjectures could reach, we proceed to treat of animals, without omitting, to the best of our ability, any member of the kingdom, however ignoble. For if some have no graces to charm the sense, yet even these, by disclosing to intellectual perception the constructive expertise \( \text{dēmiourgēsasa technē} \)\(^{27}\) that designed them, give immense pleasure to all who can trace links of causation, and are inclined to philosophy. Indeed, it would be strange if mimic representations of them were attractive, because they disclose the mimetic skill of the painter or sculptor, and the original realities themselves were not more interesting, to all at any rate who have eyes to discern the reasons that determined their formation. We therefore must not recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals. Every realm of nature is marvellous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present, so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful \( \text{kalon} \). Absence of haphazard and conducive-ness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature’s works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful \( \text{kalon} \).\(^{28}\)

In this passage, the celestial bodies, ungenerated, imperishable, and eternal, are taken to be \( \text{kalon} \) in the fullest sense, presumably for their apparent clarity, luminosity, constancy, and orderliness. But natural beings that are generated share in the \( \text{kalon} \) through the expertise in constructive activity \( \text{(dēmiourgēsasa technē)} \) that they show, which is in service of the imitation of the higher beings.\(^{29}\)

When Aristotle remarks that these lower ranks of creatures, composed of materials that are otherwise ignoble, such as bloody and squamous tissues, nonetheless are raised to the rank of \( \text{kalon} \) objects by the intelligent design that they show, he is giving his own account of how the

\(^{27}\) The original has “artistic spirit” for this phrase.


\(^{29}\) Cf. \textit{De anima} II.4.415a22–b22.
The **Kalon** in Aristotle's Ethics

**Kalon** can be acquired through activity or action, corresponding to the second notion of **kalon** that we saw in Plato. Moreover, because nature is teleologically organized, by attending to this intelligent design and following it out—which is Aristotle’s teleological reinterpretation of the Platonic idea of ascending a ladder of the **kalon**, which we saw in Plato—we in turn are led to consider the ultimate intelligent causes.

Plato tends to think of the **kalon** as something that descends from on high and is imperfectly realized in things below. Things below become **kalon** mainly by correspondence and through their receptivity. In contrast, Aristotle regards the **kalon** as something constructed and realized actively, as though the lower were striving upwards, through its own resources. One can think of the difference as analogous to two different ways of making an image: one can make an image either by impress (as for example a photograph), or by drawing. The former is receptive; the latter is an active imitation. The former would be more akin to the Platonic insight, the latter to the Aristotelian. The former takes place in a simple movement of the reception of the higher into the lower; the latter takes place in two stages: first, the lower (as it were) proposes to itself a way of corresponding to the higher, and second, the lower carries out or attempts to carry out what it had proposed.

**THE KALON AND COURAGE**

The *Nicomachean Ethics* introduces the **kalon** mainly through its treatment of the virtue of courage. The reason, I believe, is that the **kalon** in Aristotle’s ethics is a generalization of something that Aristotle regarded as most evident in connection with courage.

Before that treatment, Aristotle offers a remark on the **kalon** almost in passing, which is worth commenting on: “As there are three objects of choice and three objects of avoidance—the **kalon**, the beneficial [**sumpheron**], and the pleasant; and their opposites, the disgraceful, the harmful, and the painful—the good person gets it right as regards all of these.”30 When we compare this passage with the Delos inscription, we see that for “good” (**agathon**) in the latter, Aristotle substitutes “benefi-

---

30. *NE* II.3.1104b30–33. There are two mentions of **kalon** in passing earlier in *NE*: a reference to the inscription at Delos (*NE* I.8.1099a13), and the “shines forth” remark, mentioned above (*NE* I.10.1100b30–32).
cial” (sumpheron).31 Such a substitution is not surprising: in the classical mind, to be good was to be in a good condition such as to be fruitful; indeed, as Aristotle says, a virtue places its possessor in good condition and renders its work good.32 Yet the substitution suggests that Aristotle is supposing that the kalon is naturally understood as the goodness of a thing precisely insofar as its beneficial operation and its power to cause pleasure as something distinct from itself are regarded as removed. The kalon, we might say, is useless goodness, that is, the residuum of the goodness of a thing when usefulness and caused pleasure are subtracted. Presumably such goodness would be something structural and formal. So this fits our account very well: the kalon in matters of action would then be intelligent skillfulness precisely as exhibiting clever design, which one shares in and can therefore claim for oneself, to the extent that one chooses simply to conform oneself to what antecedently might appear to be the pertinent design governing one’s action.

Notwithstanding this passing reference, as mentioned, the kalon mainly enters into Aristotle’s discussion in connection with the virtues. Its first mention is in the treatment of courage. Let us look at the passage:

A ὁ μὲν οὖν ἃ δεῖ καὶ οὗ ἕνεκα υπομένων καὶ φοβούμενος, καὶ ώς δεί καὶ ὅτε, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ χαράτων, ἀνδρείος· κατ’ ἀξίαν γάρ, καὶ ώς ἂν ὁ λόγος, 1115b.20 πάσχει καὶ πράττει ὁ ἀνδρείος.

So then, the man who holds his ground in the face of, and feels fear as regards, those things he should, and for the sake of which he should, and in the manner in which and when he should, and similarly also is emboldened, is a courageous man—since a courageous man feels emotions and acts corresponding to the merits of the case, and as reason dictates.

B τέλος δὲ πάσης ἐνεργείας ἐστὶ τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἕξιν. †καὶ τῷ ἀνδρείῳ δὲ ἡ ἀνδρεία καλὸν:† τοιούτων δὲ καὶ τὸ τέλος ὁρίζεται γὰρ ἕκαστον τῷ τέλει.

But the goal of every actualization is that which is correlative to the state [habit, condition]. But courage is in fact kalon for a courageous man. The end, then, is that sort of thing too. For each thing is defined by the end.

C 1115b.23 καλοῦ δὴ ἐνεκα ὁ ἀνδρείος υπομένει καὶ πράττει τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἀνδρείαν.

Thus, the courageous man holds his ground and does what courage requires for the sake of the kalon.

32. NE II.6.1106a15–17.
In A, Aristotle has not yet stated what the motive or goal needs to be for a properly courageous action. Such an action needs to be done how it should, and when it should, and so on, and for the sake of which it should, but what precisely that last thing is has not been determined. In C, he concludes that the motive is the kalon. Thus, the point of B, presumably, is to give an argument to that effect. Its argument seems something like the following: (1) the goal of an actualization of a state and the goal of having of a state are the same in kind; (2) courage, a state, is kalon for a courageous person; (3) the kalon functions as a goal; (4) thus, the goal of having the state of courage is the kalon; (5) thus, the goal of an actualization of courage is likewise the kalon; (6) but to actualize courage is to conform to the mean in fearful circumstances; (7) thus, a courageous person suffers fear and acts as courage requires for the sake of the kalon.

The argument seems to be ad hominem, intended to lead a hearer from an attitude he would be expected to have towards a courageous person to the motive he should be prepared to impute to a courageous person himself. I take Aristotle to be supposing that we admire and praise others, in the first instance, for what they are like, not for what they do, although deeds may lead us to notice someone and impute an admirable trait to him. But the fact that we, from a third-person point of view, find a virtue simply admirable, shows the motive, too, for why anyone, from a first-person point of view, should want to acquire it for himself. Looking on, we find the virtue attractive, even apart from any benefits and pleasures that might flow from it to others and accrue to its possessor. That is, a virtue shows that “useless goodness” that is the kalon. But a virtue just is a state (hexis) of doing actions characteristic of the virtue. Thus, the motive for carrying out some task characteristic of a virtue would be similar: an act of courage is esteemed by the agent for the same reason that we esteem the agent. An analogy from sports can serve to illustrate this point. Suppose some youthful spectator admires the self-mastery of a top athlete such as a gymnast and wants to become like that athlete. He finds a coach, who then assigns him an extremely rigorous training regimen. When this aspirant was swamped with the difficulty and pain of it,

33. As Aristotle himself says, seeing someone as kalos is that origin of the goodwill that in turn is the origin of friendship (NE IX.5.1167a19–20). Likewise, a eulogist may enumerate accomplishments and recount benefits received, but mainly he praises traits (see Rhetoric I.9.1167b28, “praise is speech that sets forth greatness of virtue”).
34. NE II.1.1103b7–25.
he might reasonably be advised to embrace the exercise set for him each
day for precisely the same reason that he wanted to become that sort of
athlete in the first place.

Acts of courage in a striking way display “useless goodness,” because
they sometimes result in the destruction of the person showing cour-
age. Their “useless goodness” may more exactly be characterized as the
agent’s conforming to a plan of action that was antecedently determined
to be reasonable, where that he conform has the character of a command,
and where his conforming is carried out effectively and well because his
emotions assist rather than interfere. All three Platonic notions of kalon
are present in such an action. The action reveals or manifests something
else, namely, the plan, because only the attractiveness of the plan, its be-
ing kalon, serves to explain why the agent acts as he does in the difficult
circumstances. The agent possesses the kalon in doing the action, in the
sense that he can claim responsibility and credit for the realization of the
plan in the matters under his control. Moreover, his action is kalon in the
sense that it realizes the intelligent design shown in the plan.

Aristotle’s investigation of false forms of courage, then, is intended
to illustrate other motives by way of contrast. 35 Men who only appear to
be courageous because they are experienced “prove cowards when the
danger imposes too great a strain, and when they are at a disadvantage
in numbers and equipment; for they are the first to run away, while cit-
izen troops stand their ground and die fighting…. This is because citi-
zens think it disgraceful [aischron] to run away.” 36 Men who have merely
optimistic temperaments likewise run away when things take a bad turn:
“the mark of the courageous man, as we have seen, is to endure things
that are terrible to a human being and that seem so to him, because it is
kalon to do so and aischron not to do so.” 37

I take Aristotle to regard courage as a paradigm, because in his treat-
ment of other virtues the elements that make an action kalon are typi-
cally not as salient: perhaps the plan (or ordering) is not so fixed, clear,
or easy to determine; the application to facts and circumstances lacks
the direct fixedness of a command; or the plan (or ordering) is rather
general, articulable at best as a set of priorities or a rule of thumb. The

35. NE V.8.
36. NE 1116b15–19.
37. NE 1117a15–18.
The Kalon in Aristotle’s Ethics  85

virtue of moderation (sōphrosunē) seems most similar to courage and in fact is discussed by Aristotle right after it: frequently we need to follow some kind of regimen (for example for eating, for reasons of health or from custom) yet exceptions to any regimen are typically allowable, even on the basis on which the regimen was adopted in the first place; and it is not infrequent that conformity to some regimen fails to serve the interest of the agent. A virtue like liberality is in some respects even more removed, but in other respects not: although sometimes a person will be generous in accordance with a plan (such as tithing), more frequently one is generous in the service merely of general principles, such as that money of itself has no worth \(^{38}\) and that one should use it to show one’s independence of it; there is, in any case, a great deal of creativity and freedom (as the name of the virtue implies, eleutheriotēs, “a state of freedom”) in how one manifests this principle; and yet frequently a generous gift looks to be not in the service of one’s own interest. Friendship is an interesting case because it takes place in accordance with a definite plan or ordering, “deal with the other as another self,” which is revealed in acts of friendship; one gains the attractive good of relating to another in this way by an act of friendship; and always the acts of a friendship will display the ordering clearly—since, if a friend is another self, he is other than oneself, and thus to wish a good to a friend is eo ipso to wish it as thoroughly as one does so for oneself, but for someone not oneself.

We have seen that for Plato the kalon is the intelligibility of a form manifested in a radiant particular, which can somehow be possessed by virtuous action and which involves some kind of ingenious practical rationality. Aristotle appropriates these ideas but interprets them teleologically. Similarly, in his ethics, the kalon in action is the manifestation in that action of some kind of reasonable ordering, which reasonability is possessed in the manner of a good by the doing of the action deliberately as conforming to that ordering, where the ordering when reflected upon pleases us as involving an appropriate, proportionate harmonization of elements to achieve some appropriate goal. Aristotle could easily import these notions into his ethics, and presume that his hearers would be prepared to do the same, because of accessible analogies between these notions of the kalon and characteristics, especially, of acts of courage.

\(^{38}\) NE IV.1.1120a32.
The interpretation of the kalon that I have been proposing here requires, with its reliance upon the idea of an antecedent reasonable plan, what might be called a rationalist interpretation of Aristotelian ethics, insofar as emotions are accorded mainly an assisting and supportive role, and the main task in action is regarded as correspondence to some kind of ordering, with the assistance of emotion rather than the following of an emotion to the detriment of such correspondence. It is obviously not possible to defend here in a comprehensive way an interpretation which has this emphasis. Instead, I shall simply offer two remarks which indicate how such an interpretation might be advanced.

First, on this reading, eudaimonia must be construed primarily as activity of the soul in accordance with logos, not as in accordance with virtue. What this means is that, in the function argument, where Aristotle seems to conclude the argument by saying that “the distinctively human good is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue,” we should interpret the phrase “activity of the soul” as incorporating fully what he had earlier specified, that is, “activity of the part of the soul which has logos,” which is “activity of the soul conforming to logos or not lacking any logos” (psychēs energeia kata logon è mē aneu logou, NE I.7.1098a6–8). We should then take the phrase “in accordance with virtue,” accordingly, solely to add the qualification that that activity, to count as a genuinely endorsable good, must be assisted by the relevant virtue—because only in that way can it be done well. That is to say, we must put aside a common way of reading the Ethics, which takes the function of the function argument to be that of changing focus from reasonability to virtue, so that Aristotle after that point becomes free to examine, as it were, various modes of human flourishing (courageous activity, generous activity, just activity), and goes on to consider, in light of that study, whether a composite of these (an “inclusive” interpretation) or the best of these (a “dominant end” interpretation) counts as human eudaimonia. In con-

39. Aristotle likes this language of following pathos over logos, or living kata pathos rather than kata logon; see NE I.4.1095a4–8 and NE IX.8.1169a5.
The Kalon in Aristotle’s Ethics

Contrast to this common mode of interpretation, on the “rationalist” reading that my interpretation here requires, we should hold that eudaimonia for Aristotle is simply a life well-lived on an ordering determined antecedently to be the most reasonable, and that the virtues enter in as various assisting habits relative to reactions (pathē) and impulses (hormai) that potentially could draw someone away from the execution of and best correspondence to such a reasonable ordering.

If the virtues are understood as assisting in this way, an interesting corollary is that what counts as activity in accordance with a mean will often, if not typically, be determined in advance of action, and it will be understood as incorporated into the plan or ordering that is regarded as relevant to that action. That is to say, the plan will be regarded as reasonable relative to what a certain sort of person (man, woman, child, with relevant experience or not) can reasonably be expected to succeed at, given what reactions and impulses, and of what character and degree, are reasonably expected to be at play. The woman in the household understood to be deathly afraid of spiders will not be given the task of killing the wolf spider on the bathroom floor, as that would be to require what for someone like that would be an unreasonably bold act. The bold assault by commandos up the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc to neutralize German guns aimed at the Normandy beaches will be judged in advance to be sufficiently daring and not recklessly overbold. On this interpretation, one is taken to have in advance a sense of how far virtue can assist, that is, what counts as neither too bold nor too meek for a veteran of war, a civilian man, a woman, and a child. The mean does not arise out of the virtue but is always a specification of some kind of reasonable ordering.42

Second, in Aristotle’s particular descriptions of the virtues, we should understand the common phrase “as the logos (or correct logos) dictates (or bids)” 43 as meant to import and incorporate a logos which has a nested structure. One sees a precursor of Aristotle’s usage, I think, in the Crito. There Socrates refers to the discussion of the very dialogue itself as the logos binding them, but it involves all three of the following: (1) what he and Crito are now agreed upon, namely, that they should follow what lo-

42. Typically Aristotle leaves out the verb when he refers to how the mean is specified: it is “as logos ____”; and one is meant to understand “says” or “bids.” But when he does provide a verb, it is most commonly a verb most appropriate for a commander in the field, “as reason gives the order” (an prostaxēi, NE 1114b29; tathei, NE 1119b18; an taxēi, NE 1125b35).
43. E.g., NE 1117a18, 1233a 22.
gos says rather than what an emotion such as fear might impel them to do in the circumstances;\textsuperscript{44} (2) the \textit{logos} that shows, on that assumption, that they should be obedient to the authority of the \textit{polis}, whether this be regarded as like paternal authority or like an agreement;\textsuperscript{45} and (3) the \textit{logos}, on that assumption, that is the particular finding of the jury in the facts and circumstance. All three \textit{logoi} must be in place for Socrates to persevere in his choice to stay in prison and face execution rather than escape with Crito. Similarly, for Aristotle, the phrase “as the \textit{logos} says” would depend upon an account of why living in accordance with \textit{logos} should be the preeminent consideration at all (an account which the function argument presumably provides); an account of why the relevant antecedent plan or ordering should be binding at all; an account of what that binding plan or ordering might indicate in the facts and circumstances; and an account of how facts and circumstances condition the application of the plan (a matter of individual \textit{phronēsis} and \textit{epieikeia}).

In this connection we would need to reject a common presupposition in the interpretation of Aristotle’s ethics, namely, that what Aristotle calls “ethics” is meant to be the sole foundational investigation for human practice. Rather, Aristotle understands practical philosophy as encompassing three disciplines: matters of citizenship and the state; matters of the household, including wealth production; and matters of individual comportment. “Ethics” covers the last. We might tend to think of ethics as leading to politics; yet, for Aristotle, in practical matters, the end and the whole are prior. Thus, it is most appropriate to say that ethics concerns, roughly, matters of choice left unsettled by the law of the city-state and a prior determination of the duties of a household and of household administration. That is why his ethics can seem incomplete in its treatment of “morality,” namely, because Aristotle regards that burden as borne by law. Law settles, on its own grounds and relative to life among others in a peaceable polity, that murder is forbidden, that debauching of women is forbidden, and that theft is forbidden.

On such a “rationalist” interpretation of practical philosophy in Aristotle, we should help ourselves to passages in the \textit{Politics} where Aristotle speaks of practical rationality as if it radiates down from God.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Crito} 46c7, 46d3, 48b3.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Crito} 52c8.
As regards what is referred to as “absolute monarchy,” that is, where the king decides everything by his own judgment—some people consider that it is hardly consistent with nature for one man to make decisions for all the citizens, in a city-state composed of citizens who are all alike, on the grounds that, necessarily, the same thing is just by nature for those who are alike, and those who are alike all merit the same thing by nature. . . therefore, they should take turns ruling. . . . But this is straightaway a “law,” because an ordering is a law. For the law to rule, then, is better than for any one of the citizens to rule. . . . So then, anyone whose command is that “law should govern” seems to command that “only God and Intelligence should govern”; and anyone whose command is that “this man should govern” slips a beast in as well. (That is the sort of thing that sense-desire is. And as for spirit, it corrupts rulers, even the best among them.) That is why the law simply is intelligence but without desire [nous aneu orexeōs].

Passages like this allow us to draw closer analogies between the kalon in practical philosophy for Aristotle and Platonic notions. We saw above that Aristotle interprets teleologically the three notions of kalon inherited from Plato. On the “rationalist” interpretation of Aristotelian ethics proposed here, we maintain that Aristotle similarly interprets the notion of kalon in connection with the idea of activity of life that is kata logon. An action that is kalon reveals what is kata logon insofar as the action is shown to correspond to the relevant plan or ordering; in doing such an action, the agent comes to possess the good that is activity of the soul kata logon; and, finally, as any plan coordinates many elements in relation to some single goal, an action that is in accordance with a plan and is kata logon displays the proportionate adaptation and unity, as well as creative expertise—which was Plato’s third notion of kalon—leading, too, up to an appreciation of the source and goal of ordering in the universe.


47. See Met. XII.10.1075a15–20. Because a different plan or ordering may be relevant for different agents in different circumstances, the kalon in Aristotle might sometimes appear to mean something like “tending to the common good,” and sometimes something else. In this regard see the efforts of Terence H. Irwin in “Aristotle’s Conception of Morality,” in Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy 1, ed. John J. Cleary, 115–43 (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985); and “The Sense and Reference of Kalon in Aristotle,” Classical Philology 105, no. 4 (October 2010): 381–96.
CONCLUSION

We may wonder whether Aristotle’s notion of kalon in the ethics is an aesthetic notion. If by “aesthetic” we mean that, according to Aristotle, what is kalon is admirable, that it pleases when we look at it, then his notion is aesthetic in that sense. As we have seen, the kalon is goodness qua useless for Aristotle; thus, there could be no reason for us to regard it as good except for its perceived form. As Aristotle puts it in the Rhetoric, the kalon is that which, “as good, is pleasant on the grounds that it is good.”48 Again, insofar as the kalon is an object of praise,49 and insofar as we praise something in order that we might express in words that it is noticed and acknowledged, then it is aesthetic. That the kalon is aesthetic in this sense explains how, as we have seen, Aristotle can liken it to physical beauty, when he says that goodwill arises for someone when we see something kalon in his character, just as physical attraction arises when we see something beautiful about someone’s appearance.50

Moreover, it explains why Aristotle tends especially to regard as kalon those actions which have a certain kind of salience, because the action is done for something other than the interests of the agent then and there. As he says in the Rhetoric, we regard as kalon: those choiceworthy acts which a man does not do for his own sake; things which are absolutely good, which a man has done for the sake of his country, while neglecting his own interests; things which are naturally good; and not such as are good for the individual, since such things are inspired by selfish motives. And those things are noble which it is possible for a man to possess after death rather than during his lifetime, for the latter involve more selfishness; all acts done for the sake of others, for they are more disinterested; the successes gained, not for oneself but for others; and for one’s benefactors, for that is justice; in a word, all acts of kinds, for they are disinterested.51

The words “selfish” and “disinterested” can be misleading, if they import a modern contrast between egoism and altruism. Aristotle’s con-

49. In an alternative definition, Aristotle says that the kalon is that which, “as choiceworthy in itself, is praiseworthy on the grounds that it is good” (Rhetoric I.9.1366a34).
50. NE IX.5.1167a3–6, 19–21
as we have seen, is more like the contrast between someone “in the service of himself” as opposed to someone who is evidently not so, in the way that a coward serves himself but the soldier who stands firm and dies serves his homeland.

However, if by “aesthetic” we mean something that has the characteristics classically assigned to anything beautiful—unity, clarity, proportion—then, as we have discussed above, what gets called kalon in Aristotelian ethics is aesthetic in that sense also.

The interpretation proposed here raises the question of why Aristotle should have held that the ultimate end of human life is eudaimonia, when he believed that in some cases a person should prefer the kalon over his own eudaimonia. Wouldn’t it be more correct, then, to say that doing the kalon is the goal of human life?

We first must take care that the difficult cases are described correctly, on Aristotle’s terms. Consider a virtuous young man, who has lived a good life so far and who gives up his life in battle for his country, he supposes, or for a comrade. In doing so, he seems to forfeit years of activity, which, let us suppose, would in retrospect be accounted eudaimonia (such seems to be the case imagined at NE III.9.1117b9–11). But it is not clear that we should not account him eudaimōn already when he dies, so that he would not really be sacrificing eudaimonia (since he has that) so much as additional years of eudaimōn action. Also, even so, would he strictly be sacrificing years of eudaimōn action, or, rather, a potential span of life that would merely give him the opportunity for years of eudaimōn action? (In fact, we never do say about those kinds of cases that the sacrificial person loved others more than himself, but only as much as himself.)

Moreover, it is not at all clear, in such cases, that the alternative is tenable—just as there is no real alternative to falling on a grenade to save one’s mates, if the grenade was going to go off anyway and destroy you together with your mates. A person who ran away in battle to save his life, if he wanted to live a good life from that point on, would presumably need to begin by acting in a just manner—but then, to be just, he would have to turn himself in, to face execution for desertion, or prison. Again, consider a person who might have saved a friend through a heroic action, but then calculated quietly that he’d prefer to save himself instead, and then watched passively as his friend perished. If he after that point as-
pired to live well, how could such a person fail to accuse himself of a disgraceful lack of love for a friend and ruin his chances of eudaimonia on account of bitter remorse? In this regard, recall that Aristotle introduces the class of necessitated actions as those that are done “out of fear of greater evils or on account of some kalon thing,” wisely recognizing that heroic actions are as a rule also necessitated.  

But let us suppose that, after sifting through cases in this way, it does seem as if sometimes a good person would reasonably sacrifice his chances of happiness so that someone else can have a chance. We then need to consider that, for Aristotle, the kalon would not be able to play in practical deliberation the role played by eudaimonia. Eudaimonia functions as that to which other goods are ordered without being ordered to anything else, whereas what is kalon functions as a good ordered to something else: the kalon is preeminently an object of praise, but we praise something for being correctly ordered to something else, not for being an ultimate end. That is why it is possible, Aristotle thinks, to convert any counsel we could give to another, such as “Do this so that you can benefit from that!” and turn it into praise, “Congratulations for doing that, because now you can benefit from that!” merely by changing its grammatical form. 

But to say this is only to answer the question of why Aristotle would have thought it natural to regard eudaimonia as prior to the kalon. It is not to say that he was right to do so, or that there is not something very deep in his notion of life kata logon—perhaps some kind of ideal of fundamental lawfulness, implicit in practical reason—which he might have paid more attention to and developed, but did not.

52. NE III.1.1110a4–5.  
53. NE I.7,1097a30–b6.  
54. NE I.12.1110b12–14.  
4 $\infty$ Beauty and the Intellectual Virtues in Aristotle

Aristotle frequently mentions to kalon. What he means by the term “kalon” is controversial, but it is literally translated as “the beautiful.” He calls many things kalon, including living things,1 knowledge,2 good education,3 good states,4 good art,5 God,6 and virtuous actions, which are both kalon and done for the sake of the kalon.7 But while the ways in which Aristotle mentions the kalon indicate that it has an important role in his philosophy, he gives no unified account of it, and he says little explicitly about how we cognitively grasp it. Furthermore, secondary lit-

I am grateful to David Bradshaw, Rocco Buttiglione, Martin Cajthaml, Mathew Lu, Mark McInroy, Michael Pakaluk, Eric Perl, Alice Ramos, J. J. Sanford, D. C. Schindler, Martin Tracey, and two anonymous referees for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.


3. Aristotle, Aristotle’s Poli


Literature on the kalon in Aristotle has focused on figuring out what he means by the term and on its role in virtuous lives, rather than on building an Aristotelian account of how the kalon is grasped. Given that the kalon plays an important role in Aristotle’s ethics, natural philosophy, and metaphysics, there is clearly some way that we grasp it, although we cannot know with certainty how Aristotle believed this occurred. In this essay, I assemble the scattered remarks that Aristotle makes about the kalon and related notions, and build a constructive, synthetic Aristotelian account of how we grasp the kalon. In building this synthesis, I argue for four fundamental claims.

My first claim is that, taking into account all the relevant Aristotelian texts, the most fundamental way to understand being, actuality (energeia), and truth is as kalon. My second claim is that, taking into account everything Aristotle says about it, the kalon should be understood as beauty, in the way that beauty was understood by two phenomenologically influenced thinkers, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Dietrich von Hildebrand. Their account of beauty, which is founded in experience but also benefits from Neoplatonism’s reading of Aristotle, guides my Aristotelian account of the kalon. The experience of beauty is presented compellingly by von Balthasar and von Hildebrand, and Aristotle’s texts on the kalon can be plausibly read as pointing to the same experience.

My third claim is that grasping the kalon is the best way to understand the ultimate function of the human intellect (nous). Aristotle does not say that the intellectual habits or active conditions oriented to performing acts (hexeis)—that is, knowledge (episteme), craft (techne), understanding (nous), practical wisdom (phronesis), and theoretical wisdom (sophia)—aim at the kalon, but that they aim rather at truth or disclosure (aletheia). But I argue throughout this essay that the best way to put together what he says about the kalon and what he says about intellectual virtue is to see intellectual virtue as aiming at the kalon. The two of these hexeis properly called virtues, phronesis and sophia, aim at an excellent grasp of the kalon in different domains of being. Given my first claim, that the kalon is the best way to understand truth, there is no


9. See NE VI.5.1140b21–28; NE VI.7.1141b2–6; NE VI.12.1143b38–1144a32.
contradiction between Aristotle’s explicitly stated view that the intellectual virtues aim at grasping truth and my claim that they aim at grasping the kalon. My final claim is that, in the best synthesis of Aristotle’s texts, human flourishing is an activity centered around the kalon: we flourish when we are divinized, that is, when our souls become beautiful by becoming one with the most beautiful energeiai.

My overall goal in arguing for these claims is to give an account that is true to what Aristotle says, but that is also relevant to contemporary reflections on beauty and, most importantly, that accurately describes and explains experiences of beauty in a way rooted in Aristotelian thinking. I make some brief remarks in this essay as to why Aristotle did not give an explicit account of our knowledge of the kalon, even though, as I suggest, it is fundamental to the best synthetic reading of his texts. But my primary interest here is not in that question but in presenting an Aristotelian account of the kalon that is connected to contemporary concerns, especially those suggested by phenomenological inquiries into our experience.

I first summarize what Aristotle says about the kalon itself. Second, I consider which powers (dunameis) can grasp the kalon, and on that basis come to some conclusions as to what Aristotle means by kalon. Third, I argue for my first two claims, giving my synthesized account of how Aristotle understands the kalon. Finally, I argue for my last two claims, giving an account of how intellectual virtue and human flourishing relate to the kalon. This synthesis of Aristotelian ideas on the kalon allows us to see in a more unified way our place in the cosmos, and the true grandeur to which we are called.

ARISTOTLE’S ACCOUNT OF THE KALON

There has been much controversy, going back to ancient times, over how to understand what kalon means. Terence Irwin notes how the term “kalon” was translated by Cicero, Ambrose, and the Vulgate Bible, depending on context, as “bonum” (what is desirable or perfect or virtuous), “pulchrum” (what is pleasing when seen or heard, or what is proportionate and has clarity), or “honestum” (what is noble, that is, good and choiceworthy in itself, not just for someone). This might be taken as evidence that

“kalon” does not denote anything unified, given that each of these senses can be found in Aristotle. He even explicitly says that kalon is a homonym, since it has different opposites in different contexts. Its opposite is “shameful” or “base” (aischron) when it refers, for example, to an animal, but “humble” (mochtheron) when it refers, for example, to a house.11

Given this apparent variation in meaning, one might think that there is not one account of how we grasp the kalon, but a different account for each kind of kalon, and likewise many words to translate “kalon” into English. In some cases, as when Aristotle speaks of the color of certain birds, “kalon” would just refer to aesthetic or visual beauty.12 In other cases, such as in the ethical works, “kalon” would not mean “beautiful” (for otherwise, some contend, Aristotle’s ethics would be aestheticism).13 Rather, in ethical contexts, “kalon” picks out what is choiceworthy, praiseworthy, and honorable in itself14 (or what has these characteristics in some culture’s view)15 and so should be translated as “noble,” “fine,” “honorable,” or even “right,”16 since Aristotle equates the kalon with the obligatory (deon).17 Joseph Owens sees the kalon as a notion joining obrigatoriness and aesthetic beauty.18
But although kalon has many shades of meaning, Aristotle still thinks of it as unified, such that we could give a unified account of how we grasp it. Although it is homonymous, so are terms like “good,” which is pros hen equivocal.\(^\text{19}\) When a term is pros hen equivocal, it has multiple meanings that are organized around one primary, focal meaning. For example, “healthy” is pros hen equivocal. It primarily applies to organisms, for which it means good functioning. But it can also be predicated of medicine, in which it means what is restorative of health in animals, and of urine, for which it means an effect or sign of health in animals. Each of the secondary meanings is understood in relation to the focal meaning, so that the term’s referents are unified.

Brian Donohue has shown that, like “being” and “good,” the term “kalon” is pros hen equivocal for Aristotle, with its meanings centered around the focal meaning of God as most beautiful (kalliston), in relation to which all other things are kalon.\(^\text{20}\) Aristotle further says that something is kalon if and only if it is fitting or appropriate (prepon) to something.\(^\text{21}\) An animal that is too large for its kind, or a person who is too small, is not kalon, because these characteristics are not fitting for their kinds of substance.\(^\text{22}\) The kalon has order (taxis), commensurability (summetria), and definiteness (horismenon): a substance is kalon when it has the order and proportion that befits it, in accord with its kind, within the limits or bounds appropriate to that thing, that is, when it is actualized or has the forms appropriate to that thing.\(^\text{23}\) For this reason, virtuous acts and happiness are kalon.\(^\text{24}\) The kalon is linked to what Kelly Rogers calls the “functional excellence” of a substance, or what Gabriel Lear calls its “effective teleological order.”\(^\text{25}\) The kalon is also a principle (arche) of things: the beautiful, like the divine, produces what is better in that which can receive it.\(^\text{26}\)


\(^{23}\) Met. XIII.3.1078a32–b5.

\(^{24}\) NE I.8.1099a24; IV.1.1120a23–30. Cf. NE IX.8.1169a8–11.


The kalon can also be perceived, since it “shines forth” from things, and so reveals the actuality of substance and renders it available for contemplation (*theoria*). To see a thing as kalon is to see it as actualizing its nature (or at least as appearing to do so, since sometimes things appear kalon merely because of cosmetic help). In perceiving the kalon, one sees and takes pleasure in a thing’s goodness, which is fitting to do. But the kalon is not, contrary to what Aryeh Kosman contends, just the appearance of the good; rather, as J. Donald Monan argues, it is a self-manifesting irreducible value that includes but goes beyond the good. Aristotle does distinguish the appearing (*to phainomenon*) kalon, which appeals to desire, from the real (*to on*) kalon, which appeals to rational wish. But although the kalon can appear (including falsely), it is not itself a mere appearance.

The kalon motivates virtuous action by being choiceworthy for its own sake, and not for the way in which it perfects one, unlike the way in which a natural good like health is choiceworthy just because it perfects one. The kalon also does not motivate virtuous action as a means or instrumental good does, nor does it complete good action as pleasure does. Being beautiful and good (*kalokagathon*) is better and happier than just being good; it implies that one pursues virtue and happiness for the sake of the value they have in themselves, and not merely for the sake of their perfecting one’s nature. To pursue the kalon is to be free from interest merely in one’s own advantage or pleasure and from being necessitated in one’s actions; the kalon frees us to act for its sake, that is, for the sake of what is worthwhile in itself and what is genuinely leisurely rather than servile or haphazard.
the good of others or the common good (although those things are kalon too). 

34 That the kalon is not restricted to common goods is seen in that many kalon things, such as the beautiful but useless goods owned by the magnanimous person, belong only to oneself, and in that when one sacrifices what is one’s own for one’s friend, the beauty of this act accrues to oneself, not to the community. 

37 Rather, to pursue the kalon is to pursue what is serious and valuable in itself, regardless of who benefits from it, for the morally serious person (spudaios) prefers the kalon to all other things, correctly perceives the kalon, and is like a rule and measure of what is kalon (and of what is genuinely pleasant). To pursue the kalon is to pursue what actually gives the deepest advantage and pleasure. 

38 In linking the morally serious person to knowledge of the kalon, Aristotle has raised the question asked in this essay, to which he only implicitly, at most, provides an answer.

THE POWERS BY WHICH THE KALON IS GRAPSED

Having described the basic characteristics of the kalon, I turn to an account of how we grasp it. Although Aristotle does not give a complete account of this, he does say that senses and nous are most completely in act when they are directed to the things that can be grasped by that power which the kalon necessitates: those who are genuinely free are less able to do whatever they want (Met. XII.10.1075a13–24) for they must pursue the common good and the kalon. They are “necessitated” not in the deterministic or random senses of matter’s necessity, but in something like the “erotic necessity” of Plato’s Republic 459d5. This counts against the view of Christine Korsgaard, in which Aristotle’s account of the ethical kalon is equivalent to Kantian rightness or disinterestedness (“From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action,” in Kant on Emotion and Value, ed. Alix Cohen, 33–68 [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014]). While seeing the kalon certainly requires transcending selfish or vicious pleasures, it does not involve a removal of all pleasure or desire. See Lännström, Loving the Fine, 15–16.

34. Lear, “Virtue and the Fine,” 125; NE IX.8.1169a8–11; NE IX.8.1169a19–b2; Rhetoric I.9.
36. NE IV.3.1125a13.
37. NE IX.8.1169a19–b2.
that are most kalon. Each of our cognitive powers is, in some way, directed to grasping the kalon.

At the lower cognitive level, sense without intellect can grasp the kalon; indeed, even animals’ senses can grasp what is fitting and what shines forth in other animals. For example, Aristotle reports that some say that when the cuckoo lays its eggs in other birds’ nests, those birds kill their own chicks and feed them to the cuckoo chick because of the kalon of the cuckoo chick; he does not deny this interpretation. Other animals too are kalon in their sensory appearance, such as the bison in its horn or certain birds in their color, and these instances of the kalon are surely graspable by other animals, although they do not grasp them conceptually as kalon. In us, sight, hearing, and smell can grasp kalon objects, while taste and touch grasp objects that only have to do with natural goods for the sensing animal. So at least some senses can grasp the kalon, that is, what is shining, fitting, proportioned, and pleasant in a thing’s sensible accidents. This is not emotionally neutral perception but perception that involves desire and pleasure, which are one in actuality with acts of sense perception. To sense is to become one in form with sensible energeiai, and to become one with the kalon is to become one with what is most delightful and desirable. To sense is to be aware that one senses, and thereby to have some delight in one’s activity of living as a sensing being. To sense the kalon, then, is to flourish in one’s senses and to delight in the object and in one’s living insofar as one senses that object. This is so even in unusual cases, as in the example of a bird seeing the kalon of the cuckoo chick mentioned above. Although seeing the kalon of the cuckoo leads to what is naturally bad for the other bird, the sight is still pleasant.

But many substances do not appear kalon in their sensible accidents. Yet these things can still appear kalon in their substantial actuality. Their
kalon is not grasped by aisthesis alone, but is grasped in a way involving nous.47 Nous involves a different kind of soul from the sensing soul, and grasps its objects only in separation from matter.48 By nous we can grasp “what it is to be” (ta ti en einai) kalon, that is, the essence of kalon, which is something existing in itself and existing primarily, prior to concrete substances. This essence, like all essences, applies to substances through their forms (eide) and their energeiai, and is grasped through forms and energeiai.49 But nous can also grasp individual energeiai and their kalon. Nous grasps the truth about energeiai in “touching” (thigein) them, thinking the forms in sense images, and actualizing their potential intelligibility.50 Nous and aisthesis work together in considering particulars; Aristotle raises the possibility that, insofar as we judge particulars and essences, they are actually one cognitive power considered in two ways.51

The close connection of nous and aisthesis in grasping particulars is seen especially in that we grasp the kalon of particular virtuous acts by intellectual acts: the practically wise person has a sort of intellectual “eye” (omma) or grasp of appearances (opsin echonta) for this kalon, and this requires an innate capacity (which only some have) and moral and intellectual virtue achieved through long habituation, not just aisthesis.52 We cannot tell what the virtuous thing to do is in some particular situation just by applying a universal rule (logos); logoi are a starting point for ethical deliberation, but to know the right thing to do in a particular circumstance requires seeing the kalon of an act in those circumstances.53

47. PA I.5.645a9–25; NE VI.12.1143b38–1144a32.
48. DA II.3.415a12; DA III.4.430a3–9; DA III.8.431b20–432a8; NE VI.6.1140b31–1141a8.
50. DA III.6.430b26–b16; DA III.7.431b3–5; Met. VII.10.1036a7; Met. IX.6.1048a35–37; Met. IX.10.1051b18–26; NE VI.11.1143a29–b13. While nous grasps universals, it does not grasp just universals but all actualities, including individual ones. There is controversy as to how forms, essences, and actualities relate. Some take forms and actualities to be the same and to be individualized in material substances; others take them to be distinct, positing both a Platonic form (as an exemplar for a species) and an individualized enmattered actuality. The latter interpretation seems to me to be more in line with what Aristotle says, but it is beyond the scope of this essay to show this. See Jiyuan Yu, “Two Conceptions of Hylomorphism in Metaphysics ZHΘ,” Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 15 (1997): 119–45; Lloyd P. Gerson, Aristotle and Other Platonists (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), chaps. 4 and 7; and commentary throughout Joe Sachs’s translation of Nicomachean Ethics (Newburyport, Mass.: Focus, 2002).
51. DA III.4.429b10–18.
52. NE III.5.1114b7; NE VI.12.1139a18–32; NE VI.12.1144a30; NE VI.2.
53. NE II.9.1109b20–23; NE III.7.1151b11–13; NE III.8.1117a8; NE VII.3.1147a7. See Thomas M. Tuozzo, “Contemplation, the Noble, and the Mean: The Standard of Moral Virtue in Aristotle’s
The virtuous person forms an image of an act under consideration and sees with the mind the kalon of that act. In my interpretation, this means that the virtuous person sees that the act has value in itself, and that this value shines forth and thereby exerts a call to perform that act.\textsuperscript{54} For a thing to have intrinsic value is just for it to bestow itself on others by exerting this call, which must be perceived. The virtuous person then performs that act for the sake of its kalon. This series of image formation, perception of the kalon, choice, and action should be understood phenomenologically as forming one unified rational act, like a virtuosic performance, although extended over time.\textsuperscript{55} Action can occur suddenly \textit{(exaiphnes)} but choice cannot. But virtuous actions, done under the call of the kalon, can occur suddenly on the basis of character.\textsuperscript{56}

Perceiving the kalon of the particular thing to be done, or of a particular energeia (such as of the actuality of an animal that does not appear kalon in its sensible accidents), is not a perception of the senses alone, which aim at sensible qualities like colors or tones. Rather, this perception is, as it were, an “extension” of nous into aisthesis, as when one “sees” that the triangle is the closed figure that has the fewest sides of any shape.\textsuperscript{57} This noetic-aesthetic “seeing” of the kalon requires not only that the object be “fitting” in itself and that one be able to “see” it by nature, but that one’s own soul be educated and habituated into a fitting or kalon state, and that one perform acts \textit{kalos}, that is, correctly or beautifully.\textsuperscript{58} Our souls must be made to move pleasantly in harmony with the kalon, as when we listen to fine melodies, and so both grasp and become kalon.\textsuperscript{59} The kalon in objects begets the kalon in the soul, which furthers one’s grasp of the kalon; the kalon is a principle that begets more of itself.\textsuperscript{60}

Nous perceives the kalon by making contact with it, as is best seen

---


\textsuperscript{55} I owe this simile to Mathew Lu.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{NE} \textit{III.8.1117a23; EE II.8.1224a4; EE II.10.1128b3}. On the notion of exaiphnes, see note 93 below.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{NE} \textit{VI.8.1142a25–31}. Cf. \textit{DA} \textit{III.7.431a14–b9}.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{NE} \textit{I.7.1098a8–18; NE III.5.1114b7–17; NE X.9.1180a11}. On the controversial translation of the adverb “kalos” as “beautifully,” see note 91 below.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Pol.} \textit{VIII.5.1340a15–17}.

\textsuperscript{60} Aristotle’s view of the kalon works out implications of the view of the kalon in Diotima’s speech in Plato’s \textit{Symposium}, in which kalon objects beget kalon in the soul, and this leads
in the highest act of nous, contemplation (theoria), the pleasant and self-sufficient act of beholding and possessing some object that is valuable in itself by becoming one with its energeia as actually intelligible.\textsuperscript{61} One can indeed contemplate physical things, like kalon human bodies or stories, in a way that involves aisthesis,\textsuperscript{62} but one can also contemplate apart from aisthesis. Wonder moves us to inquire and thence to contemplate,\textsuperscript{63} and we wonder at kalon things, such as knowledge,\textsuperscript{64} beautiful artwork, the magnificent person’s grand acts,\textsuperscript{65} all works of nature,\textsuperscript{66} and God and the divine life of thinking. Indeed, wonder leads us to contemplate God because it moves us to inquire into the principles of things, and thence we come to God, the first principle of all things, the highest and most continuous (and so immutable) energeia, and the most kalon of beings.\textsuperscript{67} But all forms and energeiai imitate God—they rise above mere material necessity and share by imitation in the eternal, self-sufficient actuality of God (for example, by reproducing themselves)—and they are all divine and kalon, and can be contemplated as such by nous.\textsuperscript{68} Since nous becomes its objects, to see the kalon and the divine is to become kalon and divine, and this is the highest greatness to which we are called. Once we contemplate God as kalon, we see better how, in accord with the pros hen equivocity of kalon, all of its other instances imitate God in their fittingness and value, and in the shining forth of the activity that they are.

THE KALON IN ITSELF

Now that we have seen what Aristotle says about the kalon itself and about how our powers grasp the kalon, I shall present my account synthesizing what the kalon is in itself. As mentioned above, this account is not explicitly found in Aristotle but synthesizes his ideas, developed with

---

61. DA III.4.430a3–9; Met. XII.7.1072b11–29; NE IX.9.1169b28–1170a10; NE X.7–8; EE VIII.3.
64. DA I.1.402a1–5.
65. NE IV.2.1122b16–24.
66. PA I.5.645a9–25.
the help of phenomenological accounts of the experience that he seems to have considered. In this section, I defend the first two conclusions of this essay: that the most fundamental way to understand being, energeia, and truth is as kalon, and that the kalon should be understood as beauty. On this basis, in the next section, I turn to the question of how intellectual habits, especially intellectual virtues, allow us to excellently, reliably, and effectively grasp the kalon as such. I also consider what the relation between these virtues and the kalon reveals about human flourishing.

The kalon, due to its relation to form and energeia, is something divine in terrestrial things. It is valuable in itself, and shares by imitation in God’s self-sufficiency and freedom from material or deterministic necessity and from haphazard chance. It belongs to forms and energeiai not just insofar as they are good (that is, perfective of something), nor just insofar as they are intelligible (that is, able to actualize and so become one with nous), but insofar as they imitate and reflect God and shine forth from themselves. It includes goodness and truth, but also something more than these. The kalon calls us to ever-higher activities for their own sake insofar as they are kalon, and thence to the highest activity of nous, theoria of God. We can see better now why, as I asserted above, the kalon is not merely an appearance; it is more important than the good or intelligibility, but it could not be so if it were just their appearance. It bestows a high and rare pleasure—not the pleasure of being satisfied in one’s lower appetites or in one’s desires for natural flourishing or knowledge—but the pleasure of achieving and completing one’s highest activity and thereby participating in an activity that transcends oneself.69

Given all this, I contend that the best way to understand the kalon is as “the beautiful,” not in a merely aesthetic or Kantian sense, but in the sense that we find it in the work of the phenomenologically influenced thinkers Hans Urs von Balthasar and Dietrich von Hildebrand. In von Balthasar’s view, the beautiful is the totality of a being. The beautiful includes, but is not reducible to, a being’s goodness or truth. It also includes, but is not reducible to, the appearance of a being’s goodness or truth. The beauty of a being is its total “form,” not in the sense of substantial form but in the sense of a Gestalt, the being as a whole in its self-revelation, that is, its exterior communication of its interior nature.

69. NE II.9.1109a29; NE X.9.1179b8–17.
As seen in its gracefulness (charis), anything beautiful is an appearance of God, demanding a response and calling us to the transcendent. We must be attuned to the beautiful by virtuous perception and feeling in order to grasp it.  

Von Hildebrand takes up similar ideas. Each instance of beauty is an intimation of or word from God. To see anything’s beauty is to see something expressive. Just as I can see another’s mood expressed on his or her face, so in seeing beauty I can see something like a gesture arising from within a being, which appears like love expressed on the “face” of that being. By this, von Hildebrand means that when I see something beautiful, I do not just experience it giving or revealing itself to me. Rather, a beautiful being appears to love me, that is, it bestows itself on me and draws me into union with it. From this experience of being loved by the beautiful comes the rare pleasure and the absolute demand felt in the beautiful, for beauty appears as something valuable and important in itself, demanding a reverent response, not as something merely subjectively satisfying or as something that is just a good for one’s nature. Beauty also appears as the overall splendor of a being and as the divine idea uniquely embodied in a being, and so as what a being fundamentally is.

Guided by these phenomenologically motivated accounts of beauty and with an eye to his contemporary relevance, Aristotle’s texts on the kalon can be read as pointing toward an experience of the Gestalt of the beautiful similar to that described by von Hildebrand and von Balthasar. In the Aristotelian view, the kalon appears as gracefully self-manifesting and self-bestowing, valuable in itself, calling nous to what is higher by awakening the desire or eros of wonder. As Christopher Mirus puts it, beauty for Aristotle is the “richness of being.” It is identical to the divine energeia, which is being in the most fundamental sense. Given

73. God’s life (Met. XII.7) is thinking thinking itself, but this is the most beautiful activity and, through its identity with the forms and essences, is beauty itself. This activity is simulta-
that beauty, form, and energeia are all said to be something divine in things, and given that all other beings are beings only in relation to God, I contend that the most fundamental way to understand what being and energeia are is to understand them as identical to beauty. Indeed, in a correct Aristotelian synthesis, the beautiful is even more fundamental than “being.” Although the most fundamental science is of being, there is a more fundamental act of the mind than scientific reasoning, perception or contemplation (theoria), which grasps beauty beyond all logos, all scientific or noetic articulation. Still, some beings are not kalon; while each energeia in itself is beautiful, some combinations of energeiai are ugly, such as when a being lacks the energeiai it ought to have.

These claims should not be rejected on the grounds that Aristotle only makes scattered reference to the beautiful. Rather, we should not expect him to have given an extended treatment of the beautiful, since no logos can be given of it: it must be seen. The beautiful suffuses all of his work (and, indeed, all of the Greek world) and, being ever-present, is never fully articulated in itself. These are also reasons why, in giving an account of intellectual activity and virtue, Aristotle focuses on articulable truth rather than beauty. It suffices for Aristotle to note from time to time the role of beauty, and to leave it to us to be led by what he says to the divinizing experience of becoming beautiful.

**INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE AND THE BEAUTIFUL**

I now consider the final two claims of this essay, which have to do with the way in which the intellectual virtues allow one to excellently grasp the beautiful and with how human flourishing relates to the beautiful.

---

neously a manifestation of itself and a sharing in beautiful activity with others. David Bradshaw argues that these features of energeia as sharable activity and self-manifestation were only barely seen by Aristotle, and were not fully seen until later Greek Neoplatonic and Patristic thinkers, especially with the Patristic concept of acting together or sun-energeia (Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 266–68). While Aristotle has no conception of God deliberately bestowing energeiai on others or consciously sharing in energeiai with others, if my account captures something at least implicit in Aristotle, then his philosophy contains a basis for an account of activity shared between God and other beings.

74. See D. C. Schindler’s essay in this volume.

75. *NE* VIII.7.1159a6–13; *NE* X.7.1177b26–1178a8; *EE* VIII.3.1249b17–25.
Given the lack of an account of how this occurs, one might think that there must be, in addition to the five hexeis of the intellectual part of the soul enumerated by Aristotle, a further hexis by which one is disposed to grasp the kalon. But this cannot be: the term “beautiful” is said in many senses and presents itself in many ways, and so there must be multiple hexeis ordered to grasping it in each way. Although Aristotle describes the intellectual hexeis as potencies for disclosing truth, they should, in light of the foregoing, be seen more fundamentally as potencies for contact with the beautiful. For truth is a contact with or judgment about being, and to grasp truth is to grasp being, and thus, in my Aristotelian synthesis, fundamentally to grasp beauty.

I here consider each intellectual hexis, beginning with those that Aristotle says are not virtues, but for which there is a virtuous way of performing them. First, there is techne, which is an active condition of the soul that does not cause acts of merely knowing or thinking about how to make things, but rather causes acts of knowingly making something. For example, one who has the techne of carpentry is actively disposed to apply his or her knowledge to the act of making things like furniture. Excellent techne aims not just at producing artifacts, but at producing artifacts that are appropriately ordered for the kinds of things that they are and that can be contemplated. This can be summed up by saying that techne aims at producing beautiful artifacts. This requires knowing how to put each part of the artifact in its proper place. Furthermore, training in production of beautiful artifacts also helps train one to see the beautiful, and thereby (along with moral habituation and other learning) to lead

---

77. NE VI.3.1139b15.
78. Met. VI.4; Met. IX.10.
79. NE VI.1.1139a4–17; NE VI.5.1140b21–28.
80. NE VI.4.
82. See Poetics 22.1458b23: in a line of poetry, switching from a normal to an unusual word can change the line from tawdry to kalon, as in Euripides’s modification of a line from Aeschylus. This is a model for other productions. Kalon and making (poieton) are closely connected for Aristotle, but they should not be too closely connected. Erich Przywara, for example, sees techne as uniquely disclosing being as kalon (Analogia Entis: Metaphysics—Original Structure and Universal Rhythm, trans. John Betz and David Bentley Hart [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014], 125–26). This is not a view that can be drawn from Aristotle, since each intellectual hexis reveals the kalon in a distinct way.
a free, non-necessitated life. 83 For example, children should be trained to
draw not for the sake of producing drawings but for the sake of learning
to contemplate beautiful bodies. The act of making something beautiful
helps attune one’s cognitive and appetitive powers to the beautiful, so that
the beautiful can be grasped and contemplated.

Second, there is nous. The term “nous” is used in at least two senses.
First, it refers to the kind of soul or power of the soul whereby one grasps
the actually intelligible. In this sense, nous can grasp any form or ener-
geia, provided it is separated from its matter; nous in this sense aims at
what is ultimate (eschaton), whether unchanging first principles or ulti-
mate changing particulars. 84 Second, nous is the hexis that disposes us
to grasp the indemonstrable first principles of reasoning and to grasp the
universal in the particular. 85 Here too, the beautiful is still involved, al-
though Aristotle does not refer to it. A consideration of how the hexis
of nous must relate to the beautiful adds to our understanding of this
hexis. To think of nous as grasping principles considered only insofar as
they are intelligible risks overlooking that these principles impress them-
selves on the mind as fitting, ordered, shining or self-manifesting, and
that they render the mind likewise fitting, ordered, self-manifesting, dis-
posed to further reasoning, and disposed to awareness of beautiful ener-
geiai through reasoning following from these first principles. Nous is a
hexis for grasping beautiful principles.

Third, there is episteme, which is a hexis that disposes one to reason
well and to demonstrate the necessary, noncontingent universal or the
cause of some particular, starting with the principles grasped by the hex-
xis of nous. 86 Here too, for the same reasons as with nous, we should see
this hexis as grasping the beautiful and disposing one to reason beauti-
fully; it is not just excellent logical skill or skill at gaining knowledge, but
a habit of being formed in one’s reasoning by what, in its intelligibility, is
radiant, valuable in itself, and divine.

Techne, nous, and episteme aid in the performance of flourishing
acts, but their acts are not what eudaimonia consists in, and they can

84. NE VI.11.1143a29–b13
85. NE VI.6. Cf. Posterior Analytics II.19.100a4–14 (Aristotle, Posterior Analytics; Topica,
86. NE VI.3.1139b32–38; NE VI.5.1140a26–b2.
be had even by those who are vicious. But practical wisdom (phronesis) and theoretical or contemplative wisdom (sophia) are virtues of the soul, which cause the activities in which eudaimonia, our highest and most beautiful activity, consists. On the one hand, eudaimonia is an activity that, as Michael Wiitala insists, requires subordinating oneself to the transcendent kalon, pursuing beautiful activities for their own sakes, and thereby coming to share in beautiful, divine activity. On the other hand, to pursue the kalon, as Thomas Tuozzo argues, is to pursue determinate, beautiful activities of one’s own soul for the sake of one’s betterment. These accounts are not incompatible: to pursue eudaimonia rightly is just to pursue a beauty that both transcends and is instantiated in one’s activities. This is possible in the activities of phronesis and sophia, which are perfections of the part of the soul that has to do with reason (logos), the lower part of which governs the irrational powers and the higher part of which engages in contemplation. But although these two “parts” or powers of the rational part of the soul differ, due to the difference of their objects, they are both parts or powers of the nous that is a kind of soul. For this reason, the two affect one another, just as developing technē (a hexis of the lower part of the rational soul) disposes the soul to contemplate (an act of the higher part of the rational soul).

Phronesis is the hexis for reasoning “beautifully” (kalos) about what is good and advantageous for living well. This reasoning aims not at

87. In light of my claim that Aristotelian beauty is similar to Balthasarian and Hildebrandian beauty, which is a divine presence, and in light of the fact that Aristotle says that both eudaimonia and God are the most kalon (kalliston) things, then we should take seriously the literal meaning of eudaimonia, i.e., being indwelt by a good daimon, or rather by God (NE I.8.1099a24; Met. XII.7). To live and do well, which is what eudaimonia consists in, is just to perform one’s most divine energeia, to participate in God and so to have God in one. The term “divinization” might be the best one-word translation of “eudaimonia.” See Rocco Buttiglione, Sulla verità soggettiva: Esiste un’alternativa al dogmatismo e allo scetticismo? (Soveria Mannelli, Italy: Rubbettino, 2015), 146–52; Owens, “The Kalon,” 273.


89. Tuozzo, “Contemplation, the Noble, and the Mean,” 131.

90. NE VI.1.1139a4–a17.

91. Where I use “beautifully,” Aristotle has the adverb “kalos.” If it is controversial to translate “to kalon” as “the beautiful,” it is even more controversial to translate “kalos” as “beautifully,” given that it was a Greek idiom for “correctly,” “properly,” or “well.” On this standard understanding, see David Konstan, Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 202; and C. D. C. Reeve’s translation of Aristotle’s Politics (Indianapolis:
understanding a cause or universal but at action. However, there is in it an aspect of understanding, for in phronesis one has the “eye” for the beautiful mentioned above. What is best, most pleasant, and most advantageous for living well is the beautiful, so phronesis is the virtue that causes one to grasp the beautiful thing that is to be done, for while the function of the human person is living well in accord with reason, the function of the good person is to do this beautifully. We have already seen how this grasp involves the “extension” of nous into aisthesis, and how aisthesis includes feeling and desire. For this reason, one cannot have phronesis, which includes the ability to see the beauty of particular acts, unless one’s feelings and desires are virtuously formed, that is, one cannot be disposed to see the beautiful and to reason beautifully unless one’s soul is beautiful in its rational and irrational parts. The beauty one considers must “fit” with the beauty in one’s soul; beauty with its intrinsic value then draws the beautiful soul, providing it with sufficient motivation to do what is beautiful, thereby begetting further beauty.

The virtuous, practically wise person sees and is drawn by the beauty even of such beautiful acts as dying courageously for others, spend-
ing large sums for the sake of beauty,\textsuperscript{97} living magnanimously only for the sake of beautiful deeds,\textsuperscript{98} or even giving up the opportunity to do beautiful deeds so that one’s friend can do them. Through such acts, even at great loss of those goods that benefit one’s nature, one attains great beauty for oneself. A person who is serious about such deeds would rather live beautifully for just one year than haphazardly for many years, or do one beautiful deed rather than many lesser ones,\textsuperscript{99} since to attain beauty is to attain divine activity, which is worthwhile and freeing even when brief. Great human living does not consist purely in being a spectator of the beautiful, but rather in performing beautiful energeiai.\textsuperscript{100} In this same vein, one can pursue the beautiful with others, as with friends. When friends pursue the beautiful together, when they live and do well together, they experience themselves as having a single energeia, a single life of perceiving and thinking, insofar as each is aware of his own perceiving and thinking, and of his friend’s as his own.\textsuperscript{101}

Finally, there is the highest intellectual virtue, sophia. Sophia includes both nous, the grasp of first principles, and episteme, the ability to give demonstrations, for the sake of contemplation (theoria) of the most honorable things.\textsuperscript{102} Contemplation in this context is often understood to mean contemplation only of things higher than the human person, such

\textsuperscript{97.} \textit{NE} IV.2.1122b7.

\textsuperscript{98.} \textit{NE} IV.3. Ross translates “kalon” as “honorable.” Although the kalon is worthy of honor, the case of the magnanimous person shows why this is a bad translation, for that person rightly knows that his deeds, in their beauty, exceed honor.

\textsuperscript{99.} \textit{NE} IX.8.1169a19–b2.

\textsuperscript{100.} Lear contends that all pleasure and happiness is from contemplating or perceiving the kalon, and for this reason one needs friends, she thinks, in order to behold their virtuous activity (“Virtue and the Fine,” 124). Happiness, in Lear’s reading, comes from being a spectator of, not a participant in, activity. While Lear is right to emphasize the visibility of the kalon and the superior happiness of perception and contemplation over action, the texts she cites better support a reading in which happiness involves the activities both of contemplating beauty and of doing what is beautiful, along with one’s friends. Furthermore, being a spectator of the beautiful is itself not merely being a spectator but is itself an energeia that is formed by the beautiful. Cf. \textit{NE} IX.9.1069b30–1170a12; \textit{NE} X.4.1174b8–27; \textit{EE} I.5.1216b19–20.

\textsuperscript{101.} It is more beautiful and divine for the whole \textit{polis} to achieve the shared energeia of good living than for the individual to do so, and this is the aim of and reason for the city; see \textit{NE} I.2.1094b10; \textit{Pol.} I.2.1252b30; \textit{Pol.} III.6.1278b15–29. This is further support for my view, set forth in note 73 above, that Aristotle has something of a conception of sharable energeiai, at least in the sense of all energeiai being an imitation of divine beauty.

\textsuperscript{102.} \textit{NE} VI.7.
as God, or perhaps also contemplation of the human soul. For example, James Wood distinguishes contemplation in the sense of any intellectual perception of the beautiful from contemplation in the sense of the act of sophia, an epistemic-noetic grasp of the first principles. But in my synthesis of Aristotle’s ideas, since all energeiai are beautiful and divine, they are all among the most honorable things (although they are hierarchically arranged) and so all are available to contemplation. The contemplative act caused by the hexis of sophia involves perceiving the beautiful and involves the acts of the hexeis of episteme and nous; that is, contemplation involves seeing the beautiful, grasping first principles, and being able to give demonstrations of some of what one grasps. In some contemplative-perceputal acts, the powers of nous and aisthesis are both involved, as when we contemplate beautiful bodies, but in other such acts, the power of nous alone is operative, as when we contemplate God.

Just as phronesis requires that one’s desires and feelings be in a beautiful condition to perceive the beautiful, so sophia requires beautiful phronesis and moral virtue to perform its activity. But whereas phronesis’s intellectual act causes beautiful actions, sophia’s act is done entirely for its own sake. The highest human contemplative act is a pure energeia, separate from matter, a pure sharing in the beautiful and the divine, whereby we are most like God and most properly share in His activity. All lower energeiai are beautiful and share in the divine energeia, but only by imitating God as it were remotely. But in contemplation we share directly (though imperfectly) in the activity in which God in Himself consists, and so share most properly in divine beauty. Although contemplation itself is done for its own sake, the contemplative, who best grasps the beautiful, can also put his or her wisdom to work in guiding the most beautiful of practical actions. In contemplation, we grasp God who, as we have seen, is the referent of the term “beauty” in the primary sense, to which all the other senses of the term are ordered. In this

104. NE VI.6.1140b31–1141a8.
106. NE X.7.
107. Protrepticus 89, cited in Gerson, Aristotle and Other Platonists, 66. There are echoes here of Plato, Republic VII.
way, the act caused by sophia provides the ultimate standard for all the other intellectual virtues. Each intellectual hexis aids the others, since each disposes the soul to perform beautiful acts toward beautiful objects, by union with which one becomes more beautiful, and so performs more beautiful acts and activities.

This account of the third and fourth claims of the essay, which connect intellectual habits and flourishing to beauty, allows a solution to what has been termed the “problem of the two lives.” As in my account of the kalon, this solution synthesizes Aristotelian ideas but goes beyond what Aristotle explicitly says. It seems that in Aristotle’s view, there are two incompatible forms of eudaimonia, the activity of phronesis and moral virtue and the activity of sophia. Most people are never able to perform the latter, and the latter seems to move us away from the human energeia of excellent perception and thinking, and away from the possibility of having a single energeiai with one’s friends, to pure divine thinking. If one of two friends becomes a god, the two can no longer be friends, since humans and gods are too unequal to be friends. If my friend becomes a god, one living only the life of nous, then at best I can share in his or her energeia in the way I currently share in God’s energeia: by imitating my friend through energeiai lower than contemplation like virtuous acts, or by contemplating my former friend’s beauty and thereby imperfectly though directly sharing in it. But we will no longer be able to engage in a single act of contemplation together.

108. There is in Aristotle’s view a supreme essence and form of goodness and beauty (Met. VII.6.1031b10–23), which is also identical to God, the supreme good and beauty (Met. XII.7.1072b30–1073a12.) But it is not directly helpful when engaging in the act of phronesis to think about the good or beauty as such, but only about the human good and what is beautiful for us to do (NE I.6). However, apart from the act of phronesis as such, it is necessary for the life of a whole human person to think about the good and the beautiful as such. Phronesis is oriented to the beautiful human life, which is ultimately related to and shares in the good and the beautiful as such, and all senses of beauty can only be fully understood relative to that goodness and beauty.


110. NE VIII.7.1159a6–13; NE IX.9.1170a17–b19; NE X.7.1177b26–1178a8.

111. This sets up a tragic situation that is resolved by the Christian doctrine of the communion of saints, the possibility of the divinization of aisthesis and bodily desire, and the possibility of fully shared divinized activity. But as we have already seen, these possibilities are prepared for by Aristotle. On Christian views that overcome this tragic situation in a way that involves beauty, see Gregory Palamas, The Triads, trans. Nicholas Gendle (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press,
Understanding intellectual virtue to be centered on the kalon thus allows a more unified view of eudaimonia. Eudaimonia consists primarily in a life of becoming beautiful.\textsuperscript{112} The various intellectual hexeis assist one another, and so complete human eudaimonia, difficult though it may be to accomplish, will involve the exercise of the activities of both phronesis and sophia. The longing for the life of the gods, and entirely leaving behind human eudaimonia, can be seen not as a real possibility, but as the upward limit of the life focused on and motivated by the beautiful, which is an ever-greater sharing in divine activity.

In this essay I have argued that, in a synthesis of all that Aristotle says, to act in a way caused by intellectual virtue is to be formed by and for the beautiful, which draws one to ever greater activity, and renders one like unto God. This divinized activity is the ultimate function of the human intellect and brings about the greatest human grandeur, becoming fully beautiful. The beautiful is the way in which Aristotle’s notion of the kalon is best understood and it is also how being and energeia should be understood most fundamentally. While both nous and aisthesis can grasp the beautiful, it is nous formed by intellectual virtue that is especially suited to grasp it in all its forms.

\textsuperscript{112} See NE I.7.1098a8–18.
Aristotle, Aquinas, and Justice as a Virtue

With relatively few exceptions, it has become rare to find justice treated as a virtue in contemporary philosophical discourse. Even in the literature of contemporary virtue ethics, where the effort to think according to the virtues is explicit, justice has been more or less set aside. Of course, a tremendous amount has been written on justice in the last fifty years, but its focus has been on justice as the special province of institutions, or justice as a call to action. In these accounts, justice is most often treated as a formal principle, a matter of policy, a value, a norm, or a procedural code of conduct. The term “social justice,” with all its ambiguities and exhortative applications, is used to cover both of these emphases: John Rawls, whose project enjoys preeminent status in contemporary discussions of justice, claims the term “social justice” for his procedural focus on how rights and duties are assigned to the basic institutions of society; and, related to Rawls’s theoretical account of justice,

---


3. Rawls frames his project terms of the need to establish a basic set of principles for underwriting the contractual foundation for the distribution of social goods, writing: “These
“social justice” has now also become a byword for advocating for particular rights to be granted by institutions. Justice is, of course, of particular relevance to institutions, but so too is it a virtue, the lack of which is a grave mark against one’s character.

For those familiar with classical and medieval treatments of justice, the disappearance of justice treated primarily as a virtue of character ought to be seen as something remarkable, surprising, and worthy of attention. What accounts for the imbalanced scale with respect to treatments of, and so concentrated thought on, justice as a virtue versus institutional justice? No doubt there are many more reasons than the following, but these strike me as most prominent. The first reason is anthropological: justice as a virtue necessarily entails reflection on the connection between justice and a robust notion of the common good. A robust notion of the common good, one that extends well beyond an account of providing for common welfare to an account that regards a shared life in which the activity of the virtues is taken as tantamount to our best human good, is predicated on a philosophical anthropology that regards humans as dependent rational animals. But contemporary moral philosophy tends to see humans first and foremost as individuals endowed with certain rights. A personal virtue of justice, the essence of which is the promotion of others’ good, does not fit well within the dominant contemporary anthropological framework of individualism.

principles are the principles of social justice: they provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation (John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, rev. ed. [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999], 4).

4. The prevalence of this use of the phrase is evident when entering “Social Justice Organizations” into a Google search.


6. The individualistic anthropology of modernity is one of the essential features of what MacIntyre identifies in his most recent book as Morality, the preference-maximizing morality of late modernity. MacIntyre summarizes the features of Morality thus: (1) secularity, with no appeal to the divine; (2) universally binding precepts; (3) precepts whose function it is to constrain individuals in such a way as to make it seem that following Morality is often contrary to one’s own interests and desires; (4) highly abstract formulations and an extremely thin conception of human beings as mere rational agents with general rights and duties; (5) a conceit that Morality is superior to all moralities; (6) a tendency to think one is in some dilemma or other and to focus on dilemmas as the touchstones of moral reflection (Alasdair MacIntyre, Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016], 115–16).
The second reason has to do with how we have come to think about institutions. This follows directly from the anthropological point insofar as in contemporary philosophy and the culture it inhabits, there is a tendency to think of institutions as things unto themselves, distinct from the individuals that compose them. The reduction of human nature to individuals—individuals, that is, in the sense of rights-bearing preference-maximizers—makes of human beings isolated persons, separate from the institutions they may or may not choose to associate with. Institutions, under the leadership of corporate managers, come to bear the responsibility of providing for the needs of multiple individuals, and reflections on just how and why that is to be done has become primary rather than secondary. Such reflections are usually framed in terms of discerning the particulars of social justice.

A third reason has perhaps less to do with the distinctive features of the dominant mode of contemporary moral discourse and more to do with interpretive challenges in appreciating the balance achieved between justice as a virtue and institutional justice in some central texts of the tradition. Aristotle, at the end of the book on justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, corrects Plato’s claim that justice is primarily something harmonizing the soul. But he certainly agrees with Plato that justice is primarily a virtue of a person and so an internal good. It is, then, important to note that in correcting Plato, Aristotle does not swing the pendulum in the other direction and claim that justice is primarily a feature of the city rather than of the soul. Aristotle’s is a different treatment, one that in defending justice as a virtue also reveals justice to be that virtue necessary to the flourishing of communities. And yet, some features of his treatment are perplexing, at least to many of his readers, myself included. Some of
those perplexing features are carried into Aquinas’s much more extensive treatment of justice, a treatment that also has its own set of interpretive challenges. A particularly powerful and yet puzzling claim made by both Aristotle and Aquinas is that justice is beautiful. What does this mean? I hope to make some progress toward an answer to this question in what follows. The ultimate aim of reflecting on the connection between justice and beauty is to better understand justice as a virtue, and to do so in a manner which is not merely to show that Aristotle or Aquinas thought this or that about justice, but to show how their treatments are of great significance for contemporary moral discourse.

WHAT IS PERFECTED BY JUSTICE?

For Aristotle, justice is not a virtue internal to the soul in such a way as to harmonize its parts, but it is nevertheless a personal virtue. Virtues, Aristotle argues, make us good and our actions done well, a claim that is also thematized in Aquinas’s treatments of the virtues.9

Virtues are habits for both Aristotle and Aquinas. Habits are neither passions nor powers, but virtuous habits coordinate the good work of passions and powers. Consider courage. For Aristotle, courage is a habit that is a perfecting mean of hope and fear, as well as an intellectual achievement in which the governing power of perfected practical reason exerts a more or less permanent corrective to those passions. Courage thus can be thought to “reside” in one’s thumos, our desire for retaliation against threats,10 which is the principal passion that Aquinas identifies as the irascible appetite.11 Similarly, temperance perfects and so principally resides in epithumia, our appetite for pleasurable things, and achieves, through the ministration of correct reason, a right balance be-

---

9. Aristotle, NE II.6.1106a15–23; Aquinas, Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus in communi, q. 1, a. 1, resp.; ST I-II, q. 55, aa. 1–3.
10. On Aristotle’s division of the basic appetites, see De anima III.9.432b3–7. Although Aristotle is not nearly as explicit as Aquinas in regarding courage’s principal intrapersonal subject to be the irascible appetite, such is the implication of Aristotle’s treatment. This implication is confirmed in Aristotle’s identification of courage and temperance as being the principal virtues of the two main irrational parts of the soul: “dokousi gar tōn alogōn merōn hautai einai hai aretai” (NE III.10.1117b23–24).
11. For a recent treatment of Aristotle on desire that provides careful textual analysis and considerations of how to situate Aristotle within contemporary discourse on desire, see Giles Pearson, Aristotle on Desire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
tween insensibility and sensuality. Prudence perfects and resides in the intellect insofar as it regards actions. What does justice perfect? What does it principally reside in?

For Aquinas, the answer is straightforward: “But since we are said to be just through doing something aright, and because the proximate principle of action is the appetitive power, justice must needs be in some appetitive power as its subject.” Aquinas goes on to argue in this same article that justice cannot be the act of the sensitive appetite because sensitive apprehension is, so to speak, always fundamentally receptive to objects, and thus cannot go so far as to apprehend one thing in relation to another. This, then, effectively eliminates the possibility that justice could reside in either the concupiscible or the irascible appetite. Since it is reason that considers one thing in relation to another, the appetite that justice, as the virtue that has as its essence a disposition to restore right relations of one thing to another, must reside in is the rational appetite, which is to say the will.

It is notable that Aquinas presents his own grounding of the virtue of justice in the will as a mere elaboration on Aristotle, whom he interprets as having also placed justice within the will. Certainly, justice for Aristotle entails rational comparisons, the desire to see good done to another, and choices, but Aristotle does not employ a notion in his philosophical anthropology that can be identified as just the same as Aquinas’s voluntas. To be sure, there is in Aristotle’s account a rational desire, that which Aristotle calls “boulēsis,”14 which is usually translated as “wish” and which provides the appetitive home for justice. But boulēsis is not indicative of a person’s character in the way in which voluntas is, for it is not the seat from which free choice is exercised and so is not determinative of a person’s whole way of life in the way that voluntas is.

Where Aquinas and Aristotle certainly agree is that justice is a virtue perfecting that power by means of which each person can be directed toward the good, especially the good of another. The good man is he who

12. ST II-II, q. 58, a. 4, resp. Translations from Aquinas are taken, with some modifications, from the English translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). The Latin text are typically the Leonine, as found at www.corpus thomisticum.org/index.html.

13. “Respondeo dicendum quot irascibilis et concupiscibilis non sunt partes intellectivī appetitus, qui dicitur voluntas” (ST I, q. 82, a. 5).

judges matters rightly, and so wants what is in fact good and not merely apparently good. The good man is the just man. Justice is concerned with right judgment regarding the good for others. For Aristotle, this comes through clearly in the treatments of particular justice, and especially in those corrections to the positive law that are expressions of equitable (epieikeia) adjustments thereof. In the case of Aquinas, the fullest treatment of any of the cardinal virtues is that of the particular types of justice, spanning Summa theologiae II-II, questions 58 through 122. Herein one finds detailed treatments of the applications of just discernment and action considered over a surprisingly large number of cases.

There are, of course, other differences between Aristotle and Aquinas’s accounts of justice as perfecting a person than the difference between justice as residing in wish or will, for that is a difference with many implications. Aquinas’s account of voluntas enables him to provide an account of sin and redemption, both of which are notions foreign to Aristotle. So too does it make room for the human will’s participation in the divine will, a participation marked by the virtue of charity, a virtue that, for Aquinas, is supremely important and the efficient cause of every virtue, and that has no place in Aristotle’s moral economy. But for all these differences—and they are significant differences—there remains a common core to their accounts not only of what justice is, but of how it perfects a person, and of why one ought to strive to be just.

WHY BE JUST?

Aristotle considers it a sign of a poor upbringing and malformed character to question whether one ought to be virtuous; that in fact, the person who has been raised well, surrounded by examples of nobility and justice, does not need an account in order to know with sufficient clarity what qualifies as justice, or to be suitably motivated to do just deeds.

17. ST II-II, q. 23, aa. 7–8.
19. "Hence anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is beautiful and just
And yet, Aristotle does supply just such an account, or accounts rather, not only of justice but of virtue generally and of each of the virtues. Our pre-philosophical upbringings supply the archai, the principles and starting points, for philosophical inquiry, which is to say inquiry in search of an account for the reason why. Philosophical inquiry seeks not to supplant the lessons of one’s youth, but rather to build upon them and make them secure. One can ask, “why be just?” without questioning whether one ought to be just.

So, why be just? Justice is choiceworthy in and of itself: that is why we should be just. There is a special luster to each of the virtues, their beauty, and such beauty motivates their realization: that is why we should be just. Justice is virtue entire, bringing each of the other virtues to perfection, and we ought to perfect the other virtues: that is why we should be just. Justice is always another’s good, and we ought to promote the good of others: that is why we should be just. Justice is an imitation of God, just actions give glory to God, and our best end is to imitate God and to give him glory: that is why we should be just.

One of the interpretive challenges that readers of Aristotle and Aquinas face with regard to their respective treatments of justice is the desire to find one underlying reason in answer to the question of why we ought to be just. Such a desire seems related to our desire to employ univocal terms in the treatments of being, truth, goodness, and beauty. But the facts of the matter dictate otherwise, and just as one is closer to uncovering the truth of things when embracing the analogicity of being in ontological investigation, so too is one closer to the truth when recognizing layers of explanation in moral discourse.

There is simply not only one answer to the question, “why be just?” This is very different from saying that there is not an answer to the question, “why be just?” This is also not to say that there cannot be a rank ordering of answers to this question. Such rank ordering is distinct from reducibility to one underlying explanation. Although there are many an-

and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the facts are the starting-point, and if they are sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get the starting-points” (NE I.4.1095b2–8).
swers to the question, it is necessary that each of them not be conflicting, that they be, in some significant manner, mutually reinforcing. And, in the treatments provided by Aristotle and Aquinas, they are.

**Kalon, Pulchritudo**

In his *Eudemian Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tells his audience that virtue is *kalon*, and virtuous actions are done for the sake of *kalon*. We have no English equivalent for this term. It is usually translated as “noble” or “fine,” but the primary sense of the term is “beautiful.” Aristotle uses this term in a number of contexts, and, as recent surveys of the term reveal, there are many dimensions to its uses. In each context, however, recognizing the kalon is a matter of good judgment: “It seems to belong to the practically wise man to be able to deliberate beautifully [*kalōs*] about what is good and profitable for himself.” Kalon, designating that which is beautiful, noble, and good, not only serves as a term to mark one’s appreciation for an object, but is also central to the motivational structure for virtuous action. Depending on one’s charac-

20. Aristotle argues that all actions should be directed to the kalon, and that the very best activity of happiness is most beautiful (*kalliston*) (See NE I.8.1009b24–27; NE I.9.1099b22–24; and EE VII.15.1249b19).


22. NE VI.5.1140b25–27.
ter, any variety of actions can be motivating. However, Aristotle thinks some actions are intrinsically more motivational than others. Virtuous actions are especially motivational because they are choiceworthy in and of themselves: “Now those activities are desirable in themselves from which nothing is sought beyond the activity. And of this nature virtuous actions are thought to be. For to do beautiful deeds is a thing desirable for its own sake.”23 Choiceworthiness can be explained in terms of the kalon, but the senses of kalon extend beyond choiceworthiness.

Virtue is beautiful, and virtuous action is motivated by the beautiful: both of these claims—the first about virtue and the second about virtuous action—are unfamiliar in contemporary moral discourse. Indeed, a modern moral philosopher might be forgiven for thinking that Aristotle is guilty of a category mistake, illicitly combining his aesthetics with his ethics. But perhaps this has more to do with what we moderns have done to beauty—subjectivizing it on the one hand, relegating it to a merely formal abstraction on the other—than it does with some common sense notions we have about ethical terms. Consider, for instance, if, drawing out the connection between kalon and choiceworthiness, we substitute the notion of “admirable” for “beautiful” in Aristotle’s double-edged claim about virtue and virtuous action: “Virtue is admirable, and virtuous action is done for the sake of that which one admires”; or, perhaps even better, “Virtue is admirable, and that admiration serves to inspire similarly admirable actions.” Such a claim seems much more familiar, especially to the lovers of good stories in which characters’ admirability, or lack thereof, is central to the storytelling, and to the young, who tend to be specialists in character analysis. It also strikes me as an insight that is neither naïve nor insignificant to moral philosophy.

Each of the virtues is kalon, but it is in the connection to right judgment that we find an important feature of the way in which justice is kalon. In Aristotle’s Rhetoric, a work that is often and unjustly ignored in considerations of his moral philosophy,24 Aristotle writes that the kalon—the beautiful, noble, and fine—is “that which is both desirable for its own sake and also worthy of praise; or that which is both good and also pleasant because good. If this is the kalon, it follows that excellence

must be kalon, since it is both a good thing and also praiseworthy.”25 In this same chapter, Aristotle holds justice up as the greatest of the excellences, for it is most beautiful and so most admirable and worthy of our praise: “If excellence is a faculty of beneficence, the highest kinds of it must be those which are most useful to others, and for this reason men honour most the just and the courageous, since courage is useful to others in war, justice both in war and in peace.”26 It is clear that this judgment regarding beauty and the particular beauty of the just person and just actions is no mere aesthetic judgment. It is a reasoned judgment about what constitutes especial contributions to the good of others with whom one shares a community. It is a judgment grounded in the concrete circumstances of our social and political nature, and measured by the extent and the manner in which one makes those sorts of contributions that produce results that contribute to the flourishing of other particular individuals as well as to the flourishing of the whole community. Aristotle does not hesitate to see the beauty in such particular and practical contributions, and in doing so to hold out such actions for imitation. This is beauty in the concrete, and it is no less beautiful for its solidity.

Although less explicitly ubiquitous than in Aristotle, beauty in Aquinas is an essential part of the structure of the virtues, particularly with respect to our motivation to acquire and exercise them. We find echoes of Aristotle’s treatment of kalon in Aquinas’s account of bonum honestum, especially in Summa theologiae II-II, q. 145, a. 2, in which Aquinas distinguishes the honest good from the useful and pleasant by means of beauty, for “a thing is said to be honest as having a certain excellence [quondam excellentiam] deserving of honor on account of its spiritual beauty [spiritualem pulchritudinem].” Aquinas emphasizes the concurrence of clarity and due proportion [claritas et debita proportio] as distinctive of beauty, drawing from Pseudo-Dionysius’s reflections on God as beautiful because he causes the clarity and due proportion evident in the universe. It is these same principles at work whether we are talking about a person’s beautiful physique or the beauty of character: “spiritual beauty [pulchritudo spiritualis] consists in a man’s conduct [conversatio] or his actions, being well proportioned according to the spiritual clarity

of reason. This indeed is what is meant by honesty [*pertinent ad rationem honesti*].”

Aquinas argues not just that the bonum honestum is the beautiful, but that it is also the virtuous, endorsing Cicero’s division of honesty into the four cardinal virtues: “Tully, in *de Offic.* I and in *Rhet.* II, divides honesty into the four principal virtues, into which virtue is also divided. Therefore honesty is the same as virtue [*honestum est idem virtuti*].” Just as spiritual beauty has the markers of clarity and due proportion and is achieved when a person’s speech and actions are in accord with right reason, so too does the concordance between reason and conduct achieved by virtue bear the marks of clarity and due proportion: “This indeed is what is meant by honesty, which we have stated to be the same as virtue; and it is virtue that moderates according to reason all that is connected with man. Wherefore honesty is the same as spiritual beauty [*honestum est idem spirituali decori*].” The reference Aquinas makes to Augustine at the end of his response in this second article of *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 145, clarifies the scope of honesty: it is not beauty entire, but specifically spiritual beauty, which is that beauty proper to the concordance between reason and human conduct, which is to say, just that which is the work of virtue.

Aquinas’s brief reflections on beauty in this question of the *Summa theologiae* are remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that they arise near the end of his expansive reflections on moral philosophy, comprise just one question, and are not explicitly forecasted by other comments. The *prima* and *secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* provide detailed accounts of happiness, desire, intention, choice, the structure of the moral act, passions, habits, virtues, eternal and natural law, theological virtues, cardinal virtues, and the many virtues that are organized under one or more of the cardinal virtues. In all of these reflections there is hardly a mention of beauty, and no other mention of the bonum honestum. Yet Aquinas urges these notions upon us in summative terms and as signaling a significant addition to the way in which we ought to set the needle of our respective moral compasses. What accounts for this? The short answer is that I do not know why Aquinas

27. *ST* II-II, q. 145, a. 2, resp.
28. *ST* II-II, q. 145, a. 1, s. c.
29. *ST* II-II, q. 145, a. 2, resp.
chose not to describe *pulchritudo* as it applies to a moral context until this point in this text, what his particular sources were in developing this notion (beyond those sources he references in the question), or exactly what weight it ought to bear on the rest of his moral reflections. But, like other readers, I can take this text at face value and reflect on how the whole of his account of virtue can be condensed into an account of the beautiful. Such a reflection applies just as much to justice as it does to temperance, the virtue to which the honestum especially, but not exclusively,\(^{30}\) applies. Aquinas, who identifies one of the features of honesty as that which is deserving of honor, recognizes the special honor given to temperance since it perfects those passions that, when disordered, are most worthy of disgrace. And yet he also argues that still greater honor is due to justice because it excels with respect to a still greater good, the common good. And, as we have seen, for Aquinas, honestum est idem virtuti—honesty is the same as virtue.

What does beauty add to Aquinas’s extensive discussion of the virtues? Among other things, beauty points to what is admirable about a thing on the one hand, and why that thing ought to be imitated on the other. Elsewhere, Aquinas identifies a third feature of beauty—integrity, or perfection (*integritas sive perfectio*).\(^{31}\) In the case of spiritual beauty, or what we might call moral beauty or the beauty of character, integrity, the perfection achieved through the concordance between reason and action, is the foundation for right proportion and clarity. Significantly, Aquinas also remarks that beauty gives pleasure when seen or otherwise noticed.\(^{32}\) The beauty of character, whether observed in oneself or another, pleases, and it pleases not simply as something worthy of admiration, but as something that encourages imitation. We take pleasure in what is beautiful, and an essential feature of that pleasure is the desire to imitate. Hence, at least one important feature that Aquinas’s account of spiritual beauty and honesty adds to virtue is the provision of a motivational feature for becoming virtuous: identifying virtuous conduct and action as beautiful serves to say that we should go and do likewise. Virtues are beautiful, and virtuous actions are done for the sake of the beau-

\(^{30}\) *ST* II-II, q. 141, a. 2, ad 1; *ST* II-II, q. 145, a. 4, resp.; *ST* II-II, q. 145, a. 4, ad 3.

\(^{31}\) *ST* I, q. 39, a. 8.

\(^{32}\) “Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty: so that good means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the beautiful is something pleasant to apprehend” (*ST* I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3).
This applies to justice as a virtue, just as it does to each of the other virtues, or even more so given the importance of justice in achieving due proportion within a community and thereby securing the common good.

Saying that justice is choiceworthy on the one hand and beautiful on the other still seems to leave something unexplored about the power of justice to attract. Here, to be clear, I am not so much thinking of justice itself, as either a Platonic form or an Aristotelian-Thomistic species. I mean justice insofar as it is evident in someone’s character, or in an action, or in an institution, or even in an idea about how best to bring about a just state of affairs. I mean justice as it is born by some individual thing or other. To say that justice is beautiful and worthy of choice is to say that it is admirable, imitable, and ought to be realized—brought forth by an agent.

Each of these features is grounded in the beauty of justice, for it is the very nature of beauty to inspire replication. This is a point that Plato emphasizes to great effect in the Symposium when he has Diotima ex-tol the reproductive qualities of our admiration for beauty.33 Plato identifies a fundamental truth about beauty that is carried into the rest of the tradition, a truth that Elaine Scarry has reminded us of recently, and with great subtlety and force, in her thought-provoking reflections in On Beauty and Being Just.34 The beauty of justice is often overlooked in our theorizing about justice, but it is always present and accounts for the way in which justice works upon our passions and conscious awareness of what a situation we observe signifies or what another situation may be calling for from us. It is the feature of justice that makes it so accessible especially to the young, who are, if we pause to think about our experiences with children, remarkably sensitive to what is mine and thine. This lesson came home to me most palpably on one occasion when I was observing my two eldest sons at play in the bathtub many years ago. The older boy took a toy boat from the younger, who was playing with it. There was a brief moment when the one-year-old looked stunned, and then purposeful. He promptly stood up, popped his older brother on top of his head, took back his toy, and then sat down. His older brother did not respond in anger, but rather in recognition. He had done wrong, and

he knew it. There were no tears, no protests, just a return to his engagement with some other object in the tub. The whole affair took just a few moments, but in my observation of those moments I was struck by the nature of justice at work on all sides: the disturbance of order through the insertion of unwarranted acquisition, punishment, and the return to proper order. Both actors played their respective roles in the whole state of affairs, and I, a graduate student at the time and immersed in texts concerning the nature of justice and the variety of social orders, knew, somehow, that it was there, in that bathtub, that I observed the essence of the matter. I was awed by the beauty of the encounter, a beauty that came to evidence especially because of the ugliness of the instance of injustice.

It is through countless observations of interactions like these that our refined sensibilities about what constitutes justice and injustice are honed. But, in this process of sophistication, we would do well not to forget the primal elements that constitute the basic features of justice. To be sure, there is much more that can and should be presented in accounting for justice, but in identifying beautiful features of just characters, actions, ideas, and states of affairs, we can make better sense of our admiration for justice and our convictions that we ought to be just persons, persons who restore order and promote the good as well as we can in whatever circumstance we may find ourselves. Justice is beautiful, and the experience of beauty inspires replication.

VIRTUOUS ENTIRE, THE COMMON GOOD, HAPPINESS, AND THE GLORIFICATION OF GOD

Aristotle and Aquinas both use kalon and pulchritudo respectively in a manner that proves summative to their accounts of evaluating the relative goodness of particular actions, states of character, desires, and intentions. Their summative accounts of beauty are not intended as either analytically exhaustive of the elements of a comprehensive moral philosophy or singularly persuasive with respect to guiding one’s choices about how to live one’s life. In fact, both Aristotle and Aquinas are frustratingly brief in their respective accounts of beauty and its role in their moral philosophies, and they spend the bulk of their efforts working other soil.35

35. And in the case of Aristotle, as the secondary literature mentioned above bears out, some of what he says about kalon is cryptic, and a unified account of each of his brief statements about it may be in fact impossible.
what remains of this essay, I want to explore just a little of that ground insofar as it relates to their respective accounts of justice. This is more familiar territory to those familiar with the Aristotelian and Thomistic treatments of justice, so I will be brief and will seek to emphasize two main points: first, that the features of justice that emerge as one seeks to provide a reasoned account of why one should be just are not reducible to some one of them; and second, that beauty is evident in a variety of ways in each of these features.

One of the more remarkable claims that Aristotle makes is that justice is complete excellence. He tells us that two things are entailed by this claim regarding completeness of excellence. The first is that justice employs complete virtue, in the sense that justice utilizes temperance, courage, prudence, and the rest of the virtues in its own activities. This is easier to see if one considers failures in justice: one is unjust if intemperately eating more than one’s share and so depriving others of theirs, or if failing to act courageously in the face of an attack on one’s city. The second entailment is that justice necessarily puts one’s actions at the service of others, such that, Aristotle tells us, justice alone of the virtues is always another’s good. It is the very nature of justice to stretch beyond a self toward another: to be just is to promote what is good and right for another or others. Bearing these entailments in mind allows one to make sense of Aristotle’s paradoxical remark: “What the difference is between excellence and justice in this sense is plain from what we have said, they are the same but being them is not the same; what, as a relation to others, is justice is, as a certain kind of state without qualification, excellence.”

Aquinas provides a far more extensive account of the parts of justice than does Aristotle, but he adopts Aristotle’s approach to the relationship between general justice and complete excellence. Aquinas argues that justice necessarily is other-regarding, entailing by its essence an equality of relation (aequalitatem) of one person to another. Like Aristotle, Aquinas connects his account of justice to the law, insofar as the law promotes what is good for each living under it, and it is this notion of legal justice which can also be regarded as a general virtue. Aquinas makes

37. NE V.1.1129b30–1130a5.
38. NE V.1.1130a10–13.
39. ST II-II, q. 57, a. 1, resp.; ST II-II, q. 58, a. 2, resp.
clear why, even though some virtues may be primarily self-regarding in their acceptation, no virtue is divorced from what justice entails when one places a person in the more natural context of community.

Now it is evident that all who are included in a community, stand in relation to that community as parts to a whole; while a part, as such, belongs to a whole, so that whatever is the good of a part can be directed to the good of the whole. It follows therefore that the good of any virtue, whether such virtue direct man in relation to himself, or in relation to certain other individual persons, is referable to the common good, to which justice directs: so that all acts of virtue can pertain to justice, in so far as it directs man to the common good.40

Aquinas’s relegation of an individual person to a part of the whole community is helpful for bringing to light the manner in which justice harnesses the proper work of each of the other virtues and, through its own proper work, brings them to the service of others in the community. It is worth pointing out, moreover, that one should not read too much into this language: Aquinas does not think that a human person is a mere part of the whole. In point of fact, one of the most repeated themes that emerges as Aquinas makes his way through his lengthy discussion of the parts of justice is the intrinsic dignity of the individual person, a dignity which it is never right to sacrifice on the altar of what may be regarded as expedient to the community.41

Although Aristotle and Aquinas both argue that general justice is distinctive through its proper work of promoting the common good, there are some important differences between the two. One is that Aquinas is far more detailed in his account, especially as it relates to his reflections on the juridical conditions of his time. Another is that whereas Aristotle argues that justice is the whole of virtue, or general virtue, Aquinas argues that justice is a general virtue. This is to leave room for the virtue of charity, which for Aquinas is virtue entire (like justice), as well as a virtue in a specific sense, “for just as charity may be called a general virtue in so far as it directs the acts of all the virtues to the Divine good, so too is legal justice, in so far as it directs the acts of all the virtues to the

40. ST II-II, q. 58, a. 5, resp.
41. This is perhaps most vividly emphasized in his discussion of murder (ST II-II, q. 66), but is evident as well in his treatments of various other injuries to persons, including the harms done through speaking wrongly to or about others (ST II-II, qq. 72–76). See also Jean Porter’s Justice as a Virtue, 257–69.
Justice is virtue entire insofar as the work of justice is to order each of the other virtues to promote the common good, whereas charity orders each of the other virtues to the ultimate good, which is God. We should not think of this as a division of labor between the two virtues in the sense that justice serves the polity and charity serves God; rather, Aquinas sees charity as encompassing general justice, and therefore giving justice its form on the one hand and empowering it to do its work as well as possible on the other. In fact, these two ways in which charity surpasses justice converge: “Charity is called the form of the other virtues not as being their exemplar or their essential form, but rather by way of efficient cause, in so far as it sets the form on all.” Aquinas's elevation of charity as the most excellent of the virtues, his account of which draws significantly from Aristotle’s account of friendship, reveals a number of differences between their respective treatments of God and human flourishing while still leaving intact an account of justice and its relation to beauty that is Aristotelian—Aristotelian, and much more.

In both of their accounts of justice in the general sense, one finds promotion of the common good—the good of another or many others—to be the source of justice’s luster. Justice is magnificent precisely because of what it encourages: right relations between oneself and others, and the exercise of each of the virtues within the context of one’s life with others. This is truly beautiful.

What does that mean, that acting for the benefit of others and establishing right relations with one’s fellows is beautiful? Drawing from what we have already surveyed about beauty in Aristotle and Aquinas, there are several points to emphasize. Insofar as we are naturally social, bringing to perfection our relations with others has the Thomistic pulchritudinous mark of integrity or perfection. Insofar as justice yearns to establish equality with others, a symmetry within a matrix of often asymmetrical relationships, just actions, characters, and institutions bears those marks that Aquinas specifies as due proportion. Insofar as just actions, characters, and institutions are achieved, they shine forth for others to observe. Here we see the Thomistic mark of clarity converge with the Aristotelian insistence that the beautiful is the choiceworthy. Justice is choiceworthy precisely because it is perfective and well-ordered, and in these features

42. ST II-II, q. 58, a. 6, resp.
43. ST II-II, q. 24, a. 8, ad 1.
it inspires re-instantiation. Beauty inspires creativity, replication, imitation. Justice is beautiful, and inspires us to make more of the same.

Happiness
If there is a *pros hen* structure to Aristotle and Aquinas’s accounts of human motivation, the primary sense according to which other notions are related must be happiness. They both provide detailed arguments to the effect that the whole of one’s life is dedicated to happiness, that this desire, when properly clarified to account for what in fact makes us happy, orders other desires, and Aristotle and Aquinas apply this notion as a measure in assessing the relative success of a given human life.

Without a doubt, the ultimate answer to the question regarding why one should be just or courageous or temperate is happiness. Humans necessarily desire their own flourishing, and humans exercising right reason realize that the essence of happiness is excellent activity. The best activity is contemplative, and so contemplative activity regarding the best thing is our greatest happiness, but so too are virtuous actions and prudential reflections partially constitutive of our flourishing. Essential to both Aristotle and Aquinas’s accounts of happiness’s ultimate motivational power is its characteristic of being choiceworthy in and of itself, a feature common to all virtuous actions.

Evidently happiness must be placed among those activities desirable in themselves, not among those desirable for the sake of something else; for happiness does not lack anything, but is self-sufficient. Now those activities are desirable in themselves from which nothing is sought beyond the activity. And of this nature excellent actions are thought to be; for to do beautiful and good deeds is a thing desirable for its own sake.

How exactly does this notion of “choiceworthiness” help us to clarify the difference between saying that we should be just because it is the beautiful way to be, and that we should be just because we want to be happy?

Just actions, if we are persons of beautiful character or at least on the road to being such, appear to us as beautiful and, thus, as worthy

---

44. *NE* X.7.1177a11–18; ST I-II, q. 3, a. 8.
45. *NE* X.8.1178a9–22; ST I-II, q. 61, a. 1.
of being replicated. We see just actions as choiceworthy in and of themselves. When we step back from practical considerations and reflect on our lives as a whole, we can also see how just actions and the virtue of justice are not only choiceworthy for their own sakes but also contribute to a flourishing life as a whole. Through such considerations, we can see how our efforts to be just are not simply chosen for their own sakes but are also motivated by an overarching desire to flourish, for it is flourishing that, unlike anything else, is exclusively sought for its own sake. But these sorts of reflections, as accurate as they may be, appear rather removed from more immediate motivations to promote what is just. In our day-to-day efforts to live lives worthy of ultimate happiness, what works upon us more immediately is the beauty of a particular just deed that inspires another, or the reflection upon what is due to others in service to establishing a beautiful order within complex relationships. At least in my case, thoughts of distant happiness and the glories of contemplating God, as superlatively beautiful as that supreme activity is, are rarely near at hand, but considerations of striking the right balance in this or that set of circumstances is almost always near at hand, and it is the latter that points to that beauty which is a feature of justice.

IMITATING AND GLORIFYING GOD

But that is not to say that imitating and glorifying God is irrelevant to a full account of justice. This idea is thematic in Aquinas in ways that go far beyond what one finds in Aristotle, although it is not altogether absent in Aristotle. Aristotle’s emphasis in his reflections on the imitation of God tend to highlight the virtuous activity of contemplative wisdom to the exclusion of justice; at least, that seems to be the case in the penultimate chapter of the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, where justice and the other moral virtues are said not to reside in the gods, rendering inspiration and imitation of God in just acts irrelevant.\footnote{47. \textit{NE} X.8.1178b8–21.} But this is not Aristotle’s only word on the matter, for he claims near the conclusion of his \textit{Eudemian Ethics}, shortly after honing the relationship between beauty and justice,\footnote{48. \textit{EE} VII.15.1248b34–1249a16.} that every action, be it practical or intellectual, ought to be
measured by God. This is not exactly the worship of God, or doing all things for God’s greater glory, but we can see here nonetheless a role of justice, as Aristotle regards it, as being inspired by and in some manner in the service of God.

Matters much more explicit in Aquinas where, of course, the view of who and what God is and the role that God plays as creator, supreme lawgiver, and savior make for radical differences between Aristotle and Aquinas’s positions on what life is ultimately all about. Aquinas does not hesitate to find myriad ways to connect justice and the other virtues to God as the supremely just One who calls us to worship him. In point of fact, Aquinas identifies the worship of God as a work of justice, a work he calls religio. In Summa theologiae II-II, q. 81, a. 6, Aquinas argues that, in fact, the part of justice that is concerned with giving to God his due, namely religion, is to be preferred above all other moral virtues. No relations between one man and another take precedence over establishing a right relation with the God who made, sustains, and saves us. Religious actions are beautiful in all the ways that other acts of justice are beautiful, and more. The integrity or perfection, right order, clarity, and worthiness of worshipping God is sublimely beautiful, for it is sublimely perfective, proportionate, and clear. For all these reasons, the worship of God inspires more worship of God: that part of justice which is the virtue of religion inspires the sublime in others and works toward the common good on earth by orienting man toward heaven.

CONCLUSION: LAYERS OF BEAUTY, LEVELS OF JUSTICE

I have argued that there are multiple answers to the question of why we ought to be just, that those answers are complementary and nonreductive, and that although each of these answers does not reduce to the answer of happiness, each answer bears in some way on happiness. The richness of the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of happiness makes this possible, insofar as all that is perfective bears on happiness. But the manner in which all that is perfective bears upon the beautiful in the Aristotelian-Thomistic account is striking, and more so because it is infrequently remarked

49. EE VII.15.1249b10–23.
upon. Just as the perfective is necessarily the well-ordered, so too is it beautiful. And just as the perfective shines forth and displays itself for reflection and imitation, so too does the beautiful. Indeed, justice is beautiful, but happiness is most beautiful.

My task has not been to sort out with precision the ways in which the beautiful converges on beatitude, but rather to make some sense of the beautiful as it relates to justice. I hope that I have done at least that. But I also had the perhaps more ambitious aim of not only clarifying some features of the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of justice as a virtue but also defending that account. I am afraid I have not been as successful with the latter task, at least not by the conventional standards in which we speak of defense in philosophical discourse. In a philosophical defense, one is supposed to respond to objectors, prove them wrong, and make the positive case. However, the problem I identified at the outset of this essay with respect to considerations of justice as a virtue was not that the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of justice had been assailed in the recent literature but that it has been more or less summarily ignored. I suggested some reasons for why this is the case, and no doubt there are others. At bottom, what is at issue between a moral philosophy that ignores an Aristotelian-Thomistic account of justice as a virtue and another that embraces it are disagreements that we usually characterize as metaphysical. What is a human being? What is the point of life? By what means should a human life be measured and judged? These are significant questions that cannot be addressed in this short essay, but I hope to have at least shown that the Aristotelian-Thomistic account has beauty on its side. I think that is worth something, perhaps everything.
6 The Light of Pure Character

Honestum, Decorum, and the Stoic Sage

But when men, with a spirit great and exalted,
can look down upon such outward circumstances,
whether prosperous or adverse,
and when some noble and virtuous purpose,
presented to their minds,
converts them wholly to itself
and carries them away in its pursuit,
who then could fail to admire in them
the splendor and beauty of virtue?
—Cicero, De officiis II, 10, 37

The ideal of Roman Stoicism is practical. It is in the virtuous character of the sage, who alone can live the Stoic maxim (sequi Naturam), that moral beauty shines forth. The journey toward this ideal is by no means easy. Indeed, the “would-be sage” must follow the pedagogical pattern of moral conversion, and this takes a lifetime. The goal, however, is well worth it, as Cicero attests in the passage above from his De officiis: the great and exalted spirit of the sage looks down upon outward circumstances, is converted entirely by what is noble and virtuous, and makes of these ide-

Epigraph is from Marcus Tullius Cicero, De officiis, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947), 207. In citations to De officiis in this essay, the page numbers are referenced throughout using this Loeb edition.
als a reality. Here we find the object of human admiration: the splendor and beauty of virtue, the light of pure character.

According to Stoic thinkers, especially those in the age known as Imperial Stoicism,¹ the Good and the Beautiful are not abstract concepts but embodied realities, living and practical examples—indeed we may call them human exemplars. Far from the cosmological treatises of earlier Stoic thinkers (of Early or even Middle Stoicism), the Roman Stoics emphasize moral life and practical living over theoretical speculation. And this emphasis produced the most creative works of the philosophical movement.²

In what follows we consider more carefully how the Stoics of Imperial Rome linked the practical exercise of moral living to beauty and the good. By focusing on the central players in this phase of Stoic philosophical development (Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius), we lay out the Stoic program as a pedagogy of self-reflection and moral conversion, whose goal is the recognition and appropriation of the kalon: the Good or the Beautiful. Beginning with the foundational mapping provided by Cicero (a pre-Imperial bridge from the Middle Stoicism of Panaetius), we explore the pedagogical program expounded by Seneca as well as the ethical program of self-correction provided by the lectures of Epictetus. Finally, the moral ideal of harmony and tranquility is found in the portrait of the sage in the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. Throughout, we follow the Stoic threads of consistency, coherency, fittingness, and harmony. These are the keys to the moral goal, the good or happy life (de vita beata).

**Marcus Tullius Cicero: Laying the Foundations**

The foundational triad that grounds the Stoic moral approach involves an understanding of the good and the activity of moral judgment. This triad is comprised of three key elements: the good in itself (honestum),

1. Generally considered to be the first two centuries of our era, that is, from Seneca (1 BC–64 AD) to Marcus Aurelius (121–180 AD).
2. “One area in which Stoic philosophy is clearly creative in this period is that of practical or applied ethics” (Christopher Gill, “The School in the Roman Imperial Period,” in The Cambridge Companion to Stoicism, ed. Brad Inwood [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 40).
moral propriety in behavior (decorum), and appropriate moral judgment (officium).

The Primacy of Honestum

The first and most basic concept of the good (kalon), translated by Cicero as honestum, serves as a foundation for his discussion of moral action in De officiis and De finibus:

“Good” which has been used so frequently in this discussion, is also explained with a definition. The definitions offered by [the Stoics] do differ from each other, but only very slightly; for all that, they are getting at the same point. I agree with Diogenes who defined good as that which is perfect in its nature. He followed this up by defining the beneficial (let us use this term for ophelema) as a motion or condition which is in accord with what is perfect in its nature. And since we acquire conceptions of things if we learn something either by direct experience or by combination or by similarity or by rational inference, the conception of good is created by the last method mentioned. For the mind attains a conception of the good when it ascends by rational inference from those things which are according to nature. But the good itself is not perceived to be good or called good because of some addition or increase or comparison with other things, but in virtue of its own special character.3

When we set aside the clearly Platonic-influenced description of the ascent to knowledge of the good,4 we note the foundational role played by honestum in moral development and action. Honestum is a foundational concept derived from rational inference based upon experience. Honestum is attained or revealed as good in virtue of its essential character.

As Cicero’s discussion in De officiis also makes clear, honestum defines the entire category of good and unifies its twofold classification into intrinsic (honestum) and expedient (utile). Surprisingly, it turns out that there is no such thing as an expedient good that is not also intrinsically good. This means that every good is good only insofar as it is united with the absolute good. This latter good is foundational because its goodness is independent of any results or consequences it may produce. Cicero


identifies the notion of such a foundational good as belonging naturally to us as rational beings. Along with order, propriety, and moderation, it belongs to the category of “common concepts” that Stoics identify as central to human nature:

And it is no mean manifestation of Nature and Reason that man is the only animal that has a feeling for order, for propriety, for moderation in word and deed. And so no other animal has a sense of beauty, of loveliness, harmony in the visible world; and Nature and Reason, extending the analogy of this from the world of sense to the world of spirit, find that beauty, consistency and order are far more to be maintained in thought and deed, and the same Nature and Reason are careful to do nothing in an improper or unmanly fashion, and in every thought and deed to do or think otherwise capriciously.

It is from these elements that is forged and fashioned that moral goodness (honestum) which is the subject of this inquiry—something that, even though it be not generally ennobled, is still worthy of all honor; and by its own nature, we correctly maintain, it merits praise, even though it be praised by none.\(^5\)

Order, consistency, moderation, and propriety are essential attributes of the good \textit{qua} good. They are also attributes of beauty. All these constitute the foundation of moral living. Even if no one praised these attributes or recognized in them the essence of true moral goodness, the intrinsic good (honestum) would merit praise by virtue of what it is. In other words, the foundational moral good is a single concept, attained via inferential reasoning, the recognition of which depends upon the presence of order, consistency, fittingness, and moderation. Indeed, one might conclude that the foundational moral good is a single concept whose recognition requires an experience of beauty.

Later in \textit{De officiis}, Cicero examines the claim that the expedient good (utile) could be considered good independent of the intrinsic good. Here, he notes, is a conceptual mistake that becomes a source for error in moral judgment. For no good could be good independent of honestum.

The principle with which we are now dealing is that one which is called Expedi-\textit{ence} (utile). The usage of this word has been corrupted and perverted and has gradually come to the point where, separating moral rectitude from expediency, it is accepted that a thing may be morally right without being expedient, and ex-

\(^5\) \textit{De officiis} I, 14 (Loeb, 15–16).
pedient without being morally right (honestum). No more pernicious doctrine than this could be introduced into human life.⁶

There is only one good. This is honestum. True moral goodness is now seen to be the most useful (expedient); no action is truly useful if it is not already morally good. Cicero’s discussion here reveals how usefulness (expediency) does not refer to productivity, as one might imagine the usefulness of instrumental means to produce ends, but rather to the good of character, an internal good. In the case of character and moral living, the means (expedient) are the end (honestum) in becoming. We are already noting the immanence of the Stoic moral goal.

For Stoics, the highest good does not lie above or at the end of a great chain of goods of varying grades. Nor is the highest good in any sense the product of other acts of goodness. Rather, the category of the highest good includes and integrates all other items that we might call good. And this leads to the way in which Stoics speak of virtue and the foundational unity of the four cardinal virtues:

You see, Marcus, my son, the very form and as it were the face of moral goodness; “and if,” as Plato says, “it could be seen with the physical eye, it would awaken a marvelous love of wisdom.” But all that is morally right rises from some one of four sources: it is concerned either 1) with the full perception and intelligent development of the true; or 2) with the conservation of organized society, with rendering to every man his due and with the faithful discharge of obligations assumed; or 3) with the greatness and strength of a noble and invincible spirit; or 4) with the orderliness and moderation of everything that is said and done, wherein consist temperance and self-control.⁷

Honestum holds pride of place for moral concepts, experiences, and decisions. It is identical to the life of virtue which is intrinsically good and worthy of admiration and respect.

**Moral Propriety and Behavior**

If honestum is foundational, moral propriety (decorum) explains how the good appears in the concrete and is judged. Cicero identifies propriety as a subset of the virtue of temperance or self-control.

⁶. *De officiis* II, 9 (Loeb, 177).
Under this head is further included what, in Latin, may be called decorum (propriety); for in Greek it is called prepon.\(^8\) Such is its essential nature, that it is inseparable from moral goodness; for what is proper (decat) is morally right and what is morally right is proper. The nature of the difference between morality (honesti) and propriety (decori) can be more easily felt than expressed. For whatever propriety may be, it is manifested only when there is pre-existing moral rectitude (honestas).\(^9\)

However one may translate prepon into Latin, the key to Cicero’s rendering is clear: propriety is intimately connected to moral rectitude and this latter to beauty. Prepon expresses rectitude by means of fittingness among various elements of human behavior, attitude, or conduct.

Beauty is not only attributed to honestum. In numerous passages, Cicero likens propriety to beauty and harmony as well. Citing one such passage is sufficient for this essay: “For as physical beauty with harmonious symmetry of the limbs engages the attention and delights the eye, for the very reason that all the parts combine in eye and grace, so this propriety, which shines out in our conduct, engages the approbation of our fellow-men by the order, consistency, and self-control it imposes on word and deed.”\(^10\) Order, consistency, and self-control appear once again where Cicero speaks of decorum as the fourth category of excellence, “having the same beauty as the first three, in which there is order and moderation.”\(^11\)

**Officium: Decorum in Action**

Central to Cicero’s discussion of moral excellence is kathekon, which he translates as “officium,” rendered in English as “duty.” Duty, however, is clearly too narrow an understanding of the reality that is intended here. The term refers to what is reasonable or appropriate, including both moral reasoning and reflection as well as action.\(^12\) Logically, it would in-

---

8. This term, difficult to translate, refers to “an appreciation of the fitness of things, propriety in inward feeling or outward appearance” (De officiis I, 94 [Loeb, 96, translator’s note]).
9. De officiis I, 94 (Loeb, 97).
10. De officiis I, 98 (Loeb, 101).
11. De finibus II, 14 (Loeb, 47).
clude moderation and inner harmony as well as right action. As such, kathekon touches upon the integrated nature of moral living: the life of virtue, uniform consistency in action as a whole, and the harmony of desire, reasoning, motivation, and action. Cicero suggests that the ideal here is a reality only attained by the sage. “But that duty (officium) which those same Stoics call ‘right’ is perfect and absolute and ‘satisfies all the numbers,’ as that same school says, and is attainable by none except the wise man.”¹³ For normal mortals like us, an intermediate level of “mean duties” is attainable.

Kathekon deals with the set of goods called “indifferent” and captures the activity and goal of deliberation. The sage only deliberates about indifferents, since he obviously embodies virtue in its perfect degree (honestum) and does not need to deliberate about those things that are foundationally good.

But since these intermediate things [i.e., indifferents] form the basis of all kathekonta, there is good ground for saying that it is to these things that all of our deliberations are referred; and among these deliberations are those concerning departure from life or remaining alive…. When one's circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is kathekon to remain alive; when one possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is kathekon to depart from life.¹⁴

The full portrait of Stoic living now begins to emerge. The foundations for Stoic life and action flow (or ought to flow) harmoniously from those actions that have intrinsic goodness (honesta) through their manifestation in propriety (decorum) as determined by appropriate and reasonable deliberation (kathekonta). The unified life of Stoic praxis is guaranteed by the existence of absolute goodness. Nevertheless, it is problematized insofar as the sage, by whom it is personified, may or may not actually exist. This ever-present tension between the real and the ideal lies at the heart of the Stoic moral project.

Cicero presents the overall map for Stoic moral progress. Grounded on the concept of intrinsic goodness (kalon), the would-be sage progresses by recognizing those goods and actions that manifest propriety (pre-

¹³. De officiis III, 3 (Loeb, 283).
pon). Judgment (kathekonta) among the indifferents in life constitutes moral deliberation, which, when put into action (praxis), manifests virtue (arête), embodies the good, and completes the circle of self-perfection, the light of pure character.

**LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENeca: THE PEDAGOGICAL PROGRAM**

If Cicero lays out the foundations, it is Seneca who provides a glimpse into the actual practice of coming toward the good. In his letters and various treatises, Seneca demonstrates how the would-be sage actually moves through a three-part pedagogy of goodness: assessing the value of each thing; adopting appropriate impulses toward objects; achieving consistency between impulse and action. In Letter 89, Seneca explains these three elements of moral development as they relate to the divisions within moral philosophy:

Since, therefore, philosophy is threefold, let us first begin to set in order the moral side. It has been agreed that this should be divided into three parts. First, we have the speculative part, which assigns to each thing its particular function and weighs the worth of each; it is highest in point of utility. For what is so indispensable as giving to everything its proper value? The second has to do with impulse, the third with actions. For the first duty is to determine severally what things are worth; the second to conceive with regard to them a regulated and ordered impulse; the third, to make your impulse and your actions harmonize, so that under all these conditions you may be consistent with yourself.\footnote{Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Letter 89, trans. R. Gummere (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), 387. In citations to Seneca’s *Letters* in this essay, the page numbers are referenced throughout using this Loeb edition.}

This pedagogical process depends critically upon cognition: one’s ability to assess the appropriate value of objects in reality.

Such an ability requires a pre-existing notion of the good (honestum), and there is significant scholarly debate as to how or how well Stoic thinkers answer the question of conceptual acquisition of the good. Most Stoics agree that the good belongs to the category of “common concepts” that are innate and made possible thanks to *oikeosis*, the natural affinity or congruence that human nature has for itself and for things that are
proper to its own good. The backdrop to this is, of course, Nature herself as rational foundation for reality.

This is no passive portrait of human life. Oikeosis is dynamic, reaching out to reality. It would be a mistake to imagine it as a type of passivity, a tabula rasa awaiting experience. Nor is it a narcissistic self-absorption. Rather, our natural and rational affinity for goodness is continually open and receptive to all sorts of goods. Indeed, we seek them out. Each being possesses an energy focused both inwardly to itself (to hold it in being) and outwardly toward the world (to attain those goods that belong to it). In rational beings, this energy moves incessantly toward greater and greater rationality. The key to moral progress lies in our ability to discern among goods, to choose those which are proper to oneself, and to appropriate them.

Nature has endowed all beings with such self-love. This love is necessary for self-preservation, for familial relationships, for the security of the city-state, and so on. A natural endowment, oikeosis is dynamic, developing over time and, in the case of rational beings, over a lifetime. At each level of development, the rational being reaches out to reality and appropriates what belongs to its own good, integrating it with concept formation. For example, when the young person reaches the age of reason, the pattern of rational behavior (as opposed to animal behavior) emerges within consciousness as part of that person’s good. This rational pattern emerges more clearly as “the good to be pursued,” which replaces lesser goods such as pleasure, fame, possessions, and so on. So consistency in behavior would become more valuable to the young person as he or she matures.

As this example illustrates, oikeosis is self-organizing and self-perfecting. The process of pedagogical development is natural and inevitable thanks to the internal dynamic of the living and rational being, in imitation of the natural and rational order. The process can be perfected by certain practices that better enable the higher, more rational goods to be attained more quickly. At the outset, however, each being loves and protects itself.


17. Christopher Gill identifies the creative innovation of Imperial Stoicism, especially in Seneca and Epictetus, in the varying genres provided (letters and oral teachings) that served the development of moral wisdom. See Gill, “School in the Roman Imperial Period,” 42–44.
First of all, the living being is adapted to itself, for there must be a pattern to which all other things may be referred. I seek pleasure; for whom? For myself. I am therefore looking out for myself. I shrink from pain; on behalf of whom? Myself. Therefore, I am looking out for myself. Since I gauge all my actions with reference to my own welfare, I am looking out for myself before all else. This quality exists in all living beings—not engrafted but inborn.18

This self-love or natural affinity continues throughout moral development; it simply takes root in more highly-developed and rational manifestations—for example, the good of integrity and virtue, or heroic or humanitarian pursuits.

In Letter 120, Seneca explains the process of moral development as the gradual appropriation of the good. In attempting to answer the question of “how concepts of the good and honorable (bonum honestumque) can be attained in a world of imperfection,” Seneca notes how Nature has provided the rational subject with an internal bias toward the good. This refers to our innate ability to notice good or honorable aspects of any situation (or person) and actively to privilege them over the more imperfect aspects. In this way, rationality in its development is selective: its progress naturally internalizes good aspects of imperfect situations in coming to a clearer notion of virtue.19

This ability of rational reflection to seek out and glean the good in spite of imperfection is described by Seneca when he identifies what, exactly, attracts reason: order, propriety, consistency, and harmony of actions with words. The agent of maximally consistent good deeds “has always been the same, consistent in all his actions, not only sound in his judgment but trained by habit to such an extent that he not only can act rightly, but cannot help acting rightly. We have formed the conception that in such a man perfect virtue exists.”20 How has Seneca come to this conclusion? He tells us in the paragraph that follows:

We have separated this perfect virtue into its several parts. The desires had to be reined in, fear had to be suppressed, proper actions to be arranged, debts to be

19. “Seneca’s claim, then, is that this universal tendency to accentuate the praiseworthy is rooted in human nature by Nature and that this cognitive bias towards goodness is vital for our ability to derive, from the defective examples of good behavior which we actually observe in our experience, a sound notion of virtue, the ingens bonum” (Inwood, “Getting to Goodness,” 286).
paid; we therefore included self-restraint, bravery, prudence, and justice—assigning to each quality its special function. How then have we formed the conception of virtue? Virtue has been manifested to us by this man’s order, propriety, steadfastness, absolute harmony of action, and a greatness of soul that rises superior to everything. Thence has been derived our conception of the happy life, which flows along with steady course, completely under its own control.\footnote{Seneca, Letter 120 (Loeb, 389). Inwood highlights the parallels to Cicero’s \textit{De finibus} III.21 in this passage, stating that the echoing is intentional, despite the shift in terminology. What’s more, Inwood underlines the progress in Seneca’s text over Cicero’s unsuccessful effort to solve the problem of how we acquire our notions of goodness and virtue in an imperfect world. See “Getting to Goodness,” 289n21.}

As Inwood claims, Seneca now approaches an almost Platonic-like description of the sage in order to explain fully how the moral ideal can emerge from imperfect experiences. The price to be paid for such cognitive clarity may indeed be his “ruthlessly clear recognition of the distinction between body and mind.”\footnote{Ibid., 294.}

The Platonic excursus in this text raises again the question we saw earlier: that is, whether or not the sage is (or was) an actually existent human being. Does Socrates stand in the background of his description? Do other heroes, whether historical or literary? Inwood suggests that these figures, bigger than life, embody the ideal toward which Stoic pedagogy intends. They function epistemologically in bringing to birth and confirming the clarity of the concept of the good, a concept that begins with self-concern and moves gradually toward greater and greater order, consistency, and harmony throughout a lifetime. Rather than serving as examples to be imitated, Inwood argues, they are “foils in the analytic process of concept formation.”\footnote{Ibid., 295.}

Seneca offers a model for moral development that is dynamic, self-contained, natural, and yet capable of self-transcendence. The cycle of moral development begins with a vague notion of the good. It is grounded in the rational urge toward moral perfection (oikeosis). It is perfected by reflection upon experience and upon the activity of a developing moral bias: isolating and selecting the better elements in an otherwise imperfect situation or person. By contrasting what is missing with what should be present and, thanks to the idealized figures such as Socrates and Cato, by distilling the perfect from the imperfect, human reason attains clear-
er and clearer insights into the nature of the good. And the good now reveals itself as an epiphany of order, consistency, harmony, and greatness of soul.

**Epictetus: Self-examination and Self-perfection**

If Seneca identifies the moral program as centered on a dynamic outreach of rationality and a continuous reflection on experience (oikeosis), Epictetus focuses more narrowly on the exercises (askesis) themselves. In his *Discourses* and *Handbook (Enchiridion)*, the former slave likens the path to wisdom to another dynamic enterprise: artisanal or musical training. This involves nothing less than perfecting the art of living. “Philosophy does not promise to secure to man anything outside him. If it did, it would be admitting something beyond its subject matter. For as wood is the material dealt with by the carpenter, bronze by the statuary, so the subject matter of each man’s art of living is his own life.”

Epictetus privileges the exercise of self-examination over mere theoretical philosophical discourse. He continually affirms the value of understanding the meaning behind one’s actions. The goal is nothing less than the complete harmony of words and deeds with the ordering of Nature. The cosmic backdrop for Epictetus’s program frames the philosophical journey as one during which the would-be sage continually improves her ability to align judgments, impulses, and actions in tune with the ordering of the universe. Once again, fittingness (prepon) emerges as proper to moral life and progress.

One’s ability to achieve this alignment or fit results in the singular balance and integration of a dynamic life that integrates the good with the beautiful, *kalos kai agathos*, the ideal of moral and rational excellence.

There are several themes through which Epictetus describes the person of such rational excellence: (1) as one who lives a life of harmony and peace; (2) as one of integrity that is the result of continuous training; and (3) as one who has achieved perfection in the “art of living,” in the manner of Socrates. We shall consider each of these themes in turn.

The Life of Harmony and Peace

The goal of philosophy is the development of virtue (arête) which produces happiness, peace, and calm. “For really, whatever subject we are dealing with, our aim is to find how the good man (kalos kai agathos) may fitly deal with it and fitly behave towards it.”25 This project depends upon a deeper understanding of the natural order as manifestation of divine providence, beneficence, and harmony:

So with philosophy; we picture to ourselves the work of the philosopher to be something of this sort: he must bring his own will into harmony with events, in such manner that nothing which happens should happen against our will, and that we should not wish for anything to happen that does not happen…. The first thing one must learn is this: “that God exists and provides for the universe, and it is impossible for a man to act or even to conceive a thought or reflection without God knowing. The next thing is to learn the true nature of the gods. For whatever their nature is discovered to be, he that is to please and obey them must needs try, so far as he can, to make himself like them.” If God is faithful, he must be faithful too; if free, he must be free too; if beneficent, he too must be beneficent; if high-minded, he must be high-minded; he must, in fact, as one who makes God his ideal, follow this out in every act and word.26

The project involves both understanding and self-mastery, both theory and practice. The theory is not the contemplative passivity of intellectual speculation, such as one finds at the close of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Rather, theory refers to active self-awareness. We might liken this to the practice of mindfulness so common in our own day.

According to Epictetus, there are few who actually seek to understand the deeper meaning that lies within reality. He describes the world as a public festival or carnival, in which most people are looking to buy or sell to find food for themselves. The goal of the philosopher is not simply to understand the deeper ordering of things but to harmonize judgments, impulses, and actions so as to contribute to this order.

That is why it is well said by philosophers that “if the good man (kalos kai agathos) knew coming events beforehand he would help nature, even if it meant working with disease, and death and maiming,” for he would realize that by the

ordering of the universe this task is allotted to him, and that the whole is more commanding than the part and the city than the citizen. “But seeing that we do not know beforehand, it is appropriate that we should hold fast to the things that are by nature more fit to be chosen; for indeed we are born for this.”27

The good man (kalos kai agathos) submits his mind to God’s plan and learns to frame his will in accord with the events as they occur, not as he would wish them to occur. Rather, as the transformation into wisdom takes root, such a person would only wish that events occur as they occur, making a virtue of necessity.

Remembering then that things are thus ordained [by God in nature] we ought to approach education, not that we may change the conditions of life, that is not given to us, nor is it good for us—but that, our circumstances being as they are and as nature makes them, we may conform our mind to events.

What do you mean by prison? He is in prison already; for a man’s prison is the place that he is in against his will, just as, conversely, Socrates was not in prison, for he chose to be there.28

The exercises that help achieve this goal involve impulse control, mindfulness, and awareness of a reality beyond one’s self. Epictetus’s Handbook offers several concrete examples:

When anything happens to you, always remember to turn to yourself and ask what faculty you have to deal with it. If you see a beautiful boy or a beautiful woman, you will find continence the faculty to exercise there; if trouble is laid on you, you will find endurance; if ribaldry, you will find patience. And if you train yourself in this habit your impressions will not carry you away.29

Ask not that events should happen as you will, but let your will be that events should happen as they do, and you shall have peace.30

Remember that you should behave in life as you would at a banquet. A dish is handed round and comes to you; put out your hand and take it politely. If it passes you; do not stop it. It has not reached you; do not be impatient to get it.

27. Epictetus, Discourses II, 10, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 298.
but wait till your turn comes. Bear yourself thus towards children, wife, office, wealth, and one day you will be worthy to banquet with the gods.  

Remember that you are an actor in a play, and the Playwright chooses the manner of it: if he wants it short, it is short; if long, it is long. If he wants you to act a poor man you must act the part with all your powers; and so if your part be a cripple or a magistrate or a plain man. For your business is to act the character that is given you and act it well; the choice of the cast is Another’s.

If it ever happens to you to be diverted to things outside, so that you desire to please another, know that you have lost your life’s plan. Be content then always to be a philosopher; if you wish to be regarded as one too, show yourself that you are one and you will be able to achieve it.

These examples illustrate the goal of the life of philosophy: to become the integration—indeed, the personification—of the good and the beautiful (kalos kai agathos). This goal requires ongoing mental awareness and self-mastery. Virtue is not limited to actions alone. Virtue is an internal, mental state of excellence requiring a life of such spiritual exercises.

**Integrity of Life as Continuous Training**

In *Handbook* 3, 2, Epictetus describes the three areas in which “a man who is good and noble” (kalos kai agathos) must be trained. The first involves the will to get and the will to avoid; the second involves impulses and their control; the third involves impressions and judgments, that one may not be deceived. Together these three areas comprise the whole of practical excellence: judgments and assents, desires and choice, passions, and impulses. When all three are aligned in a harmonious manner, the good and the beautiful are one. Achievement of this goal of personal integrity, however, is the work of a lifetime.

The most important of these three areas is the first: willing the good and avoiding its opposite. As rational beings, we are endowed with a personal governing principle that guides the training.

It is by this principle above all that you must guide yourself in training. Go out as soon as it is dawn and whomsoever you may see and hear, question yourself

---

and answer as to an interrogator. What did you see? A beautiful woman or boy. Apply the rule: Is this within the will’s control or beyond it? Beyond. Away with it then! What did you see? One mourning at his child’s death. Apply the rule: Is death beyond the will, or can the will control it? Death is beyond the will’s control. Put it out of the way then! ... I say, if we did this and trained ourselves on this principle every day from dawn to night, we should indeed achieve something. ... Only let a man turn these efforts to the sphere of the will, and I guarantee that he will enjoy peace of mind, whatever his circumstances may be.34

The arduous training of which he speaks resembles artisanal or musical training, as Epictetus often explains:

Once when a Roman came in with his son and was listening to one of his lectures Epictetus said: “This is the method of my teaching,” and broke off short. And when the Roman begged him to continue, he replied: “Every art, when it is being taught, is tiresome to one who is unskilled and untried in it. The products of the arts indeed show at once the use they are made for, and most of them have an attraction and charm of their own; for though it is no pleasure to be present and follow the process by which a shoemaker learns his art, the shoe itself is useful and a pleasant thing to look at as well. So too the process by which a carpenter learns is very tiresome to the unskilled person who happens to be by, but his work shows the use of his art. This you will see still more in the case of music, for if you are by when a man is being taught you will think the process of all things the most unpleasant, yet the effects of music are pleasant and delightful for unmusical persons to hear.”

So with philosophy; we picture to ourselves the work of the philosopher to be of this sort: he must bring his own will into harmony with events, in such a manner that nothing which happens should happen against our will, and that we should not wish for anything to happen that does not happen.35

The Art of Living: The Sage

The sage alone exemplifies the integrity of moral excellence, the coincidence of the fine and the noble, the good and the beautiful. The sage is like Socrates (and perhaps the only sage was Socrates).36 Epictetus al-

35. Epictetus, Discourses II, 14, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 308.
36. “When Epictetus aligns Stoic doctrines with Socrates or when he asks his students to reflect on Socrates’ equanimity at his trial, imprisonment, and death, he is doing just what his Greek predecessors had done” (A. A. Long, Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life [Oxford:
ludes (either directly or indirectly) to one-hundred passages from sixteen of Plato’s dialogues, most generally the so-called Socratic or early dialogues. Socrates’s philosophical methodology (the elentic dialogue) provides the background for the approach taken in the Discourses. Epictetus encourages his students to reflect often upon this philosophical ideal.

This was how Socrates attained perfection, paying heed to nothing but reason, in all that he encountered. And if you are not yet Socrates, yet ought you to live as one who would wish to be a Socrates.\(^37\)

Even so now that Socrates is dead, the memory of what he did or said in his lifetime is no less beneficial to men, or it may even be more useful than before.\(^38\)

How does Socrates exemplify the sage? He always lived according to his understanding of the truth, despite the reactions and condemnations of others. His life was consistent in word and deed, with inner harmony and peace of mind.\(^39\) He did nothing for the sake of what others might think, but only for the sake of doing what is right.\(^40\) He did not contend with anyone, nor did he suffer others to contend.\(^41\)

The sage surpasses all living human beings and stands as an ideal toward which all persons (even Epictetus) strive. Like an asymptotic line, the life of the Stoic continually seeks to approach a certain line yet never arrives. The good and noble person (kalos kai agathos) is worthy of emulation. Epictetus’s Discourses and Handbook offer guidance in achieving the Stoic goal, as articulated by Sextus Empiricus: “The Stoics say straight out that practical wisdom, which is knowledge of things which are good and bad and neither, is an art relating to life, and that those who have gained this are the only ones who are beautiful, the only ones who are rich, the only ones who are sages.”\(^42\)

---

\(^37\) Epictetus, Handbook 51, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 483.
\(^38\) Epictetus, Discourses IV, 1, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 422.
\(^39\) Epictetus, Discourses IV, 8, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 443–44.
\(^40\) Epictetus, Discourses III, 24, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 394.
\(^41\) Epictetus, Discourses IV, 5, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 429.
John Sellars draws the link between Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius in the following way: “If the Handbook may be characterized as a guide to spiritual exercises to be used by students, then the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius may be described as an example of a text produced by a student engaged in such exercises. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that Marcus may have had a copy of the Handbook with him when he wrote the Meditations.” Throughout the Meditations, three themes emerge as threads that we can follow in this section: (1) the nature of moral perfection; (2) the experience of beauty and harmony in the good life; and (3) the result of philosophical exercises in tranquility of mind and heart.

Moral Perfection: The Goal of the Life of Philosophy
Throughout the Meditations, Marcus Aurelius urges himself to act always with perfect and simple dignity: “Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and feeling of affection, and freedom and justice; and to give thyself relief from all other thoughts.” This maxim captures the essence of the perfection toward which he strives. It also involves a life of fittingness: the harmony of attitude, thoughts, and actions. These three areas of life were highlighted by Epictetus. Marcus Aurelius guides his own life in accordance with their consistency.

Harmony among these three constitutes the goal of philosophy: to attain a happy and good life. This is nothing more than good fortune, rightly understood. “But fortunate means that a man has assigned to himself a good fortune: and a good fortune is a good disposition of the soul, good emotions, good actions.” The would-be sage achieves his own good fortune by continual self-examination and self-correction. “The safety of life is this, to examine everything all through, what it is itself, what is its material, what the formal part; with all thy soul to do justice and to say the

44. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations II, 5, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 498.
45. Aurelius, Meditations V, 36, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, 525.
truth. What remains except to enjoy life by joining one good thing to another so as not to leave even the smallest intervals between?”46 Such a practice inevitably leads one to a life of the greatest satisfaction. It is a practice that incorporates all the moral virtues and echoes the life of Socrates.

If thou findest in human life anything better than justice, truth, temperance, fortitude and, in a word, anything better than thy own mind’s self-satisfaction in the things which it enables thee to do according to right reason, and in the condition that is assigned to thee without thy own choice; if, I say, thou seest anything better than this, turn to it with all thy soul, and enjoy that which thou hast found to be the best. But if nothing appears to be better than the deity which is planted in thee, which has subjected to itself all thy appetites, and carefully examines all the impressions, and, as Socrates said, has detached itself from the persuasions of sense, and has submitted itself to the gods, and cares for mankind; if thou findest everything else smaller and of less value than this, give place to nothing else.47

The goal of philosophical practice has less to do with theoretical understanding of the universe and more to do with introspection, a life devoted to “the deity planted within you.” Through continual self-examination and self-correction, the philosopher attains the most complete satisfaction that is possible in this life. Compared to this experience, everything else is “small and of less value.”

**Beauty, Harmony, and the Good**

Central to the practice of such spiritual exercises is the personal experience of the good as beautiful (kalos kai agathos). This experience provides the moral motivation for a life that is all too often beset by many disruptive external events. Intentional preparation is the key. Marcus Aurelius writes:

Begin the morning by saying to thyself, I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that it is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, that it is akin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but that it participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity, I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what

---

is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him. For we are made for cooperation.\textsuperscript{48}

This experience of the good that is beautiful enables the philosopher to look upon all reality with a certain amount of dispassionate distance. Because of this experience, the philosopher is protected from the injuries of life and sees all events as part of a larger cosmic order whose pattern may be obscured from view but that is nonetheless real.

This experience also inspires the philosopher to seek to attain harmony, both interiorly and exteriorly. Attitudes, judgments, and actions align with the harmony that guides the universe. “Everything harmonizes with me, which is harmonious to thee, O Universe. Nothing for me is too early nor too late, which is in due time for thee. Everything is fruit to me which thy seasons bring, O Nature; from thee are all things, in thee are all things, to thee all things return.”\textsuperscript{49} The achievement of this harmony is possible thanks to the presence of the “internal deity,” the inner intelligence that is of the same substance as that intelligence (\textit{Nous}) that is in all things and guides all reality.\textsuperscript{50} “No longer let thy breathing only act in concert with the air which surrounds thee, but let thy intelligence also now be in harmony with the intelligence which embraces all things. For the intelligent power is not less diffused in all parts and pervades all things for him who is willing to draw it to him than the aerial power for him who is able to respire it.”\textsuperscript{51} Turning inward holds the key to continuous practice of attaining this type of harmony. “Look within. Within is the fountain of good, and it will ever bubble up, if thou wilt ever dig.”\textsuperscript{52}

Such daily experience of the good and continual awareness of the Intelligence that guides the universe take the philosopher beyond the temporal plane. He recognizes that attention to the present moment holds the key to moral perfection. Neither past nor future matters; what matters is living each day as if it were the last. “The perfection of moral char-

\textsuperscript{48} Aurelius, \textit{Meditations} II, 1, in \textit{The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers}, 497.
\textsuperscript{49} Aurelius, \textit{Meditations} IV, 23, in \textit{The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers}, 511–12.
\textsuperscript{50} The affirmation of the experience of the deity within was common to Greek and Roman Stoics, due to the identity of Nature and \textit{Nous}. See, for example, Seneca’s Letter 41: “God is near you, he is with you, he is within you. This is what I mean, Lucilius: a holy spirit dwells within us, one who marks our good and bad deeds, and is our guardian. As we treat this spirit, so we are treated by it. Indeed, no man can be good without the help of God” (Loeb, 273).
\textsuperscript{51} Aurelius, \textit{Meditations} VIII, 54, in \textit{The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers}, 552.
\textsuperscript{52} Aurelius, \textit{Meditations} VII, 59, in \textit{The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers}, 541.
acter consists in this, in passing every day as the last, and in being nei-
ther violently excited nor torpid nor playing the hypocrite.”

**Tranquility of Mind and Heart**

These daily exercises result in the experience of tranquility of mind and
heart: the goal of the happy life. Essential to this are frequent inner re-
treats.

Men seek retreats for themselves, houses in the country, sea-shores, and moun-
tains; and thou too art wont to desire such things very much. But this is alto-
gether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in thy power whenever
thou shalt choose to retire into thyself. For nowhere either with more quiet or
more freedom from trouble does a man retire than into his own soul, partic-
ularly when he has within him such thoughts that by looking into them he is
immediately in perfect tranquility; and I affirm that tranquility is nothing else
than the good ordering of the mind. Constantly then give to thyself this retreat,
and renew thyself.

The experience of tranquility comes from the good ordering (fit-
tingness) of thoughts, impressions, attitudes, and the behaviors that re-
sult from them. This Stoic goal, mental harmony, places the philoso-
pher above all the vicissitudes of life. Mental harmony is sure protection
against the ways of the world and the thoughts and attitudes of people
around him. “To conclude, always observe how ephemeral and worthless
human things are, and what was yesterday a little mucus tomorrow will
be a mummy or ashes. Pass then through this little space of time con-
formably to nature, and end thy journey in contentment, just as an olive
falls off when it is ripe, blessing nature who produced it, and thanking
the tree on which it grew.”

Tranquility is based upon an attitude of indifference (**apatheia**) which
has more to do with the rational act of letting go and less to do with an
“ivory tower detachment” often associated with the life of the Stoic. The

55. “Occupy thyself with few things, says the philosopher, if thou wouldst be tranqui.
ul: But consider if it would not be better to say, Do what is necessary, and whatever the reason of
the animal which is naturally social requires, and as it requires. For this brings not only the
tranquility which comes from doing well, but also that which comes from doing few things”
rational portion of our nature is capable of self-sufficiency and independence, enabling us to say: “Take me and cast me where thou wilt; for there I shall keep my divine part tranquil, that is, content, if it can feel and act conformably to its proper constitution.”\(^{57}\) Such tranquility is the key to the happy life.

As to living in the best way, this power is in the soul, if it be indifferent to things which are indifferent. And it will be indifferent, if it looks on each of these things separately and all together, and if it remembers that no one of them produces in us an opinion about itself nor comes to us; but these things remain immovable and it is we ourselves who produce the judgments about them, and, as we may say, write them in ourselves, it being in our power not to write them, and it being in our power, if perchance these judgments have imperceptibly got admission to our minds, to wipe them out…. For if these things are according to nature, rejoice in them, and they will be easy to thee; but if contrary to nature, seek what is conformable to thy own nature, and strive towards this, even if it bring no reputation; for every man is allowed to seek his own good.\(^{58}\)

This excerpt captures best all the elements ascribed to the goal of Stoic philosophers: the autonomy of the individual soul to choose to be indifferent to those things which are indifferent; to look upon reality from an inner vantage point; to think and act according to nature, that is, the rational ordering of reality; and, in this way, to experience the superiority that belongs to human reason by its very nature.

The secret to this life, affirms Marcus Aurelius, is that satisfaction found not in having what one wants but in wanting what one has.

But wilt thou be satisfied with thy present condition, and pleased with all that is about thee, and wilt thou convince thyself that thou hast everything and that it comes from the gods, that everything is well for thee, and will be well whatever shall please them, and whatever they shall give for the conservation of the perfect living being, the good and just and beautiful, which generates and holds together all things, and contains and embraces all things which are dissolved for the production of other like things?\(^{59}\)

Marcus Aurelius epitomizes the path of the Stoic philosopher: engaged in daily spiritual exercises that ground thinking, attitude, judg-

---

ments, and action. The challenge he engages in each day, filled with his own personal self-exhortations, captures all the elements of Stoic thought we have seen thus far: the foundational dimension of the good as beautiful, the pedagogy of self-analysis and reflection, the gradual reformulation and fittingness of thoughts and attitudes, and the experience of tranquility, of knowing one is part of a much larger cosmic order governed by rational principles.

CONCLUSION

Stoic thought is too often identified with a military-like approach to life, based upon toughness and detachment. When someone is referred to as “stoic” about a situation, we often take that to mean untouched, unmoved, emotionless. In contemporary culture, the Stoic is mischaracterized as one who seeks to be detached from the world, one who puts up with the vicissitudes of life thanks to the toughness of character developed over a lifetime of self-discipline and rigorous exercise. It is to be hoped that this brief glimpse at the pedagogical path carved out by Roman Stoics reveals a truer portrait of the deeper inspiration behind this philosophical tradition and its perennial attraction. This inspiration involves beauty, harmony, and peace of mind.

The originality of the Stoic approach to beauty and goodness can be found in their emphasis on fittingness. Neither beauty nor the good are static, absolute realities. Rather they are relational realities, lived human experiences, grounded upon Reason and Nature, found in the web of everyday relationships and in the way the various dimensions of life relate to one another. To be able to recognize what is fitting is the task of rationality. To do this well is the work of a lifetime of experience, self-reflection, and self-correction. Over a lifetime, the would-be sage deepens her ability to recognize how events fit together, and how patterns reveal the deeper thread of rationality and beauty within the tapestry of the cosmos and, indeed, at the heart of each human life.

Inspired by an awareness of the beauty and goodness of this world, confident of the providence of Nature, and despite the ways in which life can bring suffering, the Stoic sage seeks a deeper reality: the intrinsic goodness (honestum) upon which all goodness and beauty depend. Through perception, deliberation, and judgment, human reason moves
relentlessly toward the harmonious and unified life of virtue. In this, Stoics experience an immanent transcendence and a transcendent immanence. Goodness and beauty can be lived in this world: they do not lie in a transcendent Platonic realm of pure Forms.

The foundation for the Stoic moral path is the existence of bonum honestum, the intrinsic good upon which all virtue depends. The human natural affinity for such goodness (oikeosis) develops over a lifetime, thanks to the growing recognition of the difference between outer and inner goods. The path of wisdom opens to the spiritual realm, to the recognition of union with an inner deity. Finally, with its focus on the beauty of human action—kindness, generosity, and peace of mind—Stoicism offers a path of beauty and harmony that can be followed by anyone in any age.
7  Beauty as Form in Augustine’s
   *De vera religione*

   The Implications of Moral Pedagogy
   for a Theology of History

In the fourth book of his *Confessions*, Augustine mentions a lost work on beauty, somewhat in passing. The context for the reference to *De pulchro et apto* is significant. Augustine is trying to analyze aesthetic judgment in the concrete terms of love. While mourning the loss of his friend Nebridius, Augustine characterizes the order of historical time as an order of death: all things “pass along the path of things that move towards non-existence… in them there is no point of rest.” He continues, with palpable grief:

Wherever the human soul turns itself, other than to you [God], it is fixed in sorrows, even if it is fixed upon beautiful things external to you and external to itself, which would nevertheless be nothing if they did not have their being from you. Things rise and set: in their emerging they begin as it were to be, and grow to perfection; having reached perfection, they grow old and die. Not everything grows old, but everything dies.

---

Augustine struggles intellectually with the impermanence of non-necessary being. Augustine’s sorrow is about beauty, because *Confessions* is a work written to praise God, and there is no basis for praise other than the delight taken in “transient things” which “flee away.” Augustine criticizes himself for loving his friend inordinately, saying that he delighted in Nebridius “as though he would never die.” This is a hard standard to put to grief and loss. One might ask: do we love the people we love in any other way? For Augustine, the experience of delight and the impermanence of the object of delight are simply incongruous. His consolation and hope lie in turning away from exterior things to seek after the “interior melody,” a beauty that cannot cease to give delight even when delightful things pass away.

The alternative of an “interior melody” seems to support the dualism behind many scholarly approaches to Augustine’s aesthetics. This move from the exterior to the interior is one of several instances of a dilemma irresolvable on its initial terms. Augustine does this to set up intellectual and, on this basis, spiritual tension. Resolution is promised by the structure and ambiguity of human love itself—said to be both a fable (*fabula*), and a multitude of gestures giving true delight (*mille motus gratissimos*) by making a unity out of many (*ex pluribus unum facere, Conf. 4.8.13*). Particular people, like particular things (*in parte, Conf. 4.11.17*), are beautiful because they give delight appropriate to the “grace and loveliness inherent in them.” The “greater beauty” of the sum of created goods (*ad totum*) gives even more delight, because it arises from the fittingness of parts within a whole, revealing an order and grandeur that intimates divine stability. The greatest beauty gives the greatest pleasure, which is to love things *in* God “who made them and is not far distant.” Augustine thinks his love for Nebridius—or, more specifically, his grief at Nebridius’s passing—was inordinate because unreasonable. The sense of deliberate tension is confirmed on a larger scale. It is worth noting that Book 4 opens with a description of Augustine’s academic work as founded on “vanity and a lie,” and with a characterization of concubinage as vastly different from “lawful marriage.”

Augustine stands in tension between three possible forms of community: marriage, contemplative friendship, and visible membership in the Church. Each promises a kind of unity—marriage, through *disciplina* (*Conf.* 6.12.22); friendship, through love of wisdom and shared goods (*sed quod . . . fieret unum*, *Conf.* 6.14.24); the Church, through faith (or trust in the veracity of revelation, offered through the ministry of a reliable teacher; *Conf.* 6.4.6). However, in each case, the principle of unity remains obscure to Augustine, and so each of these ways to a lived unity seems prohibited. The analogous senses of unity are central to the nature of beauty in the *Confessions*. Augustine can articulate the beauty in things and the beauty of the order of many beautiful things, but he cannot find a way to ground these senses of beauty in the beauty that must be “embraced for its own sake.” Thus he presents them as alternatives. He should know that another friend, or “more beloved friends,” cannot respond to his need to know and love well; neither can stable, lawful marriage secure the same goods within the relentlessness of time. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory of the *Confessions* implies that something like this must be the case, since the apparent resolution promised by the “interior” fails, and gives way to the visible mediation of the truth incarnate by the end of Book 10. Augustine must resolve, in a practical and lived way, the beauty he apprehends in the created order with the beauty that is “ever ancient and ever new.”

The real issue with beauty and delight, then, is not one of choosing the exterior versus the interior, but rather one of understanding time and creation correctly. Augustine often differentiates between the sensible and the intelligible, contrasting their beauties offered to the senses (*visio*) with those offered to the mind (*cognitio*); these in turn are contrasted to God, “the beautiful” and “most beautiful.” In Book 4 of the *Confessions*, Augustine simply lacks the categories he needs to hold together

9. This is the order of argument in Book 10. Getting time “right” in Book 11 will resolve the question of the goodness of creation, and getting the Church “right” in Book 12 will ultimately resolve the spiritual drama of death and grief.
10. *Conf.* 10.27.38.
11. “Speciosissimum”; “speciosus.” *De Trinitate* 15.5.7.
all three senses of beauty; he does not yet see all things in themselves as *creatura* because they are grounded in the creative mind of God. The centrality of the language of vision throughout *De Trinitate*, from sense perception to cognition to beatific vision, confirms that Augustine’s mature theology depends heavily on an epistemology of revelation, an aesthetic pedagogy of faith in what is visible fulfilled in the *vision* of what is supremely knowable.  

The first part of this essay will show how Augustine, in a relatively early work (*De vera religione*), succeeds in linking the various senses of beauty within Christ as the creative principle of all beauty—at one and the same time of things in themselves, and of things as related to God as *creatura*. The second part will show that Augustine’s developing sense of the role of rhetoric in revelation, of how one comes to understand the truth, gives rise to a Christological aesthetic central to moral pedagogy. The final part of the essay shows that Augustine argues not only for a “vertical” aesthetics of spiritual conformity but for a “horizontal-temporal” aesthetics of visible providence. The unity of time as the “weaving” of divine providence directs the student of Christ to become a student of history as the locus of the spiritual beautification of the Church. A new sense of history’s unity and logic, confirmed by the greater attention paid to the literal and historical meaning of Scripture in the unfinished commentary on *Genesis*, written just after *De vera religione*, underlies new modes of argumentation from historical fittingness. *De vera religione* offers an incipient and somewhat allegorical form of such argumentation, but the stage is set for a fully historical apologetics in *De civitate Dei*.

### Augustinian On Beauty

Beauty, for Augustine, is vested in the formal being of things, the completeness, unity, and *forma* which make a thing to be a certain kind of thing. Insofar as a thing is, it is beautiful: we shall call this *intrinsic beauty*. Augustine’s approach to beauty is classical, beginning in the metaphysical or scientific basis for aesthetic judgment and aesthetic delight.

---


13. See, for example, Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio* 1.13.35; *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* 1.25.43; *De natura boni* 13.
Beauty is secondarily said to be “fittingness”: speaking of his early work on beauty, Augustine says that there is another kind of beauty “which is the fitting, because it is well adapted to the whole to which it belongs as a shoe to a foot.” This we shall call extrinsic or systemic beauty. It is the harmonia, symphonic unity, and order of a whole. Beauty as “fittingness” presupposes the first sense of beauty, as a harmony depends on many notes for its existence, or as a well-functioning organ depends on the presence of the right kind of cells for the organ to fulfill its function. In some cases, Augustine says that systemic beauty is a superior sense of beauty, not only because it involves multiplicity but also because it describes the functional order of many things together.

BEAUTY IN DE VERA RELIGIONE: INTRINSIC BEAUTY

De vera religione is an early text, written in 391 just before Augustine’s ordination. Augustine frequently uses tripartite formulae to speak of the nature of things. The variations on these are determined by context. At De vera religione 7.13, he links creation and providential order to the action of the Trinity, three principles working inseparably for a single end.

[When] this Trinity is known, as far as that is given to us in this life, then it is perceived without the slightest doubt that every creature, intelligent, animated, material, gets its being, to the extent that it is, from the same creator Trinity and derives from that source its own specific nature and is governed by it in the most beautiful order conceivable.

Limited evidence of the Trinity in creation is seen in three inseparable aspects: unity (ut ... unum), the form or appearance (species propria) that distinguishes a thing from other things, and the order or proper operation of a thing (rerum ordinem non excedat). Number (numerus) and


15. See, for example, Augustine’s De moribus ecclesiae catholicae 8.13, 16.43; De Genesi adversus Manicheos 1.21.32; De sermone Domini in monte 1.12.34.

species (the second term of the triad) are terms consistently equivalent to form. Species is an interesting word: in De Trinitate 4, it describes visible theophanies and the likeness to Christ aimed at through faith; in De Trinitate 11, it describes the strictly outward appearance of things, the object of visio; in De Trinitate 15, which considers the role of the Holy Spirit in the vision of God, it is best translated as beauty. In De vera religione, all things are good and beautiful precisely because they have species or forma. When these terms are equivalent in De vera religione, they describe the apprehended nature of a thing, providing a conceptual basis for continuity between sensible appearance and intellectual apprehension.

While the unity of things is associated with the Father who is “the One” (unum), Augustine associates the Son with species-forma in multiple ways. The name of “Wisdom” dominates in De vera religione; truth, form, and ratio are names which particularize Wisdom, depending on context. As the Wisdom of God, the Son is the ratio of the created order, “disposing all things sweetly.” He is also the participated formal principle of spiritual progress, the “wisdom by which is made wise any soul that is wise.” As veritas, he is the “inner light” through which understanding occurs. The Son is identified and disidentified with the name of “truth”: as truth, the Son is the “form of all things, made by the One, and tending to the One” (quae forma est omnium, quae ab uno facta sunt, et ad unum nituntur); truth is also the principle of reason and thus properly human. The Son is not the immanent form of all things in their particularity. He is the universal and aesthetic forma of formae. Augustine differentiates more carefully: God is the “unformed form” (qui for-

17. In a long quotation from Wisdom 13:1–5, species is the term used to describe the beauty of creation (at 2.3); in a quotation from Hilary about the “image of God” at 3.5; Augustine denotes the “greatest beauty” as the Wisdom of God (at 5.7), and finally, as the glory of eschatological vision (at 8.14). Otherwise, in 9.15, species generally means “kinds,” as would be the case with the English word “species.”
18. Vera rel. 20.40.
19. Vera rel. 51.100.
20. Vera rel. 55.112.
21. Vera rel. 55.113. “Ipsam quoque veritatem nulla ex parte dissimilem in ipso, et cum ipso veneremur” (Vera rel. 55.113). See De Trinitate 14.21, the “book of light called truth” from which every true principle is “copied and transferred” in the heart of the just man. Lewis Ayres characterizes this passage as “Augustine’s consciously non-technical celebration of the presence of truth to the mind” (Augustine and the Trinity [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 130).
ma est infabricata, Vera rel. 11.21) and as such, the most “shapely” of all things (omnium formosissima) and the “highest species.”

As supremely “shapely,” or beautiful, God is the only possible source of the particular being of things, and therefore their intrinsic beauty (species). Moreover, the relationship of the Son to creation is aesthetic rather than static or merely efficient. Augustine in the end allows forma and species to be basically convertible when considering things in themselves, from the side of the relationship of dependence that things have to God. Nevertheless, they are distinct in the order of perception. It is the appearance, what Hill translates as “look,” that draws in vision and understanding as aspects of natural appetite. Appearance is not simply neutral and scientific; although vested in the objectivity of form, it is a dynamic initium, drawing upon and revealing the intelligibility and fittingness between creation as good and the subject. Beauty elicits an appropriate pleasure, and on this basis, the mind is moved by desire to reflect on the higher principles of judgment of beauty, such as unity and equality.

Intrinsic beauty begins in species as appearance, which in turn is explained by form as the ontological ground for the initial “look” as an aesthetic and appetitive experience. Intrinsic beauty also includes the concept of unity as integrity: Augustine says that the unity of created things is imperfect, or partial, merely a vestigium unitatis. However, he qualifies this relative imperfection with care: corporeal species “do not lie.” Falsehood cannot be in things, because they have form and therefore beauty. What is is true, and this would not be so if things were “not in some way one.”

The limits of created unity can be explained by (1) the transitory nature of things (substantial change, or what Augustine calls a “change of species” at Vera rel. 30.55); (2) the impermanent state of things with respect to accidental change, such as “change of place”; or (3) the fact that things have parts. However, even when natural things “fail,” these beautiful things maintain their beauty. Augustine illustrates this with the example of nutrition at De vera religione 40.77: things external to the body are broken down (corrumpitur); they “lose their form,” and

22. Vera rel. 18.35.
23. Vera rel. 32.60.
24. Vera rel. 33.61.
25. Despite the possibility acknowledged at Vera rel. 34.63 of “falsa unitas.”
26. Vera rel. 34.63.
27. Vera rel. 41.77.
“change into another specific form.” This other form is not random; it is a *forma convenientia*, a form appropriate to the thing broken down and a form that is *apta*, or fitting, to the subject and the operation in question. Nutrition involves substantial and accidental change as well as waste, but Augustine argues that all the elements involved are “taken up into the structure of visible beauty.” Humble things are subject to destruction and change, but they do so according to their form and proper operation, revealing their share in a *vestigia primorum numerorum*, as themselves being vestiges of the primal unity of God. 28 Proper operation directs judgment back to the natural integrity, or unity, which in turn depends on *forma*. Intrinsic beauty is vested in the objectivity of the nature of a thing, and reveals a dynamic of subjective appetite and delight, after the pattern of Trinitarian creativity.

**Beauty in De Vera Religione: Systemic Beauty**

The example of nutrition illustrates the systemic nature of beauty as well. When speaking of the apprehension of sensible beauty, Augustine often adds *aequalitas* to *unitas*: “equality” is a term that requires multiplicity, a functional unity that is systemic, complex, and harmonious. 29 Two interconnected ideas are at work.

First, creation is orderly. Nutrition illustrates that natural things function according to a mean, or *convenientia*, determined by their nature and evidenced by their appetite (*appetat convenientia*, *Vera rel.* 41.77). Natural appetite directs things to appropriate ends. Systemic beauty describes the operation of their being as “directed by *officiis et finibus*,” as evidence of complexity. 30 Initial apprehension of *species* informs the perceiver that things are “complete in themselves” and, as such, are beautiful. Operation reveals teleology, an incompleteness determined by form, and a dynamic proper to things alive or not. This operation arises from a complexity of parts, in turn making up a whole. At a broader level, the same complex functionality is seen in the systemic interdependence of nature. Just as natural appetite directs things to appropriate ends, so also does nature simply work, on the whole, inclusive of the elements of destruction and

28. *Vera rel.* 40.75.
29. *Vera rel.* 34.63.
30. *Vera rel.* 40.76.
waste seen in the example of nutrition. This systemic functionality is its order, and for Augustine, systemic order is more beautiful than the intrinsic beauty of one thing.

The second idea at work follows from this: creation as a whole includes gradation and varietas. The beauty of creation is greater than the beauty of one species: first, because it involves more things and thus a greater complexity of order; second, because the perception of this beauty requires a more god-like consideration of things “as a whole.” Augustine argues that such a perspective should change the way one perceives intrinsic beauty. Varietas requires differences of kind and degree, including what is unseemly “in itself,” such as dolores, distortiones, and other “shadowings of color.”31 Things “unseemly,” when “considered in the whole,” turn out in fact to be pleasing, because they occupy their appropriate place in the whole. Augustine calls this whole a harmonia.32 The order and gradation of harmony affects the perceiver; its beauty draws the mind to it by convenientia, an intellective appetite.33 Systemic beauty speaks to the intellect more powerfully than intrinsic beauty, because it requires a more complex form of judgment and delight; moreover, by perceiving a complex whole, a gradation and order, the order of divine providence is intimated. The only thing “ugly in itself” from this perspective would be a refusal of the greater beauty of order. To cling to a part as though it were the whole, or as though it could explain the whole, would be ugly precisely because it would be a falsehood. The gradation and variety of creation is a pedagogical principle for Augustine: judgment comes to the intrinsic beauty of a thing, beginning from the initium of natural appetite, and then arrives at the greater beauty of order. The metaphysical and dynamic link between intrinsic and systemic beauty is the heart of Augustine’s understanding of beauty in De vera religione. The polyvalence of forma as intrinsic nature and as systemic order allows Augustine to link the experience of the goodness of creation to the creative activity of God—the only “form without form”—while grounding this experience in the simple and fitting beauty of a creature.

31. Vera rel. 40.76.
32. Vera rel. 30.55.
33. Vera rel. 39.72.
BEAUTY AS MORAL PEDAGOGY: CONFORMITY TO CHRIST AS FORMA

On the model of the *convenientia* of nutrition, Augustine describes spiritual progress from the “old man” to the “new man” as an aesthetic repristination of the *forma* of a person. Passages throughout roughly the second half of *De vera religione* argue together that the soul is remade (*reformata*) through the application of grace by divine Wisdom—the *ars divinae medicinae*. Just as nutrition involves a degree of necessary destruction, so also does spiritual renewal require a hard *disciplina*; the “old man” persists as the historical basis of personal continuity. Augustine offers an aesthetics of Christological moral formation, structured around the threefold distinction of temptation from 1 John 2:15–16. This formation can be described as “aesthetic” because, first, Augustine shows in each form of temptation how the intrinsic beauty of virtue is intelligible only in light of a profound sense of systemic beauty. Second, it is properly aesthetic because the application of “divine medicine” is not simply a moral correction intended for the intellect but rather involves an aspect of Christ the exemplar to be shown to the person, in order to enact a reordering of loves. This second point is particularly well illustrated by the correspondence between each temptation from 1 John 2 and the three temptations faced by Christ in the wilderness.

Augustine appeals to 1 John 2 at two points—*De vera religione* 38.71 and 52.101—and these serve as a textual frame for his exposition of moral reformation. *De vera religione* 38.71 precedes a magnificent series of chapters about beauty and pleasure, arguing for the *convenientia* of the whole of creation as evidence of the power and pervasiveness of divine providence. The name for Christ that dominates in these chapters is that of *sapientia*. At *De vera religione* 51.100, a significant biblical text (Wisdom 8:1) is again cited to instruct readers to build on the longing they feel for “marvels and beauty,” by yearning to “see that Wisdom who stretches out mightily from end to end, and disposes all things sweetly.”

34. *Vera relig.* 41.77.
35. *Vera relig.* 38.71.
37. These chapters precede the final ones of the work, which return to the Christological and Trinitarian language of forma, making clear that *reformatio* is a work of the whole Trinity
This wisdom, we have seen, is the principle of all order in creation. If it is divine, it is invisible and eternal, and Augustine argues that discernment requires moral re-formation according to the model of wisdom itself. The dynamic pedagogy of beauty inscribed in creation serves this reformation, in both objective and subjective dimensions. The triple form of temptation lays out the challenge of this reformatio in detail.

To correct “concupiscence of the flesh,” Christ applies the beauty and harmony of the created order. The pleasure afforded by the beauty of lesser things, even that of a worm, is explained by a veritable form of beauty. However, this pleasure passes. By contrast, spiritual pleasures (spiritalis voluptas) offer a more lasting and stable satisfaction. Pleasure, Augustine says, is concord (convenientia). A person should recognize that it is not identical with (or the source of) the concord of pleasure; instead one should “put oneself in accord with” the principle of concord—not “by walking from one place to another,” but by the firm desire “of the mind.” Conformity with the principle of concord results in a personal, interior reordering that is reflective of the systemic beauty of the cosmos: in loving beautiful things according to their right value in the order of the whole, persons also conquer “what is lesser within” them. The key virtue at work is temperance, a kind of modus, which ensures that lesser pleasures are not grasped beyond their appropriate loveliness. Through temperance, what is “higher . . . leads the lower,” so that all things in turn are subject to “Christ the head.”

To correct “pride of life” (superbia), by which one seeks to “be the one and only . . . to whom all things are subject,” Augustine analyzes freedom (libertas) by a similar method as he uses for pleasure. True freedom is not simply mastery or power; however, even in disordered mastery, one honestly seeks a good life and the “peace” that comes with ease and nonslavery to the passions. Where Christ’s refusal of nutriment points...
to the higher origin of true pleasure, the exemplum offered here is the hard work of moral self-mastery. The trials and suffering of the passion of Christ, and finally the submission to the will of God as the only just one, unite moral perseverance with the justice of God. In the perspective of the summary law of charity, to love all things rightly is to love them as they “belong to God.” When things are loved apart from this truth, this order, they are not known systemically, or as they truly are “in themselves”; instead, they are loved as private goods (non commune sed privatam rem diliget, Vera rel. 46.88). Pride is a self-assertiveness that denies the truth of systemic beauty, and the intrinsic beauty of things can only be known and enjoyed rightly in light of the greater perspective of systemic beauty. Pride makes the self, rather than God, into the principle and source of order, and thus of beauty. Its grasping character suggests not only the likelihood of falsehood, but also desperation; its outcome is a disfiguring of order, and thus of beauty in nature, as well as in the person.

To correct curiosity (curiositas), Augustine exhorts the contemplation of intelligible truths. Curiosity is associated in this text with “spectacles and other vanities.” More generally, it is associated with the moral ambiguity of all beauty. Augustine employs the biblical text with attention to the details of Christ’s life and mission, drawing out the shadings of contrast between misunderstanding and understanding and between expectations false and true; the overall effect is that the life of Christ becomes a disciplina morum. The moral correction of this disciplina is persuasive rather than violent: Augustine observes the patience of Christ, that he does nothing by force; that he, for example, rejects his mother as part of a teaching on discipleship, but nevertheless remains subject to his parents. On the one hand, the teaching and example of Christ respond to the deepest longings of the human heart; on the other hand, they defy and correct the expectations of the human heart, evidenced in the human tendency to absolutize intrinsic beauty. The pedagogical outcome of this correction is a re-reading of human history and experience in light of a higher spiritual vision, a perspective newly opened through the lens of the Incarnation of Christ. The end goal of resurrection reframes the

44. Vera rel. 46.86–88.
45. Vera rel. 54.104.
46. Vera rel. 16.31.
experience of temporal life, and should entail a “daily transferal” of loves from temporal things to eternal things.\footnote{Vera rel. 3.5; 26.48; 53.103.} In this third form of temptation, we see again that the essential moment in moral reformation is the capacity to pass from intrinsic beauty and delight to systemic beauty and delight—to a truthful sense of the order of things, with God as the center and source, and all human loves well-ordered in relation to this order.

The moral exemplarity of Christ addresses the way in which beauty is perceived as part of a visual and affective pedagogy. To love God rightly and well requires that one love creation rightly and well; to love creation in a truly just way is to love above all else the order that expresses divine ownership and providential care over all things. The modus of temperance, the hard work of moral progress, and the daily transferal of loves are Christological correctives to the human tendency to the desire, pride, and curiosity that disfigure the true beauty of order. The role of the virtue of justice in \textit{De vera religione} confirms the Christological form of the inseparability of intrinsic and systemic beauty. Justice is the truly architectonic and summary virtue, describing a sense of objective order and subjective valuation. Justice, Augustine says, is “to love better things more and lesser things less.”\footnote{Vera rel. 48.93.} The eschatological dimension of justice becomes clear when Christ is said to be the only just man. For this reason, Augustine writes that the other three cardinal virtues do not abide in the final state of life with God, because they apply to temporal goods.\footnote{De Trinitate 14.9.12.} Justice, however, does abide, because it remains one and the same between the temporal and eternal orders. Justice in \textit{De Trinitate} is nothing more or less than “to be subject to the nature … which created and establishes all other natures.”

**BEAUTY AS THE ECONOMY OF PROVIDENCE:**

**FROM ASCENT TO HISTORIA**

This picture of moral formation as a Christological aesthetics in \textit{De vera religione} remains incomplete, however, if we neglect the truly \textit{historical} dimension of divine pedagogy. Goulven Madec argues that Augustine...
lays the foundation for a theology of history in *De vera religione*, given that history reveals the unity of the divine will in time, particularly in the completion of all human desire in true religion. Augustine employs the particularity of beauty at every metaphysical level in order to generate a “vertical” sense of unity spanning the created order, beginning in the link between creation and the formal role of the Son, and ending in the sense of return to the Father through the formality of the Son as Wisdom, and seen most clearly in the reformation of the human person in the likeness of the Son as *forma*.

There is a further dimension of beauty in this text, seen in the *convenientia* which marks the stages of progress from the “old man” to the “new man,” given that Christ’s teaching and example is given in a truly historical mode. Augustine says that spiritual progress at the individual level can be easily discerned; however, it is more important to understand this progress at the general level (*publice*) so that the unity of divine providence—its order and completeness in the *dispensatio temporalis*—can be seen all the more clearly. History itself must reveal the coherence of systemic beauty. The foundation for a theology of history, beginning from the study of “useful history” and passing to the authority of faith, is essential to *De civitate Dei*’s argument for the superior coherence of sacred history (or of all history seen in light of revealed history). Augustine’s conviction that spiritual progress must be articulated not simply as a Neoplatonic kind of ascent, through personal interiority and then to God, but rather as a public and fully historical event inclusive of all peoples (*universus*, Vera rel. 25.46), shows that Augustine is beginning to realize the primary importance of history to apologetics.

In arguing for the form of true religion, Augustine does not attend in detail to historical events apart from some aspects of the life of Christ; however, the role of Christ as *forma* of both creation and salvation locates the Incarnation as the fulcrum of historical time. All other history is organized around this center through the logic of promise and ful-

---

51. Vera rel. 30.55; 34.63; 36.67.
52. Vera rel. 25.46.
53. Vera rel. 7.13.
fillment. Again, the details of this logic are the subject of considerable development in De civitate Dei, particularly Books 1 to 10 and 15 to 18. The last part of this essay briefly develops Madec’s insight about the relationship between De vera religione and De civitate Dei, given Augustine’s new attention to certain forms of apologetic technique—an attention confirmed by a greater interest in his early Genesis commentaries in the literal sense of Scripture, and the foundational character of historical gesta to the historical sense of the text. Augustine is developing a sense of historical-theological exposition as a form of argument ex convenientia.

In the medieval theological tradition, argumentation ex convenientia has a fairly precise structure and rhetorical goal. In the patristic tradition, it is primarily a mode of biblical exegesis, perhaps best seen in Irenaeus’s On the Apostolic Preaching, or in the historical systematics of Against Heresies. In the latter case, biblical exegesis is put at the service of theological argumentation for the unity of divine providence through the principle of divine adaptation or pedagogy. Much more scholarly attention has been given to argumentation ex convenientia as a uniquely theological mode of argument in the Franciscan tradition. Jean-Pierre Torrell, in his preface to Gilbert Narcisse’s book on argumentation from fittingness in Thomas Aquinas and Hans Urs von Balthasar, describes it as the “only properly theological argument.” This mode of argument does not claim to prove the truths of faith but rather brings to light the coherence of revelation given the connections between truths believed, truths understood philosophically, and the relation of both to God—particularly God as end. The truths of faith in question may be dogmatic

57. Jean-Pierre Torrell, preface to Narcisse’s Les raisons de Dieu, xiii.
principles or historical events such as the Incarnation or the Resurrection. As facts—what Augustine calls historical gesta—these events are offered publicly to the understanding; as data of faith, they arise from the depths of the divine will as cause. Argumentation from fittingness, by the stricter standards of later theological writers, should articulate the coherence between the two—what is for reason and study, and what is for faith.

The epistemological foundation of this mode of argumentation is the classical idea that knowledge begins in a kind of inductive “seeing,” as argued in Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics. Even at a more complex level of assessment and judgment, a certain inductive attractiveness is at work, such as what occurs when a complex building is seen, and an observer senses that “it works.” Torrell describes this as the “visualizing aspect” of theology. For patristic writers, the most important form of this attractiveness is seen in the Scriptural logic of typology and fulfillment. While detailed accounts of this await the writing of De civitate Dei, August-

58. Benedict Thomas Viviano limits the range of this mode of argumentation by applying it to secondary doctrine, things which “ought to be true” even though they are not “explicit in Scripture or tradition” (Catholic Hermeneutics Today: Critical Essays [Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2014], 125ff.). In his very useful discussion, he rightly links this mode back to the primacy of induction in the Posterior Analytics, thereby defending its properly “scientific” character as part of the complex process of understanding (ibid., 127). In an essay on the Matthean genealogy, Viviano offers a compelling argument for a biblical theology of history by integrating the genealogy with a patristic “sevenfold” division of salvation history (ibid., chap. 15).

59. “Fittingness,” in a historical approach, describes a weak form of necessity, allowing for divine freedom (or contingency), even as this space is limited by the facticity of actual events. What Narcisse calls a “theological form of necessity” (Les raisons de Dieu, 146), Corey L. Barnes describes as an Aristotelian “inflection of pursuing Christian wisdom,” in “Aristotle in the Summa Theologiae’s Christology,” in Aristotle in Aquinas’s Theology, ed. Gilles Emery, OP, and Matthew Levering, 186–204 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 189. Thomas clearly differentiates two frameworks in ST III, e.g., q. 1 on the Incarnation: what is possible for God, and what God actually does (what is possible, extended to ends); the first is a matter of absolute necessity, and the second a matter of necessity of fittingness, viz., the end of the Incarnation, which is salvation. On the basis of the historical event of the Incarnation, argumentation from fittingness argues for the fittingness of means in relation to end. Alternatively, Fritz Bauerschmidt characterizes this mode of argumentation as “holistic insight,” by which the “rightness” of salvation history comes to light through treating events as axioms, and some means as better than others (Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 161–63).


tine nevertheless lays the foundation in *De vera religione*. He does this not by employing multiple events as axiomatic, as in *De civitate Dei*, but by making the Incarnation the singular historical lens for interpreting Christ as the completion of the ancient desire for happiness and peace. In light of this, the seven-fold stages of spiritual progress, translated into the seven stages of history, is an essential apologetic step. Divine providence is evident in the spiritual progress of individuals (*singulus ... quasi privatim, Vera rel. 25.46*); they know what God is doing in “their” history in the most intimate and certain way. What God is doing *publice*, in the church and in the world, can only be known through the study of *historia* and *prophetia*, which, understood together, reveal a single logic of promise and fulfillment in time.

Augustine signals a sophisticated distinction between history as a mode of inquiry and history as events themselves (*gesta*). While history plays a role as a form of study (of “useful history”), in *De vera religione* he is nevertheless more interested in the second sense of history—divine providence as an orderly *disciplina*. The study of history is presented allegorically, its subject matter differentiated according to the seven stages of the life of each man, from infancy to old age, and finally ending with eternal life. The early stage of historical study provides one with the nourishment of “good examples,” which are received after the manner of a kind of faith, from authority. Within this pedagogy there is a movement from faith toward understanding, “stretching forward” to things divine. The Old Testament offers a history of justice in its literal meaning; however, this justice remains basically “servile.” Progress from servitude to the maturity of freedom involves a movement from faith as sim-

---


63. This approach to history as an allegory of spiritual-intellectual progress, beginning with faith and history, is developed in *De Genesi adversus Manicheos*, written before *De vera religione*. At 1.23.35, Augustine interprets the six days of creation as the six ages of the world, a “historical prophetic” interpretation which relativizes historical facts by eliding sacred history with the book of creation. On this basis, at *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* 1.25.43, he offers a spiritual-moral interpretation, beginning with faith in visible things. In *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, written after *De vera religione*, we find a stronger commitment to the historical meaning of the biblical text (*narratio*), since *historia* reveals a unity of events (*gesta*) insofar as it is also a kind of divine speaking (3.6–10). At 7.28 of the same work, Augustine says that Genesis lays out the work of God through intervals of time, by an orderly narratio, so that the divine plan can be indirectly contemplated by the weakness of our minds).

64. *Vera rel.* 26.49.

65. *Vera rel.* 27.50.
ple trust in divine works committed to memory, “whether true or not,” to an intelligentia of “the truth [that] is, that remains one and the same.”\textsuperscript{66} The faith of the student of history is not wrong; nevertheless, authority must be tested by vision, so that it can become “stable faith”—historical and temporal by nature, but made secure by being grounded in the “spiritual and eternal.” The study of history provides moral exemplars, all of which point to the personal, spiritual reformation accomplished by Christ at a particular point in time. Shifting to a sense of history as gesta, Augustine says that all moments in time are in fact grounded in the prior veracity of God at work in history. They make up a unified whole, since all times “run together,” succeeding one another to form a “single beauty.”\textsuperscript{67} Put another way, the progress accomplished by the study that begins in history is the very same work that God is enacting publice in the visibility of history, through the “laws of divine providence.”\textsuperscript{68}

The description of divine providence as history proper and as a disciplined study makes more sense in light of the alignment of these two pedagogies—that of the student of wisdom, beginning in history, and that of God, the maker of history. Augustine uses the language of systemic beauty in De vera religione to describe the “parts” of historical time as a systemic and beautiful whole. Just as all things individually desire a unity appropriate to their forma, so also does the succession of times constitute an integrated “weaving,” a “poem,” and finally a unity of convenientia.\textsuperscript{69} Providence works within history in a way appropriate to its temporal mode. Things are formed, and even given well-being (salus) in a progressive manner (\textit{de die in diem}, Vera rel. 40.74). The much-needed medicine of the soul, described in the previous section, is applied gradatione, by adaptation, to the spiritual and intellectual progress of the old man so as to make him become the new man. This harmonious work by “gradations” is attributed to the “law” of providence, and it must be temporal so that it can be visible; it must be visible so that it can be effective publice. The “numbers” of created things are compared to a ladder, leading the mind from the temporal to the eternal. However, these numbers do not lead immediately “out of time”; rather, they chart the fitting-

\textsuperscript{66} Vera rel. 50.99.  
\textsuperscript{67} Vera rel. 31.58.  
\textsuperscript{68} Vera rel. 27.50.  
\textsuperscript{69} Vera rel. 26.49; 22.42; 43.80.
ness of the gradus of the temporal dispensation of God.\textsuperscript{70} If these steps, or gradus, are used well and understood correctly, they will not become mere fables or dreams—willful products of the imagination—but instead will be seen as fitting evidences of the presence of God within history. These evidences are compared to the cloudy pillar that led the Israelites from “more ancient, visible” realities to newer visible realities.\textsuperscript{71} Toward the end of De vera religione, Augustine comes close to defining historical events as being much like the words of revelation, as verba visibilia, given for instruction and interpretation.\textsuperscript{72} The invitation to the student of divine providence takes the same form in the cases of both biblical interpretation and historical experience; in both cases, the invitation is to “come and see”—move into visible realities, into their beauty, and then discern the systemic beauty uniting them, the laws and principles undergirding their intelligibility. Only then, Augustine says, does one see “the beautiful in all.”\textsuperscript{73} The possibility of error remains present: what is beautiful can indeed become vanitas, literally “empty”; however, this does not mean that the visible speaking of God in time is no longer real, good, and effective. The failure to perceive true beauty arises from antecedent failure to observe “true religion”—submission to God as the creator and source of all intelligibility and beauty. Failure to perceive the beauty of historical events in themselves is a failure to perceive them in light of their systemic whole—as they truly are, revelatory of the unity of the will of God in time.

The alignment of the narrative of Scripture with the progress of man from “old” to “new” allows Augustine’s argument for the superior convenientia of Christ to not only complete the ancient desire for happiness but also support the idea that such completion is historically and visibly effective in the Church, beginning with the founding of the two cities alluded to in De vera religione 6.11. The seven-stage parable of the historical progress of man suggests that the realism of history must be given priority to the narrative of Scripture. Augustine’s historical realism is essential to a new historical-apologetic sensibility. In De quantitate animae (written about 388 AD), the seven stages of study pass from visible history to

\textsuperscript{70} Vera rel. 43.80; 10.19.
\textsuperscript{71} Vera rel. 50.98.
\textsuperscript{72} Vera rel. 52.101.
\textsuperscript{73} Vera rel. 52.101.
the unchanging law of reason; the essential midpoint is the fourth step (gradus) in which the providence of God is seen to govern all of history in a systemic, providential order.74 In De vera religione, the influence of Augustine’s study of St. Paul in the 390s is evident, and the simpler transition from the “old man” to the “new man,” already established in “the beginning,” is traced in the founding of two cities, the historical development of both running parallel throughout time. The history of the “old man” is the history of the whole human race under divine providence. The history of the “new man” begins with a particular people, chosen and “dedicated” to God, and foreshadows the advent of a people yet to come (presumably the Church).75 The central element of this history is again located in the Incarnation’s completion of the ancient desire for happiness; the systemic fittingness of this history is seen in its patient, persuasive, historical mode. Revelation unveils its purposes at the individual level as a disciplina morum, in opposing and correcting the “old man” of sin, and shines forth at the more visible, public level in the emergence of the City of God from within the ranks of a new “spiritual people.”76

**CONCLUSION**

In Retractationes 2.32, Augustine regrets his emotional intemperance over the death of his friend Nebridius; in fact, it is the only passage in Confessions that he critiques directly. A textual treatment of beauty in an early but influential work, De vera religione, makes clear that beauty is essential to Augustine’s earliest attempts to make sense of the goodness of creation in relation to the incomparable goodness of the eternal beauty of God. This work also makes clear what Augustine sought to articulate in Book 4 of the Confessions: the lived unity of beauty “ever ancient, and ever new,” summed up in the person of Christ the “true mediator.”77 In a sense, all that Augustine needed was a way to abide in time, within the peace of the divine order made visible. In De vera religione, Augustine articulates the beauty of this divine order at both particular and sys-

74. Vera rel. 33.72–73.
75. Vera rel. 27.50.
76. Vera rel. 16.31; 6.11.
77. Conf. 10.27.38; 10.43.68.
temic levels, even as this distinction opens up argumentative space for a spiritual pedagogy of both moral and historical wisdom. While the dimension of historical fittingness as a mode of aesthetic argumentation is only present in broad strokes in *De vera religione*, the centrality of the Incarnation of God in time—the manifest presence of that “most beautiful Beauty,” which “all things desire” by virtue of their natural *formae*—underlies a more sophisticated historical apologetic to come in *De civitate Dei*, and surely offered substantive consolation to a friend in grief.

78. *Vera rel.* 55.113.
Brendan Thomas Sammon

8  ☞ Beauty and the Good in Dionysius the Areopagite

In order to understand the way Dionysius the Areopagite configures the relationship between beauty and the good, it is necessary to understand the divine-name tradition that provides Dionysius with the fundamental conditions of this relation. The divine-name tradition, so Dionysius indicates, precedes his own entry into it, yet his contribution to this tradition includes original developments.¹ Since I have written more in depth about this elsewhere,² I will not do so here except to assert the follow-

I would like to thank Eric Perl for the comments he made on a first draft of this essay.


2. See Brendan Thomas Sammon, The God Who Is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in
ing: the Dionysian synthesis of the Biblical and Neoplatonic traditions enables him to accomplish what Greek rationality and religiosity could not, namely, to unequivocally identify the Supreme Principle—who for him is the Biblical God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, and who becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ and is consequently worshiped by Christians as the Trinity—with the name “beauty.” Greek rationality and religiosity had continually flirted with this idea. But Greek thought seems finally unable to escape the equivocal tension that beauty’s occupation of both the material and immaterial realms provokes, not only with regard to the terms in question (God and beauty) but also with regard to how such an equivocation conditions Neoplatonic habits of mind.

In naming God “beauty,” Dionysius overcomes this tension, elevating to the level of the Supreme Principle what had, from Plotinus to Proclus, only ever occupied a secondary position. As common experience might be said to reveal, in the human encounter with beauty there is a sense that something often “other-worldly” has descended to be with us, that beauty is a condescension (cum + descendere) of something transcendent that enters into worldly conditions. Many prominent Neoplatonists could not tolerate such condescension of transcendence, which may be part of the reason beauty could never be identifiable with the Supreme Principle in the way it is for Dionysian theology. This hypothesis fore-

---

3. What is meant by “the Neoplatonic tradition” is fairly straightforward, even if there are variations within that tradition. The phrase “the Biblical tradition,” however, requires some explanation. As used throughout this essay, the Biblical tradition identifies the community of thinkers, writers, and practitioners who compose or comment upon the Biblical text and the community that it engenders—figures that Dionysius refers to as the “Oracles” or “Sacred Theologians,” or “Sacred Writers” or whatever other identifying terms he may use. This distinction should not be taken to refer to two static and unconnected traditions, but only to distinguish influence.

grounds the significance of the doctrine of the Incarnation when considering how a Christian understanding of beauty’s relation to the good might differ from those Neoplatonic understandings that do not accept the doctrine. Alongside the Christian doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Trinitarian persons, a doctrine that secured the metaphysical unity of the different divine persons, the Incarnation provided conditions wherein divine descent into the world could be conceived without compromising either divine transcendence or the otherness of the world.5

The primary configuration of beauty’s relation to the good that comes to light in Dionysius’s theological synthesis is that beauty is the perceptible content of the good as the good manifests itself. Perception here not only indicates the conditions that enable the activity of the sense faculties, but also, insofar as sense is the beginning of cognition, identifies important dynamics associated with cognition. This latter dimension, then, indicates the way in which beauty “refracts” the good (God) into content that enables sensible and cognitive activity. God is in himself beyond both sense and intellect. But beauty reveals that this divine “being-beyond” does not remain aloof, but enters into the very conditions of the world to elevate creatures into their share of the divine being itself. This essay will explore the various contours of this relationship by foregrounding some of the more salient themes involved. Before focusing on these themes more specifically, however, it is first necessary to make a few remarks about the divine-name tradition that provides the foundation for the Areopagite’s theological synthesis.

RELEVANCE OF THE DIVINE NAMES FOR THE ASSOCIATION OF BEAUTY AND THE GOOD

Although the divine-name tradition as it appears in the work of Dionysius derives from a synthesis of both the Biblical and the Neoplatonic traditions, the specific history of a tradition of divine names remains ambiguous. No extant treatises on this tradition prior to Dionysius’s On the

5. Patrick Madigan expresses a related point: “This means that the Greeks could reason up to the ‘highest reality,’ but they could not reason back down again. They could reason up to a first principle but they could not demonstrate how this first principle could ever produce an even moderately independent world.” (Review of The God Who Is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Areopagite, by Brendan Thomas Sammon, The Heythrop Journal 57, no. 2 [2016]: 371–72).
Divine Names have been discovered. Nevertheless, Dionysius indicates that his own work is a contribution to an already established tradition, compounding the ambiguity. Although it may be tempting to dismiss this tradition as little more than a Neoplatonic trope, such a dismissal would be naïve when one considers the extent to which Dionysius’s exposition of this tradition endorses the authority of the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures. Moreover, it would deny the original dimensions of the Dionysian synthesis that go beyond his Neoplatonic influences.

The purpose in the preceding explanation is to lay out the conditions within which the Areopagite examines the relationship between beauty and the good, and to gesture to the fact that his reading goes beyond merely recapitulating Neoplatonic thought. The primary component of Dionysius’s difference from his Neoplatonic contemporaries and influence is his commitment to the truth of the Incarnation of the Son in the Person of Jesus Christ. The opening sections of his treatise On the Divine Names are imbued with a systematic structure that reflects what might be considered a methodological appropriation of the Incarnation as a principle. Recapitulating how the Incarnation is a proportional mediation of the infinite transcendence of God to finite minds, he continual-

6. Porphyry is said to have written a treatise entitled On the Divine Names, noted in, for example, René Arnou, SJ, “Platonisme des pères,” Dictionnaire de théologie catholique 12 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1934), cols. 2285–87, 2314–16, 2363–67; and Robert Maarten van den Berg, Proclus’ Commentary on the Cratylus in Context: Ancient Theories of Language and Naming (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 74. As Berg notes, nothing is known of Porphyry’s treatise except its title. Berg, however, has suggested that Porphyry’s Peri Agalmaton (On Images), a work that examines the symbolic attributes given to the gods by sculptors, may throw some light on Porphyry’s general approach to language and naming because Porphyry makes reference to the divine names in the course of his discussion. From this approach, Porphyry’s view, much like the Proclines view it influences, is that divine names are like divine statues. However, for Porphyry these are viewed as representations of the divine, although from a natural rather than conventional perspective. This approach that connects the etymologies of the names for the gods with the natural realm stands in contrast to both Plato’s Cratylus and Proclus’s Commentary on the Cratylus, which both connect them to the metaphysical realm. In any case, the Greek approach in general remains within the realm of a categorical, conceptual framework that seeks to connect a name—for example, Hera—with the (limited) power it is used to express.

7. For example, Stephen Gersh claims that Eugenio Corsini was the first to recognize the originality of Dionysius’s appropriation of both the One and nous to the Biblical God. See Eugenio Corsini, Il trattato de divinis nominibus dello Pseudo-Dionigi e i commenti neoplatonici al Parmenide (Torino: G. Giappichelli, 1962), 144ff., and Stephen Gersh, From Iamblichus to Eriguena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 155.

8. Cf. DN 1, 4 (592B).
ly stresses the primacy of proportionality when it comes to authorizing both speech and belief about God. Divine revelation not only functions as a communication of affirmative content about the God who is “above conception” and “inconceivable to all conceptions,” but more importantly also reveals the need for limits on what the human mind seeks to perceive when it gazes at the Godhead. Proportionality in Greek thought, identifiable with symmetry and harmony, was one of the fundamental components of beauty. Dionysius invokes it here as a principle of method and interpretation, that is, as a hermeneutic.

As a principle, beauty makes its first explicit appearance in Dionysius when he explains why God is praised in Scripture as Trinity or Triadic. It is much more than cosmetic that his primary account of the Trinitarian nature of God includes the identification of God as beauty, given not only beauty’s association with proportionality but also, since Plotinus, with the unity-in-plurality of nous. In the Neoplatonic tradition, nous identified the first othering of the One as both being and intelligence. One of Dionysius’s original moves is to appropriate nous to the One Trinitarian God, viewing it not as that which is other to the One but as God’s creative self-communication. Dionysius’s explanation of beauty as a name for God consists in acknowledging the divine presence in creatures (unity) that in no way compromises divine transcendence or creaturely integrity (diversity). “And God is called wise and beautiful,” he writes, “because all beings, although keeping the properties of their own nature uncorrupted, are full of divine harmony and holy beauty.” As this observation suggests, beauty not only is a property in created entities, but also serves as a conduit by which God himself inhabits the being of creatures. This condition, moreover, can only abide if God himself is the very beauty in which all beautiful things participate. So already here, at the initial stages of his examination of the divine-name tradition, it is possible to see how Dionysius incorporates beauty in the mode of a principle ordering the good for the sake of finite creatures.

9. DN 1, 1 (588BC).
10. This is Corsini’s insight, recognized by Gersh. See note 7 above. It should be noted that the Neoplatonic tradition did not have one single view on how the One related to nous and the role of difference between them. Nevertheless, I am unconvinced at this time that any Neoplatonic thinker after Plotinus espoused the degree of unity in distinction that Dionysius’s Christian appropriation of these principles achieved.
11. DN 1, 4 (592AB).
The Areopagite’s commitment to the truth of the Incarnation is, arguably, a fundamental principle establishing his commitment to the authority of Scripture. Since both consist of a condescension of the Supreme Principle to finite creatures, both are modes by which the transcendent plenitude of God is mediated to the finite intellect. Scripture becomes a kind of continuation of the Incarnation in communicated form, and for this reason establishes the limits of what can and cannot be said or thought about God. Dionysius applies this hermeneutic principle to the tradition of the divine names, asserting that Scripture alone sanctions whatever appellation may be used for God. Yet, as Aquinas would recognize centuries later, one should not read Dionysius’s Scriptural hermeneutic as a commitment to some crude sort of Biblical literalism, as if Dionysius means that some measure of precise wording as found in the text provides the necessary regula. Rather, imitating the God revealed in its pages, Scripture becomes a kind of causal wellspring that gives rise to forms of speech and practice that may not be explicitly expressed in its pages. This is precisely why Scripture can be said to ground the divine-name tradition. Scripture does not provide a systematic accounting of each of the names it authorizes, but it does sanction the various methods and limits of divine nomination. This is partly why Dionysius’s whole project becomes important—it participates in, or contributes to, the communication of names whose origins are traceable back to Scripture and the event it articulates.

What precisely a divine name identifies is not easy to pin down. Dionysius offers no exact definition of what he means, but it is possible to derive a working definition from the contents of his treatise. The numerous references taken together indicate that the term “divine name” identifies the procession of a divine perfection that enters into the formal constitution of created entities, or the “common and undifferentiated names of the differentiated being of God.” To put it more bluntly, as others have observed, it is God’s presence in creaturely constitution.

12. DN 1, 2 (588C).
13. DN 1, 5; DN 1, 6.
14. “Significantly he [Dionysius] does not say in holy speech, but according to (ex) holy speech, since whatever can be elicited from these things which are contained in Holy Scripture, even though they are not contained in Holy Scripture, are not foreign to this teaching” (Thomas Aquinas, In Div. Nom., 1, 1, my translation).
15. DN 2, 11 (649B).
16. Eric D. Perl, Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite (Al-
Cast in this light, it becomes possible to see the divine names as a tradition involving both a metaphysics of being and a theology of revelation, each treated according to how human language relates to God. Dionysius treats important themes relevant to a theology of revelation in his (lost) treatise the *Theological Outlines*, in which God is celebrated as nameless and above all names.\(^{17}\) The primary theme of this text is the hiddenness of God that can only ever be known by God’s self-communication in revelation. One might say that for Dionysius, the divine hiddenness that exceeds all creaturely knowledge is the sine qua non of revelation. Not only is it the case that all revelation involves a kind of emanational coming-forth, that is, a communication of that which, even in being communicated, implicates its own excess that remains beyond communication, but, in Dionysius’s vision, revelation also communicates the limits of all thought and speech about God. In himself God is nameless, both because his being transcends the finitude required for all naming and because he is the generator, or “emanator,” of all nameable content. Dionysius does acknowledge that certain hyperbolic expressions—supergood, superessential, superwise, etc.—can be validly applied to God in himself but only because these convey the divine superessence beyond all nomination and creation. A metaphysics of being, then, examines the foundations for how created things serve as bearers of appellative content, which Dionysius claims to have treated in another (lost) treatise, the *Symbolic Theology*.\(^{18}\) This treatise examined those names derived from symbols used in Scripture that are communicated in sensible forms.

This is important to establish because Dionysius’s treatment of beauty is found most completely in his treatise *On the Divine Names*, which stands in between these two lost treatises. As such, the subject matter of this text, that is, the divine names, inhabits both. Like those names treated in the *Theological Outlines*, the divine names derive from God’s unitive and transcendent plenitude and, as such, bear the same hyperbolic content. However, similar to those names treated in *Symbolic Theology*:

\(^{17}\) DN 1, 5 (593BC). The text claims to offer an excerpt of this lost treatise in DN 2, 10 (648C–649A).

\(^{18}\) DN 1, 6 (597B).
ology, the divine names are found in some way in creatures. The divine names are, in Dionysius's expression, “God-becoming names of God,” expressions of the uncreated in the act of creating. These names are dynamic rather than static, as well as universal and particular simultaneously.

Another significant dimension of the divine names as a tradition concerns how, for Dionysius, each name identifies God in his fullness. Dionysius stresses, in other words, that such names should not be conceived as partial components of God. Rather, “all the God-becoming names of God are celebrated by the Oracles not in part, but as applied entirely, wholly, and completely to the full Godhead.” Dionysius even goes so far as to assert that it is blasphemy to consider one of these names as identifying only a part of God. This is a significant departure from those aspects of the Neoplatonic tradition that, following Plotinus, would locate beauty in the first emanation (nous) rather than in the One itself. Remarkably, Dionysius asserts that each name identifies God completely without conflict or confusion between the names themselves.

Since the names so identified are also constitutive of creaturely experience, they provide the substance for various directions in natural theology. One possible direction might be to say that the divine names constitute God’s “public identity.” “Public” here ought not to be taken in contrast to some private divine identity. Rather “public” as used here stands in contrast to “intimate” or “endemic.” Where God’s revealed identity gives rise to an endemic and intimate relationship constituted by specific forms of faith, dogma, liturgical forms and rites, the divine names as God’s public self-presentation give rise to more general, sociocultural forms of these. Admittedly, this particular way of looking at the divine names is not obvious in the Dionysian text. Further, his constant appeal to the authority of Scripture for the sanctioning of these names could be read in a way that includes the divine names as part of the Christian community’s intimate experience of God. However, there are two responses to this objection.

First, insofar as Dionysius’s Scriptural hermeneutic can be conceived as conveying authorization rather than exclusive possession of the divine

20. DN 2, 1 (637A).
21. DN 2, 1 (637AB).
names, any judgment that these names are intended to remain at the level of “intimate community” becomes short-sighted at best. The question concerning how those nominations bear a unique relation to the Christian community are perhaps most properly located in his Theological Outlines. Since this is a lost treatise, however, it is only possible to justify this verdict based upon the evidence of this treatise in his On the Divine Names. Still, the little evidence that this furnishes, primarily in chapters one and three of On the Divine Names, is suggestive enough. The Theological Outlines, so Dionysius explains, considers affirmative expressions of God’s unity-in-trinity, that is, the unions and distinctions which are neither possible to say nor conceive (ou te eipen ou te ennoësai dunaton). Given that any language capable of expressing what is beyond all speaking and conception could also never rightfully occupy the limits of the printed page, it seems justifiable to wonder whether such a treatise is even possible, let alone whether it even existed. Then again, given the enigma surrounding the Dionysian identity, one is justified in wondering further whether the self-impossibility of the treatise is the whole point of his even mentioning it in the first place. Still, it is clear that this treatise treats of those names that are intimate or endemic to the Christian Trinitarian God.

Second, given what the names in fact identify, it is rather difficult to conclude that they would be thought of as bound up with the intimate portrait of God found uniquely among practicing Christians. The notion that Dionysius would see a name like “beauty” as exclusive to his Christian tradition seems to violate the very Pauline context upon which his chosen allonym is based (Acts 17:34). So although it is quite possible that his commitment to the doctrine of the Incarnation significantly shapes his account of the divine names, and even though it is likely that he does see a unique dimension of beauty that is mediated by, or revealed in, Christian thought, this shaping, I would suggest, is also a release of the intimacy of his Christian tradition into a more public arena.

This second response to the objection serves to throw light on another crucial dimension of examining the relationship between beauty and the good in the context of the divine names. Taken together, these names

22. He provides some content in DN 1 and a substantive excerpt, as already noted, in DN 2, 10.
23. DN 3, 1 (680A-D); DN 3, 2 (681AB).
identify a community of interrelating modes of the divine presence. Acknowledging this bears important methodological considerations. Although much can be learned by isolating Dionysius’s account of beauty and treating that isolated picture philosophically or historically (or both), such a picture remains incomplete. The treatment of beauty as a divine name requires examining it primarily under the conditions of its relation to its others, that is, those other divine names that together constitute what I have called God’s “public” identity. Dionysius’s treatment of beauty within this tradition means that, much like the God examined in the entire Dionysian synthesis, beauty has an “identity” constituted by both an immanent and a communicated aspect.

It may be worth closing this first section by noting how such a method relates to the late modern conceptualization of beauty in order to underscore the enduring relevance of Dionysius. Perhaps the most common approach to beauty today is most aptly articulated by the cliché “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Such a cliché prioritizes beauty’s power to grant the individual conscious subject almost total authority over the aesthetic dimensions of human experience. Indeed, beauty’s proclivity to the subjective seems to distinguish it from other divine names. Consider, for example, the names “good” and “true,” which give rise to the discourses of ethics and science respectively. Ethical and scientific norms and patterns of discourse seem not only to restrict the good and the true respectively, but also to do so with a degree of popular consensus. People are less willing to justify claims over what is good or true by a simple appeal to personal subjective opinion. But when it comes to beauty, who can deny that what another person finds beautiful is in fact beautiful, at the very least to them? And if at least to them, then who can say it is not beautiful?

It is important not to dismiss this modern picture, especially when one considers the widespread acceptance of it. Nevertheless, a critical approach that is attentive to a figure like Dionysius allows us to see that this modern picture is limited and for that reason also somewhat exag-

---

gerated in order to compensate for failure to overcome those limits. The modern subjectivization of beauty derives from beauty’s immanence in all creatures and the power that this immanence has to render a harmony between the subject and the world outside of her. But if this were the whole story, it would be difficult to see how beauty could be anything more than another quality of the isolated, autonomous, atomized modern subject. Indeed, this picture seems unable to accommodate beauty’s power to gather together communities, to elevate human consciousness beyond its current limits both collectively and individually, to maintain the harmony between unity and diversity, to surprise and often destabilize our assumed self-sufficiency, to provoke attraction to alterity in every form, to inspire its own self-distribution, indeed to mediate the divine presence. All of these attributes of beauty constitute the Dionysian picture. In what follows, I lay out some of these primary themes with an eye toward offering Dionysius as a corrective to the late modern picture.

BEAUTY: THE ARRIVAL OF THE GOOD AS PERCEPTIBLE CONTENT

Dionysius followed the Greek notion that the good is “that which all things desire.” In applying this name to the God spoken about in the Biblical tradition, he further maintains that the whole of the Scriptures is oriented toward celebrating this name of God.25 Citing both Matthew 9:17 and Mark 10:18, Dionysius begins by foregrounding the exclusivity of the divine goodness, that is, no one is good but God alone. Taken at face value, this seems to render a problematic equivocation between God’s absolute goodness and the putative goodness of creatures. How are they related? For our purposes, it will be instructive to consider Aquinas’s response to this tension with respect to how Boethius had framed the problem around the same time as the first known appearance of the Dionysian texts.

According to Boethius’s De Hebdomadibus and later scholastic commentaries on that text, the tension concerns how there can be an absolute good source, which is all-good in itself, alongside other created goods. According to Aquinas’s reading of Boethius, these other goods must be good

25. DN 2, 1 (636C).
either by substance or by participation: if creatures are good by participation, then it follows that they are good in only an accidental way rather than in a substantial one, but if they are good by substance, then there are many absolute goods rather than one good. Aquinas’s approach to this issue, influenced in large measure by Dionysius, involves rejecting the equivocation between participation and substance that Boethius assumes is necessary. Instead, for Aquinas (and implicitly for Dionysius) participation is not an accident, that is, it is not something added to a being already existing. Substance is already a participated act in itself—for a thing to be at all, it must receive its substance from a source other to itself. To be a being, in other words, is to be a substance, and to be a substance is to be a participant in being.

Although in a more implicit way, Dionysius follows a similar path that comes to light by examining the relationship among the divine names as a unity-in-plurality. Immediately following his Scriptural citation, he proceeds to posit the unity-in-plurality of the divine names (as noted above). Why would he do this? Why would he open his second chapter by citing this Scriptural assertion about the seemingly exclusive nature of God’s goodness only to follow it up with an explication of how every divine name identifies not a part but the whole Godhead?

One possible answer to this question, which suggests an implicit doctrine of analogy in Dionysius, is that since the supreme good, who is God, exceeds all conception, it can be approached only in celebration, but a celebration whose ground and order is the community of the divine names. In other words, because God in himself exceeds every mode of thinking available to the finite intellect, it is not possible for any creature to “get outside” of God and examine him through some more encompassing dialectical logic. Knowledge of God can only be acquired through participated acts that, as acts of celebration, provide being and knowing to the participant. It was a widespread Hellenistic view that like is known by like. One can really only come to know something by be-


27. "For by imparting itself to all participating beings, and pouring upon them the whole of its goodness, it is united even in its distinctions, made many in its unity, and multiplied from unity while remaining within itself" ([DN 2, 11 [649B]])

coming more and more like it (to the extent that such likeness is possible). Dionysius recognizes a fittingness between this theory of similitude and the practices of the already burgeoning Christian tradition, and synthesizes them to emphasize the importance of participation as a practice of knowledge, as well as to foreground the way participation oriented toward the good and the beautiful is celebratory. The highest mode of celebration for Dionysius is liturgical participation, which, as two of his other treatises explain, follows upon both a celestial (heavenly) model and an ecclesial hierarchical model. The good for Dionysius is constituted primarily by a hierarchy of perfections that are most properly knowable by being celebrated, or liturgically participated, alongside other divine perfections.

In the fourth chapter of *On the Divine Names*, Dionysius begins to explicate this community of names in what could be considered a kind of cascading descent, although this image may not quite capture the picture that I think Dionysius intends to convey. The movement of his analysis suggests a kind of linearity to the movement of names. Rather than a motion from point A to point B and back to point A, however, the movement ascribed to the divine names is rather one from what is extensive to what is intensive, from general to specific, without at any point displacing either the extensive or the general. There is a creaturely return that is dependent on the non-displacement of these two levels. This means that when, for instance, the good is said to communicate itself as light, the light is both itself as light and as bearer of the good. And when beauty is said to communicate both the good and light, beauty remains itself but can also be seen to be the bearer of the good and of light. From the side of the recipient, this movement enables the ascent into God himself, guided always by Jesus who is the “light of the Father.” And it is real-

---


30. Cf. *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, 1, 1–2 (120B–121A), where Dionysius opens by citing James 1:17 and provides an elaboration of how it fits into his hierarchical picture: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights. Further also, every procession of illuminating light, proceeding from the Father, while visiting us as a gift of goodness, restores us again gradually as a unifying power, and turns us to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in. For as the Sacred Word says, all things are from Him, and to Him (Rom. 11:36). Invoking then Jesus, the Paternal Light, the Real, the True, ‘which lights everyone coming into the world,’ (Jn. 1:9) ‘through Whom we have access
ly the role of Jesus that enables what could be called a cruciform attraction, that is, an intersecting vertical-horizontal attraction, wherein God attracts all things to himself (vertically) by attracting them to each other (horizontally).  

For the purposes at hand, it is important to foreground the way this intensive specification identifies how beauty enables the perceptible content of the good that draws all things to each other and to the good simultaneously.

The divine-name relation that serves the purpose at hand is that between the good, light, and beauty. Read from within the context of intensive specification, this triad articulates the way that the good emanates itself into perceptible content. The term “perceptible content” is used intentionally to convey the way that this emanation belongs to neither the subjective conditions of the mind nor the objective conditions of extra-mental reality (to use modern categories). Rather, the resulting perceptible content stands in between both of these categories, providing the conditions for that which is perceived and authorizing the recognition of what is perceived in the act of perception.

Dionysius opens chapter four of On the Divine Names by echoing the Neoplatonic principle that the good is self-diffusive, extending its goodness to all things that exist in the way that the sun shines its light to all things capable of receiving it. The self-diffusion of the good enters into the ontological constitution of all existing things and of the many modalities that existing things may possess. At the same time, Dionysius invokes the principle of plenitude and declares that the good in itself transcends all things insofar as it negates all things by its superlative excess. It is “non-essence” insofar as it is the preeminence of essence; it is nonliving insofar as it is a “superior life”; it is mindless insofar as it is a “superior wisdom”; and it is even nonbeing insofar as it is above all beings.

In the first three sections of chapter four, the good is spoken of ex-

31. DN 5, 7 (821B); DN 13, 3 (980BC).
32. DN 4, 1 (693B).
33. DN 4, 2 (696BCD).
34. This is a point he echoes in Mystical Theology 1, 2 (1000B).
35. DN 4, 3 (697A).
Dionysius the Areopagite

195

tensively and generally in terms of its self-diffusion, its ontological prov-
idence, and its superlative essence. Dionysius takes the first step toward
giving more intensive, specific intelligibility to the good when he intro-
duces the name “light,” which he discusses in the three sections that fol-
low the opening sections on the good.\(^36\) Admitting that something is
missing in his consideration of the good (“But what slipped from our
view in the midst of this discourse….”),\(^37\) Dionysius acknowledges that
his prior discourse—ostensibly the previous three sections—neglected to
relate the good with the movements of the heavenly bodies. He proceeds
to do this by introducing the sun and the various forms of light, empha-
sizing how these luminaries provide a way to perceive the intelligibility
of, or “to contemplate,” the good. Following the Platonic tradition, Dio-

nysius’s use of the sun enables him to describe desire for the good in the
concrete terms of the sensations that light and heat evoke. After describ-
ing the way in which “Goodness turns all things to itself,” he reiterates
this turning with respect to light and its intensities, that is, its particular
effects:

After the same method of its illustrious original, the light also collects and
turns to itself all things existing—things with sight, things with motion, things
enlightened, things heated, things wholly held together by its brilliant splen-
dors…. And all creatures endowed with sensible perceptions aspire to it, as as-
piring either to see or to be moved and enlightened and heated and to be wholly
held together by the light.\(^38\)

As Dionysius moves his examination from the good to the light,
there is a discernible development toward a greater degree of intensive
and specified content. Especially toward the end of this section, Diony-
sius believes it necessary to clarify that these images should not be taken
in the literal sense associated with “antiquity” but in the more spiritu-
al sense found in Pauline theology. “By no means do I affirm, after the
statement of antiquity,” he explains, “that as being God and Creator of
the universe, the sun, by itself, governs the luminous world, but that the
invisible things of God are clearly seen from the foundation of the world,
being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal pow-

\(^{36}\) DN 4, 4 (697B–700C); DN 4, 5 (700D–701A); DN 4, 6 (701B).
\(^{37}\) DN 4, 4 (697B).
\(^{38}\) DN 4, 4 (700C).
er and deity.”

Although a historical consideration of this statement would invoke a possible polemical context, it is the content that serves our purposes here. These statements indicate Dionysius’s intention to extend the divine names even to the sensible properties found in material things without univocally identifying any particular divine perfection with those material things. The sun, as light and heat, extends itself physically to the world to provide natural, corporeal sustenance. With what invisible things might these be said to correspond? One possible way of framing it: the good, through the perfection of light, is made intelligible to sight by creating the possibility of vision and to sense by taking the sensible form of heat and its absence (as coldness), both of which stimulate desire by provoking the senses into operation. And the fact that Dionysius believes it is necessary to warn against taking these images literally demonstrates the way in which these images express more intensive and specific content, for to take them literally would be to sever these images from the fuller ontological content they intend.

When Dionysius arrives at On the Divine Names chapter 4, section 7, he opens his account of the name “beauty” by identifying it initially with God himself and later on foregrounding the way in which beauty provides determinate content to all that exists. Given their importance, these excerpts are worth quoting at length. First, we find the hyperbolic sense of the divine names explicitly affirmed when Dionysius writes:

But, the superessential Beautiful is called Beauty, on account of the beauty communicated from Itself to all beautiful things, in a manner appropriate to each, and as Cause of the good harmony and brightness of all things which flashes like light to all the beautifying distributions of its fontal ray, and as calling kaloun all things to Itself (whence also it is called Beauty) kallos, and as collecting all in all to Itself.40

39. DN 4, 4 (700C).

40. DN 4, 7 (701D). Underscoring this sense of beauty as synonymous with the Supreme Principle, there is also this excerpt that closely follows Plato’s Symposium, 210E–211A: “(And it is called) Beautiful, as (being) at once beautiful and super-beautiful, and always being under the same conditions and in the same manner beautiful, and neither coming into being nor perishing, neither waxing nor waning; neither in this beautiful, nor in that ugly, nor at one time beautiful, and at another not; nor in relation to one thing beautiful, and in relation to another ugly, nor here, and not there, as being beautiful to some, and not beautiful to others; but as Itself, in Itself, with Itself, uniform, always being beautiful, and as having beforehand in Itself pre-eminently the fontal beauty of everything beautiful.”
Beauty is exposited here as first communicating itself (like the good), but with the added qualifier “in a manner appropriate to each.” Here, Dionysius seems to be anticipating what he will elaborate further on in the same chapter. Before presenting that excerpt, however, it is worth noting a few other important dimensions of beauty established in this initial excerpt. Beauty is not only a communication down into the very particularity of a being, but also the cause of harmony among beings, as well as a being’s luminous capacity, which is also a being’s potential to be seen, known, and loved. Further, beauty is a power that gathers many into one without compromising either the many or the one by virtue of its power to call.

Later on in the same chapter, we find an account of this same beauty but with respect to how it enters into creaturely determination. The Areopagite writes:

From this beautiful (comes) being to all existing things—that each is beautiful in its own proper order; and by reason of the beautiful are the adaptations of all things, and friendships, and inter-communions, and by the beautiful all things are made one, and the beautiful is origin of all things, as a creating cause, both by moving the whole and holding it together by the love of its own peculiar beauty; and end of all things, and beloved, as final cause (for all things exist for the sake of the beautiful) and exemplary (cause), because all things are determined according to It…. This, the one, good and beautiful, is uniquely cause of the multitude of all beautiful and good things. From this are all the substantial beginnings of things existing, the unions, the distinctions, the identities, the diversities, the similarities, the dissimilarities, the communions of the contraries, the commingling of things unified, the providences of the superior, the mutual cohesions of those of the same rank; the attentions of the more needy, the protecting and immoveable abidings and stabilities of their whole selves and, on the other hand, the communions of all things among all, in a manner peculiar to each, and adaptations and unmingled friendships and harmonies of the whole, the blendings in the whole, and the undissolved connections of existing things, the never-failing successions of the generations, all rests and movements, of the minds, of the souls, of the bodies.41

Not only is beauty identifiable with God in Himself, the Supreme Principle, but it is also the name for the divine capacity to give all things

their being—not, to be sure, in a general and extensive way only, but a
giving of being down to the very particularity of each specific being be-
cause “all things are determined according to [beauty].” By means of
beauty, the good disperses itself in a way that gives being to all that ex-
ists, but a giving of being that is always and everywhere relational. By
virtue of beauty, beings receive their being from other beings as the
means by which God enters into their ontological constitutions. In Di-
onysius’s view, being is never a statically possessed property but the dy-
namic movement of the divine as it moves from the general and exten-
sive toward the specific and intensive, all with the intention of gathering
the manifold into its own divine unity without compromising either.

Dionysius further articulates beauty through that aspect of the good
that pertains to attraction and desire. “The good is celebrated by the sa-
cred theologians,” writes the Areopagite, “both as beautiful and as beau-
ty, and as love, and as beloved; and all the other Divine Names that are
well suited to the beautifying and highly favored attraction.”42 Diony-
siuss appears here to gather even the content of the divine names un-
der the nomination of beauty insofar as each name bears the power to
attract. In effect, he identifies beauty as that divine perfection that ac-
counts for the more intensive and specific presence—what we might at
this point refer to as the more “determinate presence”—of the good’s al-
 lure. This is because, as the very power of attraction, beauty must some-
how be as intensive as it is extensive: extensive to reach and inhabit all
beings, and intensive to reach into and inhabit the very heart of a be-
ing, where attraction is found in its most intense form as the indissoluble
bond between creature and Creator.43

At the ontological core of every being, that is, at the “point” of its
indissoluble bond to the origin, there resides an energy of attraction,
most of which is dormant while waiting to be awoken by the otherness
of other beings and thus by being as other. As noted, for Dionysius this
awakening must begin in the particular, determinate content of a being,
which is “called” into being by means of the divine names. It is by means
of beauty that the good becomes intensive and specific to the particulars
of a given being. Once it takes root, the Dionysian picture might be said
to convey the sense that through beauty, the extensive power of the good

42. *DN* 4, 7 (701C).
43. By the word “creature,” I mean to indicate *this concrete being in the here and now.*
is “planted” (so to speak) intensively, that is, at the deepest core of a given being. Once it is thus planted, it takes root as it orients itself in the form of potency, that is, an orientation open to the divine call (kallos) by means of which it will continue to emerge. This emergence, driven by the response of immanent being to its transcendent call, presents one possible image of beauty’s anagogical power. A closer look at some of his language may provide some textual support for this picture.

It is significant that the word used in On the Divine Names chapter 4, section 7, to characterize how the other divine names are well suited to the “highly favored attraction” is ὀραιοτέτος—which connotes a sense of youthfulness—rather than kalon. This suggests that while beauty, as identified with the divine itself, calls to all things (kalon), other names, like love, relate to beauty at its more initial stages. Could these two distinct ways of identifying beauty as a divine name correspond to distinct though continuous phases of beauty’s anagogical power, indicating beauty’s overall relation to the good?

An affirmative response might look like this. Beauty is the good insofar as the good becomes more determinate in its “call” to all things. Determinacy is both consequent upon, and necessary to, the divine call because this call extends itself intensively into the specific condition of each creature. Explaining this again, Dionysius asserts that the good “pours forth by its very being the rays of its unitive goodness to all beings according to their receptive capacity.” Beauty comes closer to the receptive capacity of things, however, in a more “youthful” form as the attraction that elicits love’s more determinate desire. Its youthfulness corresponds to the fact that it identifies the early stages of beauty’s attraction relative to the percipient. Since whatever it is that makes a creature to be a unique “this” involves a difference or a range of differences from all other beings with whom similarities are also shared, for the good to “come near” to a creature it must somehow conform itself not only to the shared properties, but even to the unique, specific particularity of this or that concrete being.

The good is surely what all things desire, but this remains at an extensive or general distance without the more determinate content provided by the phenomena of light and beauty, which, it is worth noting

44. DN 4, 1 (693C).
again, are other to, although not absolutely different from, the good as modalities by which the good gives itself. Light provides the conditions in which the good’s perceptible content can become visible. Beauty then serves as the means by which the good’s perceptible content extends itself more intensely into the specific particularity of the creature itself. This provides the creature its ontological constitution and enables the creature to begin to respond to that beauty with love. This love begins in a “youthful” way as appealing to the unique particularity of a given being to evoke attraction made possible by the determination of beauty, but opens itself more extensively and generally as it ascends anagogically more and more into the good itself. It is now fitting to examine this anagogical “return” dimension of beauty.

BEAUTY: THE ANAGOGICAL POWER OF THE GOOD

The picture that Dionysius paints of the relationship between beauty and the good is one in which beauty identifies the good as the good becomes more determinate. This means, among other things, that beauty is the good taking form as perceptible content. As we began to examine above, this vision of beauty and the good has implications beyond what is merely sensible. Rather, insofar as perception is the beginning of all cognition and love, there is a corresponding ascending dynamic involved as well. In the Greek tradition that influences Dionysius, this ascending dynamic was named anagogy, the spiritual ascent of the soul into ever higher dimensions of reality.

Dionysius’s vision of beauty furnishes for him several features of this anagogical return of the creature to God, many of which also distinguish his approach from his Neoplatonic milieu. At the beginning of chapter three of On the Divine Names, Dionysius asserts what is perhaps the most explicit account of his anagogical vision. The comparative context by which his vision is proposed alongside a rejection of a different vision suggests something polemic. No doubt co-opting the Procline image of the “chain of being,” Dionysius claims that prayer is akin to the act of reaching up to take hold of a cord, or chain, in order to draw closer to divinity. Rather than pulling divinity down as the case would appear

45. *DN* 3, 1 (680A–C).
to be, however, one is in fact pulled upward by and toward God. Prayer is an attunement, an opening of oneself to God, the efficacy of which depends in some sense on one’s capacity to resist the desire to reduce otherness to one’s own standards.

It is important to remember that for Dionysius, this anagogical momentum is not an individual event but always happens in community, which in the Dionysian vision is best captured by his term “hierarchy.” Many of the primary features of Dionysian anagogy can be examined by grouping them under the Dionysian principle of hierarchy. In chapter four of On the Divine Names, he articulates the way in which the good and beautiful provide a foundation of love that engenders a unity-in-plurality that preserves both unity and plurality:

By all things, then, the beautiful and good is desired and beloved and cherished; and, by reason of it, and for the sake of it, the less love the greater suppliantly; and those of the same rank, their fellows brotherly; and the greater (love) the less considerately; and these severally love the things of themselves continuously; and all things by aspiring to the beautiful and good, do and wish all things whatever they do and wish.46

Much more than an expression of affection or a principle of desire, love in this Dionysian vision is an ontological adhesive that not only accounts for the way in which a particular substantial entity is constituted in and by a community of relations, but also brings all substantial entities into a sacred ordering. The principle of love that is described here bears an ordering power that reflects Dionysian hierarchy. Love is the power of attraction that unites the various orders with each other and themselves as they all strive to the final goal of beauty. A similar passage appears in On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy:

*And by our love of things beautiful elevated to Him,* and which elevates us, folds together our many diversities, and after perfecting into a uniform and divine life and habit and operation, holily bequeaths the power of the divine priesthood; from which by approaching to the holy exercise of the priestly office, we ourselves become nearer to the beings above us, by assimilation, according to our power, to their abiding and unchangeable holy steadfastness; and thus by looking upwards to the blessed and supremely divine self of Jesus, and reverently gazing upon whatever we are permitted to see, and illuminated with the

46. *DN* 4, 10 (795BC).
knowledge of the visions, we shall be able to become, as regards the science of divine mysteries, purified and purifiers; images of light, and workers, with God, perfected and perfecting.  

Because Dionysius conceives the relationship of beauty and the good through the context of the divine names, wherein the hyperbolic being of God is entirely communicated in an unmixed diversity of each name, beauty can be seen as a principle that establishes the divine unity in diversity, and the consequent return of that diversity to the divine unity. In ways that differ from his Neoplatonic contemporaries, this return does not entail a dissolution of the many into the one. Rather, as the above sense of hierarchy indicates, it is a more robust and fruitful community of beings unified by their participation in the beautiful and the good.

As Dionysius explains in his *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, hierarchy is not only an activity but one that is “assimilated, as far as attainable, to the likeness of God, and conducted to the illuminations granted to it from God, according to capacity, with a view to the Divine imitation.” Hierarchy is an activity, an operation of sacred ordering, whose goal is divine union, and—through reception of divine light—divine imitation. All of this is made possible by beauty and imaged in the specific, or concrete, person of Jesus. Beauty, as Dionysius explains here, is a deifying agent because it is simple (haploun) and good (agathon), has the power to initiate (teletarchikon), and, from every dissimilarity relative to the whole (amiges men esti katholou pasēs anomoiotētos), is universally attractive. As he further notes, hierarchy is an activity that teaches as it assimilates, allowing its practitioners to begin to see the beauty of God: “He, then, who mentions hierarchy, denotes a certain altogether holy order, an image of the supremely divine beauty.” Here again Dionysius uses the word “hōraiotētos” rather than “kallos,” indicating that, as it relates to hierarchical activity, beauty remains in its initial, more “youthful,” stages. As the anagogical power of beauty is distilled through hierarchical activity, however, beauty at its more mature stages—which Dionysius signifies with the word “euprepeian” as “well-ordered beauty” or even “dignity”—appears as it confers assimilation with the divine.

47. *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1, 1 (372B) (emphasis added).
The purpose, then, of hierarchy is the assimilation and union, as far as attainable, with God, having him leader of all religious science and operation, by looking unflinchingly to his most divine beauty, and copying, as far as possible, and by perfecting its own followers as divine images, mirrors most luminous and without flaw, receptive of the primal light and the supremely divine ray, and devoutly filled with the entrusted radiance, and again, spreading this radiance ungrudgingly to those after it, in accordance with the supremely divine regulations.\textsuperscript{51}

Beauty’s anagogical power is prevalent in this passage insofar as divine beauty takes the form of “religious science and operation” (\textit{hieras epistēmēs te kai energeias}), which can be validly reconfigured as “knowing” (science) and “being” (operation or act). In being received, divine beauty in this form is horizontally passed through members of the hierarchy to other members. This “receiving” and “passing on” occurs when each member vertically looks “unflinchingly” at the divine beauty (\textit{euprepeian}) in order to imitate this beauty for every other member. As conceived in this Dionysian sense, divine beauty is not an “object” to be captured and handed on through some kind of material exchange. Rather, the one who beholds the vision of divine beauty transmits it to other members by showing forth her own beauty, by being a participant in the divine beauty itself. In other words, rather than competing with the beauty of creatures, divine beauty increases the particular beauty of each participant.

There are a few significant ways in which this Dionysian vision of anagogical return differs from Neoplatonic thought. As ought to be clear at this point, Dionysius’s account of beauty and the good results in an elevation of the value of creaturely particularity. God dwells in each creature insofar as a creature is beautiful. And because beauty is a principle of determination, the very act of being a creature is an act always already endowed with, and sustained by, beauty. Beauty is the good insofar as the good illuminates the particular determination of each creature, not only creating the conditions for the initial stages of cognition and love but also sustaining the ascent as it moves ever higher and higher in relation to other beings.

Neoplatonism did not hold the same value of the particular. Perhaps there is no better evidence for this than the aspirations of Neoplatonic

\textsuperscript{51} On the Celestial Hierarchy 3, 2 (165A).
theurgy. According to Gregory Shaw, one of the foremost scholars on the subject, Neoplatonic theurgy, a performance of rites designed to allow the soul to enter into the “work of the gods” in order to transform the performer to a divine status, entailed freeing the embodied soul from its particularity.\footnote{See Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 52.} Theurgy, according to Shaw, intended to purge the soul of its fixation on particular things, since these were part of a secondary world that only inhibited the ascent intended by theurgy. A primary reason for this view can be traced back to the Platonic worldview. In the *Laws*, Plato had asserted that “not for your sake was this world generated, but you were born for its sake.”\footnote{Plato, *Laws*, 903C. This stands in significant contrast, for example, to the Catholic counterreformer Ignatius of Loyola who, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, requires that the retreatant consider the idea that God created the whole world for her. Rather than placing the retreatant at the center of existence, this is an undertaking designed to increase gratitude on the part of the retreatant, but it is an undertaking that is made possible by a history that counteracts its Platonic and Neoplatonic opposite.} As this example of the Platonic vision indicates, creatures are subordinate to the whole. Neoplatonism had proceeded to maintain that a creature’s true destiny can only be achieved when this subordination is completed in a theurgical union in which particularity is absorbed in its return to the whole.

The Dionysian theology of beauty, in large measure revealed and affirmed in the Incarnation, conceives of a whole that is able to give itself entirely to each part. Parts need not relinquish their particularity in order to commune with and coexist in the whole. Rather, creaturely particularity is the sine qua non of the hierarchical union that sustains the Dionysian vision. This is the reason that Dionysius is able to assert quite liberally that everything, even down to the lowliest worm, can be a doorway through which one can contemplate the divine presence in the world.\footnote{On the *Celestial Hierarchy* 2, 5 (145A). This image of the worm allegedly can be traced to Psalm 22:6, although Dionysius’s use of it here does not quite reflect its appearance in that Psalm. See also Enrica Rauro, “God and the Worm: The Twofold Otherness in Pseudo-Dionysius’s Theory of Dissimilar Images,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2008): 581–92.}

**Conclusion**

It is hoped that this analysis has brought to light the central place and significance of beauty in Dionysius’s theological synthesis. As I have sug-
gested, there are two fundamental features of Dionysian thought that are necessary in order to throw light on his account of beauty. The first is the tradition of the divine names, in which he presents the most complete treatment of beauty. The second concerns the differences between Dionysius and his Neoplatonic contemporaries and predecessors. The differences most relevant to our purposes were (1) the fact that Dionysius unequivocally identifies the Supreme Principle, God, with the name of beauty, and (2) the way in which Dionysius’s commitment to the doctrine of the Incarnation furnishes him with content for understanding beauty. Bringing these together, we suggested that for Dionysius beauty not only is coextensive with the good, but also is the good insofar as the good is intensive, that is, insofar as the good intensifies itself into perceptible content. In other words, beauty is the more intensive or specific form that the good assumes in and as creaturely existence. Consequently, imitating the Incarnation, this feature of beauty concerns the descent of something other-worldly into the world to dwell within and among creatures. But there is a corresponding ascent as well, which is identifiably with beauty’s anagogical power. All of this identifies beauty as the event in which the unity of the divine plentitude gives or communicates itself as the diverse multitude of beings in order to gather that diverse multitude into its unity without compromising either. The image of this beauty-event, so we suggested, is best captured by the Dionysian notion of hierarchy, which identifies a community of beings emerging and being gathered in a network of indelible, ontological relations. Insofar as a creature has being in a unique way, it is beautiful. And the more a creature enters into that network of relationships by which it receives its being, the more it comes to know its own beauty by knowing the beauty of others. This horizontal distribution of beauty, then, becomes the medium for the vertical integration of God’s very presence and the way in which God’s presence may be recognizable in a “public” way.
Boyd Taylor Coolman

9 ☞ Beauty in Hugh of St. Victor
The First Christian Theological Aesthetics?

This essay hopes to begin to fill an important gap in the scholarly treatment of medieval theological aesthetics. In his pioneering and magisterial survey of theological aesthetics in the Christian tradition, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s analysis of medieval figures consisted in lengthy chapters devoted to St. Anselm of Canterbury and St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, leaving the period between these figures essentially unexplored. For von Balthasar, Bonaventure was the aesthetic theologian *par excellence* in the Christian tradition, and the Franciscan’s “theological aesthetics” was foundational and paradigmatic for the Swiss theologian’s own constructive proposal. Yet Bonaventure does not fall from the sky lightning-like, nor spring from the ground fully formed. Rather, his aesthetic “theological style” has deep roots in the fertile soil of a theological tradition that begins not with St. Anselm but rather with Anselm’s younger contemporary, Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141), and extends through his Victorine successors (including the understudied Thomas of St. Victor or “Gallus,” ca. 1200–46), up into the early Franciscan theological tradition, beginning with Alexander of Hales (1185–1245) and culminating in his most famous student, St. Bonaventure (1221–74).


Hugh himself did pioneering work in what today is often called “theological aesthetics” that has been studied to some extent. Both Edgar de Bruyne and more recently Lenka Karfíková have analyzed his definition of beauty as it emerges in his various writings, while Margot Fassler, Conrad Rudolph, Grover Zinn, and, most recently, Dominique Poirel have explored important links between Hugh and the development in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of “gothic art” generally and of liturgical art forms as well. But the aesthetic dimensions of his theology merit further consideration. In ways that have not been sufficiently appreciated, beauty and aesthesis play a crucial and well-integrated role in Hugh’s theology.

If the high medieval theological achievement in theology generally and in theological aesthetics in particular is to be fully appreciated, it is necessary to expose the unified and coherent “Victorine-Franciscan” theological tradition running from Hugh to Bonaventure, one well captured in the seraphic doctor’s own doxographical account of it. Surveying the luminaries of the recent and remote Christian tradition, Bonaventure observed that Augustine and Anselm excelled in speculative theology; Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux in practical morality; Dionysius and Richard of St. Victor in mystical contemplation. But Hugh “excels in all three.”

While the current essay cannot canvass this entire Victorine-Franciscan tradition, even in relation to the theme of theological aesthetics, it hopes to lay a foundation for that undertaking by assaying the theological aesthetics of Hugh of St. Victor.

THE PROBLEM OF “MEDITELAESTHETICS”

In his recent scholarly work on pre-modern “theological aesthetics,” Oleg Bychkov offers two general observations that helpfully frame the topic of aesthetics in the Middle Ages and in Hugh. First, the pre-modern Chris-


tian tradition does not pursue an aesthetics for its own sake, an aesthetic theory, or “aesthetic experience.”\(^6\) One will not find there a theory of aesthetics in the modern sense of the term.\(^7\) Second, while Christian thinkers from Augustine and Dionysius onward attended to beauty in their theologies, one does not find a truly Christian theological aesthetics until the Middle Ages,\(^8\) and only then in the theology of St. Bonaventure.\(^9\) Following von Balthasar, Bychkov argues that a distinctive and genuine Christian theological aesthetics entails the following characteristics. It begins with a theological \textit{a priori} of faith and affirmation of certain articles of faith,\(^10\) especially the Trinity and the Incarnation;\(^11\) it involves assumptions about a “converted aesthete,”\(^12\) one who has received the gift of faith and the concomitant ability to sense in a particular way;\(^13\) it thus pursues an analogy of faith, aesthetically construed; finally, it must appeal to nonanalogical aesthetic language, that is, to actual sense experience.\(^14\) For

6. Ibid., 10–11.

7. “It is a prevailing opinion among contemporary scholars that to address the question of aesthetics as medieval is a historical impossibility. Their research shows that, unlike in the modern period, there is no conceptually unified aesthetic theory in the Middle Ages. Nor is there any unified concept of beauty or art” (ibid., 8–9).

8. “Augustine uses aesthetics almost exclusively for apologetic purposes, with the simple aim of revealing the existence of the divine principle to the general observer: the transcendent divine principle, to be sure, but by no means a specifically Christian one.” So “aesthetics remains in the purview of his fundamental theology” (Bychkov, \textit{Aesthetic Revelation}, 268).

9. “It is interesting that aesthetics shares a similar fate in the hands of even later medieval authors, such as Anselm” (ibid.).

10. “A leap from such sensible beauty to the affirmation that being as such is beautiful cannot be attempted from below: for this, one needs a theological a priori, that is, the possibility of seeing the form and the subsequent ascent must be preconditioned ‘from above.’ According to von Balthasar, establishing such an a priori was attempted ‘for the first time’ in metaphysics by the Franciscans, and specifically by Bonaventure, who reformulated a certain experience of being that Francis had” (ibid., 273).

11. “The Trinitarian structure of reality, as it appears in Augustine and later in Bonaventure, can be grasped only ‘in the light of the resemblance’ effected by faith,’ or through the ‘insight of faith’ (\textit{GL2} 301). Furthermore, in his own attempt to turn aesthetic categories specifically to shed light on the mystery of Christ . . ., von Balthasar seems to follow in the footsteps of medieval theologians such as Bonaventure” (Bychkov, \textit{Aesthetic Revelation}, 270).

12. In this essay “aesthete” is used literally to mean simply “one who perceives beauty,” without any of the modern connotations associated with the term.

13. “It is only conversion—which affects all aspects of the human person, including emotional and perceptive—that ‘directs’ one to see the specifically Christian beauty” (ibid., 269).

14. “The contexts that involve true (that is, non-analogical) aesthetic experiences, or analogies with actual sense experience of the aesthetic type,” excluding ‘cases in which ‘beauty’ or other aesthetic categories are used simply analogically, with no reference to actual aesthetic experience” (ibid., 270–71).
Bychkov, in short, for the medievals, “one can speak only of analogical aesthetics.”\textsuperscript{15} Elaborating on this second point, he observes:

By the time of the high Middle Ages, however, aesthetic thought takes a different turn. No longer focused on “aesthetic proofs” of the existence of God accessible to any observer, the schoolmen shift their interest to what aesthetic parallels or analogies can reveal to them about the topics of a specifically Christian systematic theology, about, for example, the nature of the Trinity and Christ as the Son, or the second person of the Trinity. Authentic Christian aesthetics must have in view the Trinity and Christ.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, “such late Patristic or earlier medieval authors as pseudo-Dionysius or Anselm … are not yet building this specifically Christian aesthetics, being limited either to the discussion of God as abstract ‘beauty’ (\textit{to kalon}) or to certain aesthetic arguments explaining the economy of salvation.”\textsuperscript{17} For Bychkov, only Bonaventure’s theology fully satisfies the conditions for a full-fledged theological aesthetics.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsc{Hugh of St. Victor’s \textsc{Theological Aesthetics}}

In fact, though, all these criteria for a Christian theological aesthetics are met in the theology of Hugh of St. Victor.

\textit{An Aesthetic Human Vocation}

It is surprising how explicitly beauty figures in Hugh’s theology and how little-noticed this seems to be. Beauty’s importance appears programmatically in the opening sections of his pioneering “summa,” \textit{On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De sacramentis Christianae fidei)}.\textsuperscript{19} Pondering the narrative of creation given in Genesis, Hugh raises the question...
of whether creation was instantaneous or required a literal six days. Disagreeing with the first Augustine, the “second Augustine” opts for the latter.

For even the rational creature itself was first made unformed \([informis]\) in a certain mode of its own, afterwards to be formed \([formanda]\) through conversion to its Creator; and therefore matter unformed \([informis]\) but afterwards formed \([formata]\) was shown to it, that it might discern how great was the difference between being \([esse]\) and beautiful being \([pulchrum esse]\). And by this it was warned not to be content with having received being from the Creator through creation, until it should obtain both beautiful being and happy being \([pulchrum esse atque beatum esse]\), which it was destined to receive from the Creator through a conversion of love.\(^{20}\)

Though instantaneous creation was of course possible for divine power, Hugh argues that God created in six days, proceeding gradually through increasing degrees of form and beauty, so that the rational creature “might discern how great was the difference between \(esse\) and \(pulchrum esse\),” between “being” and “beautiful being.” God’s intention was that rational creatures would be “warned not to be content with having received being \([esse]\) from the Creator,” but would “strive for beautiful being \([pulchrum esse]\),”\(^{21}\) such that it might then “arrive at blessed being \([beata esse]\)” in relation to its Creator.\(^{22}\) This short passage encapsulates Hugh’s entire theological aesthetics, at least implicitly.

First, a fundamental feature of the created cosmos as a whole is beauty (including the beauty of the rational creature itself), which beauty is to command the attention of the rational creature. God created beauty in some sense \(for\) the rational creature, though not for it only, as will be seen.

Second, Hugh here posits an aesthetic quality to God’s activity \(ad extra\). God acts artistically, as an \(artifex\), gradually imposing form on matter, \(progressively\) rendering created beautiful form, not due to a lack of mastery over matter, but rather as a function of divine wisdom, with a view toward human perception and experience thereof.

Third, created beauty figures centrally in the divine plan for relation-

---

\(^{20}\) *Sacr. 1.1.3* (PL 176.189A; Deferrari 9).

\(^{21}\) The notion of *pulchrum esse* seems unique to Hugh.

\(^{22}\) *Sacr. 1.1.3* (PL 176.189A; Deferrari 9).
ship with rational creatures, which plan is for them to arrive at that state of beatifying beauty through the perception of the created beauty of the cosmos. Creation’s beauty is not, thus, an end in itself, but is a sign or a reflection of something else. More precisely, the aesthetic experience of created beauty should facilitate the rational creature’s movement toward and arrival at beautiful and beatific being. Hugh’s aesthetics are explicitly theological, subordinated, that is, ordered to, the ultimate divine-human relationship.

Fourth, strikingly, Hugh situates the rational creature’s beauty as the divinely intended condition for the possibility of an ultimate beatific relationship to God. Though not sufficient, the rational creature’s own beauty is necessary for its final beatitude.

Fifth, a related implication is that the human acquisition of pulchrum esse, as contemporaneous with and constitutive of the divine activity of sanctification, also occurs gradually as a process of formation, even self-formation in cooperation with the divine Artisan. This will lend an overall aesthetic cast to Hugh’s whole account of the spiritual life.

Implied here, in the sixth place, is the claim that beauty is also a divine attribute; that created beauty, both in the rational creature and in creation as a whole, is important because God is beautiful and is in fact Beauty itself.

Finally, this text harbors Hugh’s perhaps most original contribution to medieval theological aesthetics, already adumbrated in the previous section. Most theological aesthetics are anthropocentric. As such, they situate divine Beauty as the ultimate object of creaturely experience, often, of course, mediated by the experience of created beauty. But for Hugh, the ground of all theological aesthetics is God as subject of aesthetic experience. According to Hugh, God experiences and delights in God’s own inner-trinitarian Beauty—the Beauty that the Trinity is—and God creates beauty “outside” of God in order also to manifest and delight in that beauty, and especially in the beauty (pulchrum esse) of the rational creature. In this sense, Hugh’s is a profoundly theocentric theological aesthetics, as he executes a kind of “Copernican revolution” in re-

---

23. Hugh’s distinction between “being” and “beautiful being” does not imply that esse could be utterly without any pulchrum at all before arriving at pulchrum esse; rather, he is thinking in terms of gradations of beauty, such that being could gradually acquire greater degrees or intensities of beauty.
flection on beauty, by placing God’s “experience” of beauty, rather than human experience thereof, at the center of his theological aesthetics.

So this is Hugh’s theological aesthetics in sum: the rational creature is called to discern created beauty, in order to be formed beautifully, in order not only to know and love uncreated Beauty beatifically but, most importantly, to become an object of divine aesthetic pleasure.

While all this reveals the aesthetic framework of Hugh’s worldview, a fuller picture emerges from one of his most important theological works, namely, On the Three Days Work (De tribus diebus), arguably the first full-scale treatise on theological aesthetics in the Middle Ages and perhaps in the Christian tradition as a whole. With it, in fact, after John Scotus Eriugena (815–77), Hugh “is the first author to devote a complete treatise to beauty.” De tribus contains all the elements of Hugh’s fully Christian theological aesthetics.

Admiratio: An Aesthetic Attunement

As just noted, Hugh positioned the pre-lapsarian human as fundamentally oriented toward and attentive to the pulchrum esse of creation. Even after the fall, though, this disposition and posture remains as the human continues to experience awe, amazement, marvel, stupefaction—in a word, wonder (admiratio)—at the beauty of the cosmos. This is no mere theoretical claim for Hugh, whose lyrical praise of beauty in De tribus diebus betrays his own attunement to it:

Would that I could examine these [created beauties] as subtly and tell of their beauty as ably as I can ardently love them! I find delightful that it is so very pleasant and agreeable to treat frequently these matters where simultaneously sensation is instructed by reason and the mind delighted with sweetness, and feeling aroused to exultation, so that stunned and admiring we shout with the psalmist: “How magnificent are your works, O Lord!” (Ps 91:5–7).26

24. Hugh of St. Victor, De tribus diebus, ed. Dominici Poirel, CCCM 177 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002). For discussion, see Dominique Poirel, Livre de la nature et débat trinitaire au XIle siècle: le De tribus diebus de Hughes de Saint-Victor (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002). The work appears to be one of Hugh’s earliest, probably originally written before 1120 or 1121 and then revised and reissued before 1130 (De tribus diebus, 218*–220*). See the English translation by Hugh Feiss, OSB, in Trinity and Creation, vol. 1 of Victorine Texts in Translation, ed. Boyd Taylor Coolman and Dale M. Coulter, 49–102 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). Unless otherwise noted, all translations below are from Feiss’s translation.


26. De tribus diebus 4.1–2 (Poirel 8–9, 78–89; Feiss 63).
He enthuses over the marvelous manifestations of creation’s variegated beauty:

[Providence] situates the stars and the luminaries in heaven, so that they illumine everything below. She makes a path in the air for the winds and clouds, so that dispersed by their movements they pour down rain from above. In the womb of the earth, She orders reservoirs of water to form so that through their streams they run here and there where the nod of their commander carries them. She suspends birds in the air and immerses fish in the waters. She fills the earth with beasts and serpents and various kinds of other reptiles and worms. She endows some regions with rich produce, some with lush vines, others with fertile olive trees, others with productive livestock, others with powerful herbs, others with precious gems, others with monstrous animals and beasts, ... others with various kinds of metals or incenses.27

Narrowing in on specifics, he takes delight in the remarkable variation in even the size and shape of creatures.

Notice, therefore, which you should admire more: the teeth of a wild boar or of a moth, the wings of a griffin or of a stinging insect, the head of a horse or of a locust, the legs of the elephant or of a gnat, the snout of a pig or of a succrio; the eagle or the ant, the lion or the flea, the tiger or the tortoise. In one instance you are amazed at their great size, in the other at their smallness, a small body created with great wisdom, great wisdom which no negligence negates.28

Returning to a grander scale, he asks:

What is more beautiful than light, which, although it does not have color in itself, in some ways gives colors to all the things that it illumines? What is more delightful to behold than a clear sky; resplendent like a sapphire, it draws one’s gaze by the extremely pleasing mildness of its glow and softens the view? The sun shines like gold; the moon is pale like electrum. Certain stars radiate a flaming appearance; others sparkle with a rosy light; others alternately display a rosy glow, then green, then white.29

And in another place:

Behold the earth wreathed with flowers! What a pleasing show it puts on, how it delights the eyes; how it arouses feeling! We see blushing roses, white lilies, purple violets. Not only do they look wonderful, but their origin is also wonder-

27. *De tribus diebus* 5 (Poirel 15.197–208; Feiss 66).
29. *De tribus diebus* 12.1 (Poirel 26.409–18; Feiss 72)
ful—how God’s wisdom produces such beauty from the dust of the earth. Finally, there is green, the most beautiful of all. How it enraptures the minds of those who see it, when in a truly new way shoots come forth with new life and standing up in their stalks, which seemed to have been trodden down by death, bud forth together into the light in a symbol of the future resurrection.\textsuperscript{30}

Nor does he shy away from a fully-orbed sensuousness in his aesthetic appreciation of the created world:

Sight perceives one thing, hearing another, smell another, taste another, touch another. The beauty of colors nurtures sight; the sweetness of song soothes hearing; the fragrance of scent, smell; the sweetness of savor, taste; bodily feel, touch. Who could list all the delights of the senses?... We find as many delights for the ear in the variety of sounds, as we have shown there are delights for the eyes in the variety of colors.... It is thus with smell. Incenses have their odors, ointments their aromas, roses their scent. Thickets have their smell, and meadows have theirs. Wastelands have their odors, wood, flower and fruits theirs. All things that emit a sweet fragrance and breathe out sweet smells serve the olfactory sense and were created for its pleasure.\textsuperscript{31}

Strikingly, in an almost “art for art’s sake” way, he carves out an aesthetic space for the beautiful for its own sake, as he distinguishes the necessary from the beneficial, from the fitting, and lastly from the pleasing:

Hence, it was not fitting that in any aspect the array of visible things suffer a defect, because it was instituted above all to announce the inconceivable profuse-ness of eternal goods [\textit{inaestimabilem aeternorum bonorum affluentiam}]. This is what we have said about why God also wished to create those things that He foresaw would not be necessary for human uses. If He created only what was necessary that would be goodness but not richness. So, when God also joined the beneficial to the necessary He showed the riches of His goodness [\textit{divitias bonitatis}]. When, however, the beneficial is augmented by the fitting, that manifests the abundance [\textit{abundantia}] of the riches of His goodness. Then, when to the fitting the pleasing are also added, what does that tell other than how super-abundant [\textit{superabundantes}] are the riches of his goodness.\textsuperscript{32}

In the wide array of created things, divine Goodness desired to create things that have no utility, but only pleasing beauty, and in a sense \textit{De}

\textsuperscript{30}. \textit{De tribus diebus} 12.2 (Poirel 26–7.420–30; Feiss 72–73)
\textsuperscript{32}. \textit{De tribus diebus} 14.3 (Poirel 31.495–505; Feiss 74).
tribus is a lesson in aesthetic pleasure-taking, delight in created beauty, almost for its own sake. Throughout, Hugh gives voice to the wonder that created beauty fosters in him, and lest the reader be slow in joining the doxology, he often exHORTs her to “consider how great are the wonderful things of God.” For “who does not see it? Who is not amazed?”

While this admiratio is a point of departure for Hugh, not an end-point, it is worth noting nevertheless how long he lingers on the sheer pleasure of sensuous experience, on the sensual delight afforded by the physical world in all its dimensions. In this way, Hugh is, perhaps surprisingly, proto-modern: he neither decrIes the pleasures of the physical senses, nor does he rush hastily to spiritualize them—to see the physical as merely an ephemeral sign of true intelligible beauty. At the same time, undeniably and perhaps more stereotypically medieval, he believes created physical beauty does ultimately point to something beyond and other than itself. Although it is perhaps more accurate to say, anticipat-Ing Bonaventure’s (and von Balthasar’s) theological aesthetics, that physical beauty does not simply point beyond itself, but rather reveals divine beauty by making it “manifest.”

God as Artifex Imparting Form

All of this reflects a distinctively Hugonian doctrine of creation that is profoundly aesthetic, a doctrine, moreover, that is governed interestingly by the notion of “form” (forma): “the Creator [artifex] gave form [forma] to His work,” for “the immensity of things received the form [forma] of power; the beauty [of things received the form of] wisdom; and utility [of things received the form of] goodness.” In this notion of the Creator-Artisan gradually imposing forma upon matter are found the crucial features of Hugh’s theology of creation.

33. De tribus diebus 4.7 (Poirel 12.150–52; Feiss 65).
34. De tribus diebus 4.8 (Poirel 13.170; Feiss 65).
35. “The fundamental feature of Bonaventure’s approach is that it is based on seeing and wonder at the sight of the vastness of reality, or God’s revelation. From von Balthasar’s point of view, that makes it essentially aesthetic. Bonaventure’s experience of approaching this vastness is fundamentally humbling. It is an experience of ‘being lost,’ ‘overpowered,’ or ‘defeated from the start,’ which precludes any possibility of creating a finished systematic description. This position is contrasted with the arrogance of all-knowing ‘finished’ systems (von Balthasar refers to the thought of Thomas Aquinas) which by the very reason of their finished-ness fail to capture the vastness of experience” (Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation, 275).
36. Sacr. 1.2.11 (PL 176.211A; Deferrari 34).
37. Sacr. 1.2.12 (PL 176.211A; Deferrari 34).
At the outset of his account of creation in *De sacramentis*, Hugh observes that the pagan philosophers—he clearly has Plato and his *Timaeus* in mind—had posited three co-eternal principles: “an artisan, matter, and form,” and that they had argued that all things were “fashioned from matter into form by an artisan.” 38 Insisting that God alone is the eternal first principle, Hugh rejects the notion of three co-eternal principles. Yet he not only retains but revels in the idea of God as an artisan imposing *forma* upon matter: in six days, he says, God “disposed, and ordered, and reduced to form” all that God had made. 39

Hugh affirms that the *matter* of the whole creation did in fact come into a certain kind of existence immediately, at the outset of God’s creating act, even before the first day. “Therefore, all things were founded simultaneously.” 40 That is, “the works of creation—this sensible world with all its elements—were made indeed in matter before any day, equally in time and with time.” 41 But, the creation was not yet in the state of being that God intended. Initially, “the matter of all visible and corporeal things had the form of confusion (*forma confusionis*)”; that is, it was relatively “unformed,” though not completely so, otherwise it could not exist at all. But, “it did not yet have the form of disposition (*forma dispositionis*), until it was afterwards formed and yielded order and disposition.” 42 Hence, the initial creation of all things had to receive *forma* in order to come fully into being. 43 Put simply, for Hugh, the six days account of creation in Genesis is more precisely an account of formation (*formatio*)—the divine activity of gradually forming inchoate being into definite being: 44 in six days all the parts of the sensible world were “disposed into form.” 45

39. *Sacr.* 1.1.7 (PL 176.193A; Deferrari 13).
40. *Sacr.* 1.5.5 (PL 176.249B; Deferrari 77).
41. *Sacr.* 1.1.29 (PL 176.204C; Deferrari 27).
42. *Sacr.* 1.5.5 (PL 176.249B; Deferrari 77).
43. “Therefore, before form, matter was in a broken state, yet in form—in a form of confusion (*forma confusionis*), before a form of disposition (*forma dispositionis*). In the first form, that of confusion, all corporeal things were first created as matter simultaneously and once; in the second form, that of disposition, they were afterwards arranged through the interval of the six days” (*Sacr.* 1.1.4 [PL 176.189D; Deferrari 10]).
45. *Sacr.* 1.1.29 (PL 176.204C; Deferrari 27).
But Hugh says more. The act of gradually disposing into form is two-fold: in the first three days, created things were “arranged” (ordinata); in the second triad of days, they were “adorned” (ornata). Dividing the six days into two triads, he sees formless matter increasingly disposed (dispositus)—ordered, arranged, and reduced to form—in the first three days. In the second three, the creation formed thus is now decorated and ornamented (ornatus). That is, matter’s gradual disposition by form (dispositus) is accomplished by the third day; in the remaining three days, the creation receives “adornment,” it is decorated and ornamented (ornatus). That which is formed (formata) by the end of day three is well-formed by the end of day six; that which receives being (esse) in the first three days receives beautiful being (pulchrum esse) in the last three.

Not only does forma give each thing its essential nature, but the creation as a whole is formed in its overarching order and structure. In De sacramentis, for example, Hugh observes how creation as a whole is disposed, ordered, arranged, and differentiated by forma. The initially “void and empty” earth is “uncomposed (incomposita).” From the imposition of forma comes “disposition,” “order,” “arrangement,” and even “harmony.” Indeed, Hugh’s very definition of created form reflects this: “Form is nothing else at all but the disposition of parts in a whole.” So, at the macrocosmic level: “Wisdom distributes each thing in a suitable way within the whole, so never, never does the joining of the parts give rise to a conflict of attributes.” “Thus does all nature … in some wondrous way, by means of a concord of many dissimilar things joined together in unity, fashion (facit) one harmonious whole (armonium) in all of them.”

Remaining within the semantic field of forma, Hugh can thus speak of the initial creation as not only formata, but also as formosa, as finely or well-formed or beautiful. The Victorine sentence collection, the Miscel-
lania, which also contains authentic writings of Hugh himself, puts the point thus:

In the very creation of things, God first made matter; after he added *forma*, in order to show that, similarly, in the rational creature, being (*esse*) was made first, and afterwards beautiful (*pulchrum esse*) or lovely being (*formosum esse*): something better was to be added, so that the rational creature would not glory too much in the good which it had first accepted, but instead would hasten to the better thing he was going to receive afterwards.\(^{56}\)

Hugh himself makes the same point in his internal dialogue, the *De arrrha animae*.\(^{57}\) Anticipating the reformative work of salvation, he reminds himself that he is now receiving “beautiful and lovely being [*pulchrum esse, formosum esse*], which far surpasses nothingness in its existence, as it outdoes something merely existent in its beauty.”\(^{58}\) God’s gradual imposition of form on matter constitutes a gradual process, not just of formation, but of beautification, and the result is not merely *formata* but also *formosa*.\(^{59}\)

Together these two acts—to dispose and to ornament—constitute Hugh’s conception of formation. The result is a visible, corporal creation both *formata* and *formosa*, both formed and beautified through a gradual act of divine formation. Hugh sees the Artist’s creative act, not as instantaneous, but as a wise, gradual, orderly impartation of form upon matter.\(^{60}\) Like an artist, God creates gradually, through a process that forms matter. For Hugh, this conception of divine activity, which he often emphasizes, is fundamental. Though good, the initial creation (*esse*)

---

56. Miscellanea I: *De eo Quod Spiritualis Dijudicat Omnia, et de Judicio Veri Et Boni*, 1.48 (PL 177.497B).


59. “To be sure I might believe that something has being and not any form (*formam*). Thus it is not absurd to call matter uniformed (*informem*), because existing in a certain confused and mixed state it had not yet begun [to have] this beautiful and suitable disposition and form (*pulchram aptamque dispositionem et formam*) in which it is now seen” (Sacr. 1.1.4 [PL 176.189C–D; Deferrari 10, trans. altered]).

60. See Sacr. 1.1.3 (PL 176.188B–189B; Deferrari 8–9).
is yet called to a higher degree of form, namely, beautiful being (*pulchrum esse*).

In short, Hugh conceives of creation—both the divine activity and its nondivine result—from the perspective of form (*forma*). Creation as a whole, and in its individual parts, receives being (*esse*) through *forma*, and being can become beautiful (*pulchrum esse*) through increasing degrees of form. This notion of the Divine Artisan fosters a profound aesthetic dimension in Hugh’s view, not only of how God creates, but of what God creates.

Moreover, Hugh sees sapiential pedagogy in a prolonged process of creation. The actual six days of creation are a “sacrament,” a historical occurrence with theological significance—more precisely, a principle that Hugh will also see at work in salvation history and in the life of the individual person. Creation’s finely formed beauty (*formosus*) is a “sacrament” of the divinely intended state of human beings. The rational creature emerges from the creative act with a certain *forma*, which, although good and beautiful as such, was called to a higher degree of form and beauty.61 For Hugh, human nature is both formed and formable, dynamic, open to and indeed, as noted at the outset, summoned to greater and greater degrees of form and beauty.

*The Form of Wisdom*

Noteworthy in all of this is that Hugh’s attention to *forma* in creation is grounded in his fundamental Trinitarian affirmation that God’s creative act occurs through the Second Person of the Trinity, with whom Hugh associates the divine attribute of wisdom and whom Hugh will even call the *Forma* of Wisdom. Created things have been formed according to the Idea or Pattern or Exemplar of Uncreated Wisdom.62 To use one of Hugh’s favored expressions, it is God as Wisdom, as the Wise Artifex, who “disposes” (*disponit*) all things in form.63 What comes into being as a result, consequently, does so precisely as reflecting divine Wisdom variously in and by its beauty: “the supreme beauty (*summa pulchritudo*) of

---

61. *Sacr.* 1.1.6 (PL 176.190B–192D; Deferrari 10–13).


63. *Sacr.* 1.2.6 (PL 176.208B; Deferrari 31).
the work shows that the wisdom (sapientiam) of the founder is perfect."64 In the beauty of visible things, in various and myriad ways, “the invisible wisdom of God shines forth” (clarescat);65 and such beauties are “witnesses” (testes) and a “true and evident demonstration (argumentum) of divine wisdom.”66 So, for Hugh, there is an intimate and integral relation between the Second Person of the Trinity, divine wisdom, and created beauty. Hugh’s theological aesthetics are thus at once Trinitarian, Christological, and sapiential.

The Twin Aesthetic Problem of Sin and Fall: Moral Deformity and Epistemic Dis-function

As noted at the outset, for Hugh, the created beauty of the cosmos is, for the human, a sacrament of something analogous that is to occur within it. Humanity’s Edenic vocation was to perceive pulchrum esse without and then to achieve pulchrum esse within, in order to arrive at beatific intimacy with God. It is from this perspective that Hugh’s understanding of the fall and its implications are best appreciated. These, too, he construes aesthetically.

First, Hugh can describe the primordial fall itself as an aesthetic failure, in the sense of what he calls a failure to maintain proper “measure” and “mode.” The first is an excessive, immoderate desire for divine likeness—not “according to the imitation, as befits a creature,” but “inordinately,” “according to equality, which exceeds creaturely capacity.”67 The second is an impatience with the wise process of gradual formation that God intended. In Eden, Hugh concludes, the first humans exceeded proper measure on both counts.

In this therefore was the injustice of man: that he extended his desire beyond measure, both according to quality, when he wished to be made like his Creator, and according to time, when he hastened to forseize reward before merit. When, therefore, he desired the highest good, he desired good but he did not desire well, because he sought to seize this both immoderately and unreasonably.68

64. Sacr. 1.3.14 (PL 176.221A; Deferrari 46).
65. De tribus diebus 4.5 (Poirol 11.136; Feiss 64).
66. De tribus diebus 11.2–3 (Poirol 24.382–84; Feiss 71).
67. Sacr. 1.7.15 (PL 176.293C; Deferrari 127–28).
68. Sacr. 1.7.15 (PL 176.294A; Deferrari 128) (emphasis added).
Hugh stresses that nowhere were the first humans told that they should not desire what the forbidden fruit contained: knowledge of good and evil, or life. The sin, rather, was not submitting to the divine dictate regarding degree and timing. Original sin then was a violation of proper measure: it was excessive desire and irrational haste. In short, the rational creature was rapacious and impatient. The primal failure was not so much a wrong act, but an act done wrongly; not a bad deed, but a deed badly done.

Here, “transgressing measure” is a failure to maintain creaturely poise, a refusal of creaturely boundaries: “Every vice takes its origin from nature; since vice is nothing other than natural affection [having gone] beyond order and measure: it transgresses order, when it is moved toward that which it ought not [to be moved]; it exceeds measure, when it is moved more than it ought [to be moved].” In short, the original sin was a failure to preserve due measure, proper mode, and right order in being and acting.

Second, the results of the fall are twofold: a lost beauty of humanity’s very being and a lost capacity for genuine aesthetic experience of created beauty. Through the fall, humans became deformed and blind.

Regarding the first result, since Hugh thinks of creation as formation, with all the above-noted aesthetic connotations, it follows naturally that he construes its primordial undoing inversely, as de-formation and its resulting deformity. Hugh equates the violation of measure with lost beauty: by “averting itself (averti se) and transgressing measure” (transgrediendi mensuram), the rational creature became “shameful” (turpis), “depraved” (prava), and “disordered” (inordinata); “issuing forth” (efluens), it no longer “held fast to the mode and law of its beauty” (non tenens modum et legem pulchritudinis suae). Again, sin is that which “vitiates good nature and takes away its beauty and integrity” (pulchritudinem et integritatem). The fallen rational creature is no longer formata and formosa but is now deformed and disfigured. After the fall, it no longer has “its form or comeliness or beauty, for which it should have been loved and brought to glory.”

But sin and its deforming impact also affect the rational creature’s

69. Sacr. 1.7.6 (PL 176.289B; Deferrari 123).
70. Miscellanea 1.50 (PL 177.501C–D).
71. Sacr. 1.7.21 (PL 176.296D; Deferrari 131).
72. Sacr. 1.7.10 (PL 176.291B; Deferrari 125).
73. Sacr. 1.7.16 (PL 176.294C; Deferrari 129).
own aesthetic capacities, its own ability to perceive the created physical world aright. If the bodily senses had not lost their integrity in the fall, they would have easily facilitated the mind’s perception of divine truth from the visible, external creation.\textsuperscript{74} But now, because “the instrument for conceiving truth is lacking in the vigor of integrity,” “the light of the truth is taken away from the mind,” such that, “deprived of its integrity, it cannot drink in pure truth without the confusion of error.”\textsuperscript{75} The result is ignorance, especially of God; the rational creature has lost the “knowledge of invisible good from his mind,” and the “sight of visible things” has changed from “spiritual delight to the concupiscence of the flesh.”\textsuperscript{76} Paul’s statement in Romans 1:20, accordingly, that “the invisible things of God are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood by the things that are made,” no longer holds true for the fallen rational creature.\textsuperscript{77}

Thus the predicament of fallen humanity before the beauty of the creation is that humanity is no longer able to admire it correctly. In an oft-cited passage, Hugh compares the beauty of creation to a manuscript beautifully illuminated by God himself:

For this whole sensible world is a kind of book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power, and each creature is a kind of figure, not invented by human convention, but established by the divine will to manifest and in some way signify the invisible wisdom of God.\textsuperscript{78}

But Hugh continues:

However, just as when an unlettered person sees an open book and notices the shapes but does not recognize the letters, so stupid and carnal people, who are not aware of the things of God, see on the outside the beauty in these visible creatures, but they do not understand its meaning. On the other hand, a spiritual person can discern all things. When he considers externally the beauty of the work, he understands internally how wondrous is the wisdom of the Creator. Therefore, there is no one who does not find God’s works wonderful, but the foolish person admires only their appearance, whereas the wise person,

\textsuperscript{74} Sacr. 1.7.32 (PL 176.302B–C; Deferrari 137).
\textsuperscript{75} Sacr. 1.7.34 (PL 176.302D–303A; Deferrari 138); Sacr. 1.7.27 (PL 176.297C; Deferrari 133); Sacr. 1.7.32 (PL 176.302B–C; Deferrari 137).
\textsuperscript{76} Adnotatiunculae elucidatoriae in threnos Jeremiae (PL 175.255B–322B), at 271B–C.
\textsuperscript{77} Sacr. 1.7.33 (PL 176.302C–D; Deferrari 138).
\textsuperscript{78} De tribus diebus 4.3 (Poirel 9.94–98; Feiss 63).
through what he sees externally, explores the deeper intent of the divine wisdom, just as in one and the same writing, one person notices the color or shape of the figures, whereas another praises their meaning and signification. 79

In this light, Hugh’s pointed question from after his extended meditation on the beauty of creation—“Who does not see it?”—is a complex question. In one sense, every person can see it at least on the surface. But at a deeper level, the fallen person cannot see it aright, does not know how to read the book, is blind—senseless to its full significance. As Grover Zinn has put it, “fallen man is now deaf and blind … and no longer perceives the world as a symbol revealing the Creator … [and is] unable to read the book of creation.” 80

A Sapiential Aesthetic II: The Beauty of Wisdom in Salvation History

The same sapiential aesthetic noted above in regard to creation appears in Hugh’s view of God’s saving activity in time, ordering all of history to its end.

[Wisdom] reaches forth from end to end mightily, in order that by its power it might contain evil within measure [ad mensuram], and that evil might be restrained to order [ad ordinem] by reason [ratio], lest corruption extend itself to the end destroying everything, or confusion pour itself out to the extreme, deforming [deformans] everything. For this reason, therefore, wisdom reaches forth everywhere mightily, subjecting evil to its domination: and whatever that [wickedness] of corruption brought to confusion, this Wisdom converts to the beauty [ad decorem] of its works by a marvelous law [lege mirabili] and by a secret disposition [secretaque dispositione], bringing this about from something not beautiful [ex non pulchro], so that what is beautiful [pulchrum] becomes most beautiful [pulcherrimum], and that which is constituted good arises from that which is not good, in the consummation of the good. 81

Evident here is wisdom’s power to form the beauty of the whole, not only by secretly ordering and marvelously disposing “all things pleasingly (suaviter),” “without violence,” “without tumult,” and “without coercion”

79. De tribus diebus 4.3 (Poirel 9.94–98; Feiss 63).
81. In Salomonis Ecclesiasten homiliae (PL 175.113–256), at 188D–189A.
into a “most peaceful (pacatissimo) kingdom,” characterized “by justice,” but by raising all things to a mode of existence that is a consummation exceeding what was originally granted in creation.\textsuperscript{82} Not only does the ugly become beautiful, but the beautiful becomes most beautiful—not merely a return but an advance. God does this with sapiential art, wisely disposing all things, gradually, within and over time. The goal is in fact a greater good, a greater beauty than that which was present at the beginning of creation, even pre-lapsarian creation. Though divine power could have accomplished this instantaneously, divine wisdom ordained that the “renewal (innovatio) of human life which is accomplished through the grace of Christ until the end of the world,”\textsuperscript{83} occur gradually, in time, through the course of history. In this way, “the divine economy of our restoration” is “supremely well-ordered.”\textsuperscript{84}

**Paschal Mystery as Aesthetic Solution: Reformation in Christ, Becoming Beautiful in the Son**

If creation’s fall consists in some sense in the loss of beautifying forma, then salvation will fittingly entail the restoration of forma, or re-form, and it will fittingly occur through that very same Form of Wisdom that formed it in the first place. At the center of this aesthetic theology of salvation history is the Incarnation and the cross (anticipating Bonaventure again). Here too Hugh’s sapiential aesthetic is in view—“when He put on beauty, that is to say, when He took flesh, unspotted, stainless, fair flesh from a virgin body.”\textsuperscript{85}

This sapiential soteriology is perhaps most apparent in Hugh’s unique deployment of the biblical imagery of the “book of life,” noted above. If the original creation could be compared to a book, the book of wisdom, written by the finger of God, the divine response to the fall is the wise writing of another “book”!

\textsuperscript{82. In Salomonis Ecclesiasten homiliae (PL 175.189A–B).}
\textsuperscript{83. De scripturis et scriptoris sacris (PL 175.9–28), at 17 (24C).}
\textsuperscript{84. De archa Noe, 4.3 (Sicard 93.38; CSVM 129). Critical text: Hugonis de Sancto Victore: De archa Noe, Libellus de formatione arche, ed. Patrice Sicard, CCCM 176 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001). English translation: Hugh of St. Victor: Selected Spiritual Writings, trans. a Religious of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, intro. Aelred Squire, Classics of the Contemplative Life (London: Faber and Faber, 1962). Future references to Sicard’s text will include page and line number; the English translation will be abbreviated as CSVM.}
\textsuperscript{85. De archa Noe 1.5 (Sicard 26.60–62; CSVM 66).}
God willed afterwards [i.e., after the fall] that [a book of wisdom] be written still outwardly, yet in a different way, that wisdom might be seen more manifestly and be recognized more perfectly, that the eye of man might be illumined to the second writing, since it had been darkened to the first. Therefore he made a second work.86

This second “text” is the Incarnation: “He assumed flesh, not losing divinity, and was placed as a book written internally and externally; externally in humanity, internally in divinity…. Internally, ‘in the beginning was the Word’ (Jn 1:1), externally, ‘the Word became flesh’ (Jn 1:14).”87 Hugh sums up: “Therefore, there was one book written once internally and twice externally; first externally through the creation of visible things; second externally through the assumption of flesh.”88 The internal writing is none other than hypostatic Wisdom itself: “the Wisdom by which God made all his works … in which from all eternity He had written beforehand all the things that He was going to make” in time, namely, “the Book of Life” (Rv 5).89 In relation to theological aesthetics, the primary purpose of the “second book” is not only to reveal but also to heal human beings, both of their blindness and of their deformity. Only the visible appearance of the God-Man both heals spiritual blindness and reveals divine Beauty.90

The Spiritual Life as Aesthetic Re-Formation toward Pulchrum Esse

As in his discussion of the original pre-lapsarian human situation, Hugh’s view of post-lapsarian re-formation orders these two aspects in a particular sequence: restored capacity for true aesthetic perception leads to the (re-)acquisition of moral-ontological beauty (pulchrum esse). That is, the healing of aesthetic blindness facilitates the re-forming of moral-ontological deformity. In the post-lapsarian “devastation,” Hugh now situates all the traditional aspects of salvation, including conversion, healing,

86. Sacr. 1.6.5 (PL 176.266D–267A; Deferrari 97–98).
87. Sacr. 1.6.5 (PL 176.267A; Deferrari 98).
88. Sacr. 1.6.5 (PL 176.267A; Deferrari 98).
89. De archa Noe 2.10 (Sicard 48.10–12; CSVM 88).
90. “For to be sure by its appearance nature showed its Creator, but it could not illumine the eyes that contemplated it. But the humanity of the Savior was both medicine, so that the blind might receive sight, and at the same time instruction, so that the ones who saw might recognize the truth” (Commentariorum in hierarchiam Coelestem [PL 175: 923–1154], at 926C–D, my translation).
restoration, and even elevation, within the larger framework of aesthetic re-formation. In one work, Hugh addresses his own soul from this perspective, saying: “You do not know how vile you have been in the past, how polluted, how deformed (deformis) and squalid, how unkempt and dissipated, plainly a horror and an enormity to all.” Shortly thereafter, the soul responds: “How can I please him in my present deformity (deformitate), which is even revolting to me? O ancient stains, O stains that are ugly and disfiguring, how long will you remain?”

Continuing in an aesthetic vein, Hugh consistently adopts an architectural metaphor for soteriological re-formation, both the process and the result. He likens the soul to a cathedral (literal instances of which were being built in the Paris of his time), gradually built up, in conformity to the Forma sapientiae, into a beautiful structure in which the divine presence may dwell: “For the faithful soul is the true temple of God (templum Dei) by the covenant of virtues which is built (aedificata), as it were, by a kind of structure (structura) of spiritual stones, where faith makes the foundation, hope constructs the building, charity imposes the finish.” For love, “like an adorning color, embellishes the building by its virtue.” After laying the foundation and constructing the building, one should, “through the loveliness of morality, paint the structure over as with the most beautiful of colors.”

Consistent with his theocentric orientation, Hugh insists that this soul-construction is first and foremost a piece of divine artistry: “[The Holy Spirit] will come to you, in order to build a mansion in you. For he will not find it when he comes, but he will come in order to build.” At the same time, according to the sapiential Christology described above, the architectural forma of this structure is Christ: “For in truth [Christ] is Himself the wisdom whereof it is said, ‘Wisdom hath builded her house.’” But this work is not exclusively God’s; the human is invited to join in too: “You will build a house (fabricabis domum) for the Lord your

92. Arrha (OHSV 1.278:800–803; Herbert 34).
93. Sacr. 2.5.1 (PL 176.439C; Deferrari 279).
94. De arca Noe 1.3 (Sicard 9.4–7; CSVM 50).
God in and of yourself. He will be the craftsman (artifex), but He chooses other builders (artifices) too.”98 As C. Stephen Jaeger notes, “Hugh clearly thought of spiritual formation in terms of the model of human handcraft…. The finished man, reformed to the image of a new life, is the work of art.”99

One so reconstructed “embraces the beauty of morality [moralitatis gratiam],”100 and acquires “virtue to adorn [the] soul.”101 Moral beauty, the “beauty of the spiritual life” (spiritualis vitae honestas), is central to Hugh’s aesthetics, and this pertains to the whole person, body and soul.102 There is “both beauty without and beauty within, and wholeness without and wholeness within, and when beauty is removed, ugliness and turpitude ensue.”103

There is an exterior beauty in a well-ordered and disciplined manner of life. Hugh consistently describes disciplina thus: moral knowledge “pertains to the institution of living rightly and becomingly (recte et honeste).”104 “Discipline is good and becoming (bona et honesta) behavior,” as well as “the ordered movement (motus ordinatus) of all the members, and a fitting disposition (dispositio decens) in all habits and actions.”105 A “good act” has “external beauty (decorem).”106 The literal walls of Jerusalem stand tropologically for the “discipline and beauty (disciplinam et decorem) of external good works.”107 Only with difficulty do the obdurate receive “the form of discipline (formam disciplinae) and the appearance of loveliness (speciem honestatis).”108 One should pursue the “the beauty of chastity” (decora castitate).109 There is even “adornment of beauty and integrity of wholeness” that pertains to the body itself.110

98. De archa Noe 4.1 (Sicard 87:30–34; CSVM 123).
100. Didascalicon 5.7 (Buttimer 105:4; Taylor 128). The phrase is from Gregory the Great. See Taylor’s notes in The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor, 220n23.
101. De archa Noe, 1.3 (Sicard 10:39–40; CSVM 52).
102. Sacr. 2.3.18 (PL 176.433A; Deferrari 272).
103. Miscellanea 1.186 (PL 175:582D–583A).
105. De institutione novitiorum 10 (OHSV 1.48:51); De institutione novitiorum 10 (OHSV 1.48:451–55).
106. Adnotatiunculæ elucdatoriae in threnos Jeremiae (PL 175.276A).
110. Miscellanea 1.186 (PL 175:582D).
Such external decorum, though, corresponds to a more profound loveliness of soul—which surpasses “the loveliness and beauty of all visible things.”111 Before the fall, man was “most beautiful (speciosus) through the innocence of his conscience,” until guilt rendered him “most dark and equally ugly” (foedam).112 For “every soul is turned either away from or toward God.” To be turned away is to be removed from God, and the greater the distance of separation, the greater the ugliness of soul. Conversely, to be “near to” (propinqua) God is to be “beautiful” (speciosa), although not yet totally; but to be “next to” (proxima) God is to be “totally beautiful” (tota speciosa).113

Mary, the Mother of God, is for Hugh the paradigm of both dimensions of this moral beauty: “This is total beauty: beauty in body, beauty in mind. In the body, the integrity of virginity makes you beautiful; in the mind the virtue of humility exhibits beauty…. For in you beauty lacks nothing which it does not possess: decor obtains over all; formositas holds over all, honestas rules over all.”114 Paul Rorem notes, following Bernadette Jollès, that Hugh’s interest here is “Mary as an exemplar for all the faithful.”115 Fassler confirms the extension of moral beauty to all: “for Hugh, beauty…. is found…. in human beings. Hugh’s church…. is beautiful for its saints.”116

As before the fall, the goal in all of this is the state of pulchrum esse: “When you did not exist, he loved you so that you would; afterward, when you became ugly, he loved you so as to restore you to beauty (pulchram).”117 The whole moral life—indeed, the whole re-forming process—is beautifying and beatifying.

**Hugh’s “Copernican Revolution” in Theological Aesthetics**

Evident in all the foregoing is the importance Hugh attaches to the pulchrum esse of the rational creature. What is not yet fully apparent is why. As noted above, one reason is that the more the creature recovers pul-

---

112. *Adnotatiunculae elucidatoriae in threnos Jeremiae* (PL 175.271B).
117. *Arrha* (OHSV 1.238:498ff.; Herbert 26ff.).
Beauty in Hugh of St. Victor

chrism esse, the more it can perceive divine beauty in created beauties; that is, the more it is re-formed in accord with the “second book,” namely, the Incarnate Christ, the more it is able to read the “first book,” the visible creation. The deepest rationale for Hugh’s concern with pulchrum esse, however, is that the rational creature’s beauty is divinely intended, in the final analysis, to please the Creator’s aesthetic sensibilities. For the Victorine, God desires to delight, to take aesthetic pleasure in the beauty of creation, and especially in the beauty of the rational creature, because it is a created manifestation and reflection of God’s own beauty. Created beauty is for God and for God’s aesthetic delight.

For Hugh, God’s love of beauty is both interior (ad intra) and exterior (ad extra), and in both, the above-noted link between beauty and wisdom is key. In the western, Augustinian tradition of Trinitarian theology to which Hugh is heir, God’s self-knowledge and self-love constitute the intra-trinitarian life of the three Persons. For his part, Hugh consistently construes this in sapiential terms: “The one who always has had Wisdom has always loved Wisdom.”118 But here he accentuates the note of aesthetic pleasure within these Trinitarian relations. God is supremely “pleased with what he is.”119 Hugh focuses on the relation between the Father and the Son, as he associates with, or appropriates to, the Son the attribute of Wisdom. Divine pleasure is a function simultaneously of the one divine essence shared between the persons and of the personal distinction between the Father and the Son. Invoking the Father’s words of approbation of the Son from the gospel account of the Transfiguration of Christ: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased [mihi complacui]” (Mt 17:5), Hugh interprets the Father’s words thus: “The Father says: ‘I am well pleased in him,’ that is, ‘what pleases me regarding myself is in him, not outside of him, because what I am he is. For, since I am not other than he, I cannot be pleased outside of him: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.’”120

Shared essence establishes the basis for taking pleasure—the beauty of divine wisdom;121 distinction of persons establishes the possibility

---

119. De tribus diebus 23.2 (Poirel 56–57.996–1000; Feiss 88).
120. De tribus diebus 22.2 (Poirel 55–56.972–82; Feiss 87).
121. “Since, then, this Divine nature is beyond any particular good, and to the good the good is an object of love, it follows that when It looks within Itself, It wishes for what It contains and contains that which It wishes…. For the Supreme Being is love, seeing that the Beautiful is necessarily lovable to those who recognize it, and the Deity does recognize it, and so this recognition becomes love, that which He recognizes being essentially beautiful…. God’s life will
of one taking delight in the beauty of another. 122 Ad intra, in short, the Father does not merely love, but takes what can only be called aesthetic pleasure and delight in the sapiential beauty of the Son.

Hugh immediately relates this back to the beauty of creation, which, as a work of divine Wisdom, reflects Wisdom’s beauty. The Father delights in the beauty of his own consubstantial Wisdom for its own sake and, by extension, delights in the beauty of Wisdom’s created works because they reflect and participate in it: “when it is said that the Father of wisdom takes delight (complaceat sibi in illa) in that wisdom, let it be far from our minds to believe that God loves (diligat) His wisdom on account of the works which He did through it, when, on the contrary, He loves (amet) all His works only on account of Wisdom.” Continuing his exegesis of Matthew 17:5, Hugh explains:

[The Father] did not say He was pleased with the earth or the heaven, nor with the sun and moon and stars, not even with the angels and what things are the most excellent in creatures, because even these things, though in their own way they are pleasing, nevertheless cannot please except in Him and through Him. They are the more worthy of my love (amore), the more closely they approach His likeness. Therefore, God does not love (diligit) Wisdom on account of His works, but His works on account of [his] Wisdom. In Wisdom is all beauty and truth, and the whole of it is desire, invisible light and immortal life. Its appearance is so desirable that it can delight the eyes of God (ut oculos Dei delectare possit). 123

Ad extra, the Father takes pleasure in the sapiential works of the Son, both in his Incarnation—“this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”—and in his works of creation, insofar as these participate in and reflect the divine Beauty of uncreated Wisdom. Strikingly, Hugh continues to stress

have its activity in love; which life is thus in itself beautiful, and is essentially of a loving disposition towards the Beautiful, and receives no check to this activity of love” (Gregory of Nyssa, De anima et resurrectione, vol. 5 of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994, reprint], p. 450).

122. “One might say, to begin with, that for Gregory all knowledge consists in theoria of the reflected, and this is in some sense so even within the life of God: the Son is the eternal image in which the Father contemplates and loves his essence, and thus the Father can never be conceived of without his Son, for were he alone he would have no light, truth, wisdom, life, holiness or power…. God himself is, one is tempted to say, an eternal play of the invisible and visible, the hidden Father made luminously manifest in the infinite icon of his beauty, God ‘speculating’ upon himself by way of his absolute self-giving in the other” (David Bentley Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the Vestigia Trinitatis,” Modern Theology 18, no. 4 [2002]: 541–61, 547–48).

123. De tribus diebus 22.2 (Poirel 55–56.972–82; Feiss 87).
God’s own experience of aesthetic delight in divine beauty, wherever it appears.

Hugh then situates the entire re-formation of the rational creature and, indeed, the whole history of salvation, within this framework of divine pleasure-taking. Again, the Father speaks:

Whatever pleases me does so in Him and through Him. For He is the Wisdom through whom I made all things. In Him, I have eternally arranged whatever I have made in time. And the more perfectly I see each work of mine to be in harmony with that first arrangement, the more fully I love it…. Through Him … the creation of all creatures becomes praiseworthy and pleasing in my sight. In Him, I consider all the works I do, and I cannot not love what I see is similar to Him whom I love. The only one that offends me is the one who departs from his likeness.124

Hugh then concludes his discussion of intra-divine aesthetics with an urgent exhortation to the rational creature to be con-formed to Christ in order to recover the pleasing divine likeness:

Therefore, if you wish to please me, be like Him, Listen to Him (Mt 17:5). And if by chance you have departed from His likeness by acting badly, return by imitating Him…. Listen to Him. He is the creator and He is also the redeemer…. Listen to Him. For He is the form (forma); He is the medicine; He is the example (exemplar); he is the remedy. Listen to Him. It would have been a happier situation to have always maintained His likeness, but now it will be no less glorious to return to imitation of Him. Listen to Him.125

Hugh construes salvation in terms of Christological re-formation, renewed participation in the forma of Wisdom, and thus in the sapiential beauty of Christ. The gradual beautification of creation is nothing other than the progressive assimilation of the creature to the beauty of the Incarnate Son, so as to be a source of divine pleasure.

For Hugh, in short, God is the first and last Aesthete. The very life of the Triune God is both an eternal and, derivatively, a temporal act of aesthetic enjoyment. God is the Lover of beauty and delights in it both ad intra and ad extra.126

124. De tribus diebus 24.2 (Poirel 58.1031–40; Feiss 89).
125. De tribus diebus 24.3 (Poirel 58–59.1041–43, 1048–54; Feiss 89).
126. A strikingly similar notion is found in Athanasius of Alexandria’s Contra Arianos, as Khaled Anatolios describes: “Using the felicitous biblical image of God’s delight in Wisdom,
Human Aesthetics on the Trinitarian Model

In light of Hugh’s account of intra-divine aesthetic delight, his corresponding account of human aesthetic experience acquires interest. He finds the highest human analogue of the divine Trinity not in the mind’s knowing and loving of itself but in the aesthetic enjoyment of something outside of itself:

The rational mind is one and generates from its one self one understanding. Sometimes when it sees how fine, true, suitable and pleasant something is, it immediately loves it and takes pleasure in it. Simultaneously it sees and is awestruck and is amazed that it could have found something like that. It would be very glad to gaze upon that thing always, to have it always, to enjoy it always, to delight in it always. That something pleases the mind through and because of itself. There is nothing beyond that something that the mind seeks, because in it the whole is loved. In it, contemplation of truth is delightful to see, pleasant to have, sweet to enjoy.127

This is clearly an Augustinian “theological anthropology”—as *imago Trinitatis*, the soul consists of mind (memory) producing both intellect and will. But the “second Augustine” goes out of his way to inflect it aesthetically, to stress the theme of pleasure-taking and enjoyment in the experience of something beautiful—the soul “loves and takes pleasure in” whatever is “fine, true, suitable and pleasant.” Hugh here grounds his conception of theological aesthetics for human beings in the more fundamental Trinitarian aesthetics.

Athanasius speaks of God’s delight in the world as derivative of and embraced within the intra-divine delight of the relation of the Father and the Son: “Therefore all the earth is filled with his knowledge. For one is the knowledge of the Father, through the Son, and of the Son, from the Father, and the Father rejoices in the Son and in this same joy, the Son delights in the Father, saying, “I was beside him, his delight. Day by day, I rejoiced in his presence” (Prov. 8:30).… When was it then that the Father did not rejoice? But if he has always rejoiced, then there was always the one in whom he rejoiced. In whom, then, does the Father rejoice (cf. Prov. 8:30), except by seeing himself in his own image, which is the Word? Even though, as it is written in these same Proverbs, he also “delighted in the sons of people, having consummated the world” (Prov. 8:31), yet this also has the same meaning. For he did not delight in this way by acquiring delight as an addition to himself, but it was upon seeing the works that were made according to his own image, so that the basis of this delight also is God’s own Image.’ ([*Contra Arianos*] 2.82 [English translation: Anatolios, *Athanasius* (Routledge, 1998), 174–75])” (Retrieving *Nicene: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011], 118).

CONCLUSION: THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND DIVINE-HUMAN INTIMACY

Arguably, for Hugh, being an object of divine pleasure is the creaturely condition for the possibility of the deepest intimacy with the Creator. First, the soul’s deformity impedes its ability for the kind of aesthetic experience that would lead it to knowledge and love of its Creator. But secondly, it is the presence of divine beauty in the soul that draws the Creator to the creature and facilitates their union: “it is not fitting to join deformed things (deformia) to beautiful ones.”128 Again, the sinner “does not have its form or comeliness or beauty, for which it should have been loved and brought to glory.”129

To capture this final aesthetic dimension, Hugh adopts a nuptial metaphor: “God is in the world as ruler...; He is in the Church as head of the family...; He is in the soul as the bridegroom in the wedding-chamber.”130

Addressing himself in one place, Hugh says:

Finally, you began to doubt whether in your deformity [deformitate], which you now endure (even though you willingly subjected yourself to it), you could be loved by him. Yet do you not remember that once you were wholly ugly and yet beloved? If then he deigned to love you when you were wholly disfigured and having no comeliness, how much more does he now desire you, now that you are beginning to be adorned and to put off your disfigurement?131

The soul-bride’s recovery of beauty facilitates union with her Beloved: “How can you therefore seek to go so quickly into that chamber of modesty and chasteness, unless by some care and zeal you first regain your former comeliness (decorum)?”132 The soul’s re-formed beauty draws God into it as a Bridegroom to a Bride: God “would not have been captivated by you unless a singular comeliness (singularis decor) in you, admirable beyond that of others, had attracted him.”133 What does your beauty—“so sublime, so decorous”134—signify, “but that he who clothed you has

129. Sacr. 1.7.16 (PL 176.294C; Deferrari 129).
130. De archa Noe, 1.2 (Sicard 7.46-8.48; CSVM 49).
132. Arrha (OHSV 1.262:565ff.; Herbert 28ff.).
133. Arrha (OHSV 1.234:126-29; Herbert 16).
134. “Quam sublimis, et quam decoras” (Arrha [OHSV 1.254:440; Herbert 24]).
been preparing you as his spouse for his bridal chamber”?¹³⁵ This is the goal of Hugh of St. Victor’s theological aesthetics.

Richard Viladesau construes medieval theological aesthetics, including Hugh’s, as governed by the Neoplatonic paradigm of ascent from the visible, through the intelligible and moral, ultimately to divine beauty. The focus is on perceiving, on “seeing the form” and then using, rather, “climbing,” all the levels of created beauty to arrive finally at the vision of divine Beauty.¹³⁶ This notion is undeniably present in Hugh’s theological aesthetics. With many of his premodern colleagues, he can say: “Let us seek through the beauty of created things that beauty that is the most beautiful of all that is beautiful.”¹³⁷ But for Hugh this is situated within a wider theological framework, which alters it significantly, perhaps even radically.

The most important feature of Hugh’s framework is its theocentrism. Arguably, modern theological aesthetics assumes the early modern “turn to the subject.” Not only aesthetic theory itself, but even modern historiography of premodern theological aesthetics has assumed an anthropological center, wherein everything revolves around the human experience of beauty. For his part, however, Hugh positions God in the center and assumes as fundamental and paradigmatic the divine experience of beauty. In this, ironically, Hugh’s theological aesthetics executes a kind of “Copernican revolution” in theological aesthetics; he inverts the paradigm. Human aesthetic experience for him is derivative from and subordinate to God’s “aesthetic experience,” so to speak. Here, God is the primary Aesthete. First and foremost, God experiences, enjoys, and delights in Beauty, first ad intra, and then ad extra, “before” it is something that rational creatures encounter and into which they are beatifyingly invited.

Hugh integrates all the other aspects of his theological aesthetics within this theocentric framework. First, he consistently construes divine activity, in both creation and salvation, in aesthetic terms. God is Artifex, not only in creation, but also in salvation, in the gradual process of re-forming creatures to be both formata and formosa. Hugh revels in

¹³⁵. Arrha (OHSV 1.254:441f; Herbert 24f).
¹³⁷. De tribus diebus 4.5 (Poirel 11.130–32; Feiss 64).
perceiving this divine artistry in act. Second, and perhaps most similar to the modern paradigm, there is a role for “aesthetic experience,” for the pleasure of the perception of beauty, and for its revelatory capacity to mediate an encounter with divine Beauty itself. But the Beauty here encountered is not a passive Object of human experience; not a Reality called Divine Beauty inertly present and waiting to be perceived by the human aesthete. Rather, it is Beauty in person, the Person of the Son, who is encountered as Artisan, beautifully rendering the beauty of creation and salvation, and as Bridegroom, attractively wooing the rational creature into the personal encounter and intersubjective union of the bridal chamber. Here, thirdly, is the place of moral beauty, both of body and soul. In modern, anthropocentric aesthetics, this aspect is often seen as subordinate to the first; that is, in order for the human aesthete to perceive and experience beauty fully, she must first acquire moral beauty as a kind of precondition for aesthetic perception. Purity of heart allows purity of vision. Here too, though, Hugh’s theocentrism inverts the paradigm. He does allow that moral deformity causes epistemic disfunction. But for him, the moral beauty of the creature is first and foremost for God’s sake, for the sake of the divine Lover, who desires a beautiful bride. Moral beauty is thus not the condition for the possibility of vision, but the condition for the possibility of divine pleasure-taking and ultimately for the intimacy of divine-human union.
Albert the Great does not often use the word “beauty” (pulchritudo) or its cognates in his Super Ethica commentum et quaestiones. Nevertheless, the few places where he does use it serve to advance two of the German Dominican’s key moral-philosophical findings: namely, that human happiness consists in contemplative activity, and that such activity can only be practiced fully in heaven. The second finding is a consequence for Albert of another: namely, that the contemplative activity practiced by any human being on earth is entangled with his earthly body in a way that limits and interrupts it. As we shall see, one way that Albert builds support for these findings is by denigrating bodily beauty and bodily pleasure while extolling intellectual beauty and intellectual pleasure.

Albert’s dim view of bodily beauty and bodily pleasure is striking, considering that he builds his moral philosophy upon a spine furnished by Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. Given how often and how favor-

1. For some discussion of Albert’s intellectualism in ethics and anthropology, including discussion of the meaning and importance for Albert of the formula homo inquantum homo solus est intellectus, see Henryk Anzulewicz, “Anthropology: The Concept of Man in Albert the Great,” in A Companion to Albert the Great: Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences, ed. Irven M. Resnick (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 340–44.

2. For a defense of the view that one finds in the Super Ethica an articulation of Albert’s independent moral-philosophical thought—albeit one whose presentation is subsumed to the presentation and defense of Aristotle’s moral-philosophical thought—see Martin J. Tracey, “Albert’s Moral Thought,” in A Companion to Albert the Great: Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences, ed. Irven M. Resnick (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 340–44.
ably Aristotle’s *Ethics* speaks of beauty, both bodily and intellectual, one might expect more extensive and favorable discussion of it in Albert’s *Super Ethica*. Consider the following partial inventory of claims Aristotle makes about beauty (*to kalon*) in the *Ethics*: the subjects studied in moral philosophy are beauty and justice (*NE* 1094b13); the function of a human being consists in the good and beautiful performance of the most beautiful activities (*NE* 1098a15); virtuous activity is beautiful (*NE* 1099a23); virtuous activity produces something beautiful (*NE* 1099a32); virtuous activity is for the sake of the beautiful (*NE* 1115b12); and the ultimate goal of virtuous activity is what is most beautiful (*NE* 1099b24). Beauty clearly figures prominently within Aristotle’s formulation of several of his central moral doctrines; he uses it in his account of the ultimate end, the human function, and virtuous activity—its nature, product, and motive. Not surprisingly there is a rich body of scholarship on *kalon* in Aristotle’s thought. Scholars have seen in Aristotle’s uses of the word a means to resolve a number of fundamental questions, most famously the question of whether and to what extent Aristotle’s thought is altruistic.3

Much of the scholarly discussion addresses how kalon is to be translated.4 Although Aristotle does sometimes use the word to mean beauty and even bodily beauty, he more commonly uses it to denote what is fine, noble, right, or good.5 The debate surrounding Aristotle’s uses of kalon is largely premised on the conviction that, although the word often means “right” or “good,” Aristotle has other words for right or good, most notably the word “agnoston,” and given what a careful and rigorous

---


writer he is, there is likely some significance to his choice of using kalon where he does, even though Aristotle himself never directly explains it.\(^6\) The scholarship ponders what that significance may be.

In comparison with Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Albert’s *Super Ethica* speaks relatively little and largely negatively about pulchritudo. Why is that? The main reason is accidental: Albert reads Aristotle’s work in the Latin translation prepared by Robert Grosseteste, and that translation typically renders both kalon and agathon by the same word: *bonum* (good).\(^7\) The puzzles concerning the signification of kalon that intrigue contemporary readers are thus effectively invisible to Albert.

While some of Aristotle’s remarks about beauty are lost on Albert, several are not. Indeed, as we shall see, Albert finds within some of Aristotle’s remarks about beauty reinforcement for some of his own key moral-philosophical doctrines. That may owe in part to the fact that Aristotle discusses the subject in noteworthy ways throughout the *Ethics*, including within his treatments of happiness (Book 1), virtue (Book 2), choice (Book 3), intellectual virtue (Book 6), and pleasure (Books 7 and 10).

A first locus where Albert’s Latin Aristotle does speak of beauty (pulchritudo) comes in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.8. In that chapter, Aristotle discusses an inscription at a temple on Delos that seems to suggest that what is most beautiful differs from what is most useful and from what is most pleasant. Aristotle discusses the inscription because it appears to undermine his thesis that happiness, or the ultimate goal of human life, is an activity that is at once most beautiful, most useful, and most pleasant. Aristotle’s discussion of the Delian inscription moves Albert to ask whether happiness indeed possesses maximal beauty, utility, and pleasure. Within the *quaestio* he devotes to the matter, Albert argues in defense of Aristotle’s view. His argument takes the form of a refutation of three objections.

The first objection invokes an authority from Dionysius’s *Divine Names* claiming that beauty consists in consonance and clarity (*conso-


\(^7\) For a reflection on some of the philosophical choices that Grosseteste made as a translator of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and their influence upon thinkers who relied on his translation, see Jean Dunbabin, “Robert Grosseteste as Translator, Transmitter, and Commentator: The *Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Traditio* 28 (1972): 460–72.
nantia et claritas). Consonance and clarity, notes the objector, are features of composites; they are qualities found in the arrangement of a composite's parts. It follows that happiness—more exactly, the civic happiness that is the ultimate goal of our earthly lives—cannot be most beautiful, because happiness, as ultimate, must be something simple and noncomposite. Albert's reply admits that civic happiness is indeed something simple and noncomposite, and for that reason, as the objector rightly contends, it cannot literally possess beauty. However happiness can and does possess beauty “metaphorically” (metaphorice) in the fittingness (convenientia) of the perfection it brings to the perfectible being who attains it. Albert clarifies later in *Super Ethica* the sense in which civic happiness is noncomposite and simple. It is noncomposite because it consists in the full actualization of a single power of the human soul, the intellect, when that power is employed in the activity of contemplation. That activity is “simple” in the sense that it occurs without dependence on any bodily organ.

The second objection turns on an apparent conflict between an authority from Augustine and another authority from Dionysius. The authorities concern what makes one good more perfectly good than another. For Augustine, the perfection of goods involves mode, species, and order, whereas for Dionysius it involves beauty, goodness, and light. Their divergent accounts are also at odds with Aristotle's own, which involves beauty, utility, and pleasure. How, asks the objector, are the three accounts to be reconciled? As he often does in reply to objections within the *Super Ethica*, Albert provides two different answers. His first reply asserts without explanation that the claims of both Augustine and Dio-


nysius about the perfection of goods are reducible to Aristotle’s claim. His second reply—which Albert himself says is the better of the two—contends that Augustine and Dionysius are discussing the perfection of one particular good, God, who is the sole uncaused good, whereas Aristotle is discussing the perfection of caused goods, and in particular the perfection of the best of caused human goods, happiness.\(^{13}\) As in his reply to the first objection, Albert’s reflection here also yields a significant conclusion about happiness: namely, that happiness must be a caused good. While that conclusion is one Albert first reaches elsewhere, the line of reasoning that leads him to it here is different; here it is a consequence of the premise that whatever else happiness may be, it is beautiful. Later in the *Super Ethica* Albert clarifies that, while human action is the cause of human happiness philosophically speaking, divine grace is its cause theologically speaking.\(^{14}\)

The third objection contends that happiness cannot be at once most beautiful, most beneficial, and most pleasant, since the best good cannot be what is most pleasant. The best good cannot be most pleasant, says the objector, because bodily pleasures are most pleasant and happiness is an intellectual activity that involves no bodily pleasure. Albert’s reply to this objection is much more expansive than his responses to the previous two. It begins with a general account of happiness or the perfect human good that distinguishes that good considered in itself from that good

\(^{13}\) “(4) Ad quartum dicendum, quod illa tria quae dicit Augustinus, possunt ad ista reduci, ut ordo referatur ad bonum, species ad pulchrum, modus ad delectabile, propter hoc quod dicit convenientiam quandam ad bonum esse. Vel melius dicitur, quod non reducuntur ad ista, quia illa inveniuntur in bono causato, secundum quod exit ab incausato et repraesentat ipsum; et sic non loquitur hic de bono” (*Super Ethica* 1.9).

\(^{14}\) “Dicendum, quod contemplatio theologica in aliquo convenit cum philosophica et in aliquo differt; unde non sunt omnino idem. Convenit enim in hoc quod etiam in theologica est inspectio per intellectum aliquorum spiritualium sine impedimento passionum ex parte subjecti et dubietatis ex parte fidei ordinata ad quiescendum in deo, quod est summa felicitas. Differt autem in habitu et in fine et in objecto. In habitu quidem, quia theologica contemplatur per lumen infusum a deo, sed philosophus per habitum sapientiae acquisitum; in fine, quia theologica point ultimum finem in contemplatio dei in patria, sed philosophus in visione, qua videtur aliquatenus in via; in objecto etiam non quantum ad substantiam, sed quantum ad modum, quia philosophus contemplatur deum, secundum quod habet ipsum ut quandam conclusionem demonstrativam, sed theologus contemplatur ipsum ut supra rationem et intellectum existentem” (*Super Ethica* 10.16). “Dicendum, quod operationes nostrae sunt causa felicitatis, de qua hic loquitur Philosophus. Nihilominus dicimus, quod deus est causa prima, a qua procedit omne bonum quod secundum operationes est virtutis vel artis vel propositi. Sed nos querimus hic causam propinquam” (*Super Ethica* 1.10).
considered in the human being who possesses it. Considered in itself, Albert argues, the best good cannot be “most useful,” because a thing is useful insofar as it facilitates the acquisition of something desirable beyond itself, but there is nothing desirable beyond happiness, which is the best good precisely because it satisfies desire completely. By contrast, the best good considered in the human being who possesses it can be most pleasant, although Albert here again stresses that the pleasure that attends happiness is not and cannot be a sensory pleasure. By way of clarification, he adds that the activity that constitutes happiness is, for the person performing it, a fitting, proper, and natural activity, and as such it is pleasant for her, albeit in a noncorporeal way. Her practice of that activity is also beautiful, insofar as it reflects the kind of clear thinking and orderliness of mind presupposed in the pursuit of what is truly good as opposed to what merely appears good to the senses.\textsuperscript{15} In \textit{Super Ethica} 1.9, Albert thus conceives beauty as a feature of both bodies and minds. Pleasure, too, in this question is imagined in material and mental ways. Albert contends that the best human activity is indeed most pleasant but insists that the pleasure that accompanies it must be purely spiritual or intellectual.

While Albert’s first discussion of beauty in \textit{Super Ethica} does not come before Chapter 9 of Book 1, his next discussion comes immediately in Chapter 10. The occasion for it is Aristotle’s \textit{dictum} that a person’s happiness is marred by the lack of certain external goods, and in particular by the lack of physical beauty. Albert considers several objections to that thesis. A first objection contends, contra Aristotle, that physical beauty offers no help in the performance of the virtuous activity that constitutes happiness, just as ugliness offers no impediment, and so the absence of physical beauty in no way mars a person’s happiness. Albert’s reply concedes that when ugliness is a feature of one’s body alone, it presents no impediment. However, physical ugliness is frequently a sign, he says, of an underlying interior defect—a bad disposition of the soul—and such interior defects do indeed impede felicific activity. In an effort to lend credence to that claim, Albert argues that the parts of the human body, such as the hands, serve as tools whose purpose is to enable the human person to put his mind’s thought in action. This relationship, he tells us,

\textsuperscript{15} “Vel secundum effectum, quem relinquit in ipso, quod est clarum esse in notitia hominum et dicitur ordinatum, et sic est pulchrum” (\textit{Super Ethica} 1.9).
helps to clarify why morons (moriones) and others incapable of learning (indisciplinabiles) so often possess ugly, deformed bodies—the defects of their minds, which make them incapable of forming intelligent thoughts, are reflected in the defects of their bodies, which are incapable of enacting what thoughts they do have. This phenomenon grounds Maimonides’s saying that “the person whose body is monstrous is also monstrous in soul.”\(^{16}\) It also suggests why ugly people cannot be effective rulers—a theory for which Albert finds Biblical corroboration within Samuel’s proclamation that Saul, precisely because he was beautiful and tall, was well suited to be king (1 Sm 10:23ff).\(^{17}\)

While Albert’s analysis of Aristotle’s dictum leads him to say some ludicrous things, it does not lead him to reflect any further on the subject that emerged from his analysis of Aristotle’s earlier remark about beauty: namely, the relation between pleasure and happiness. Albert does return to that subject, however, within a question occasioned by Aristotle’s statement, in \textit{Ethics} 2.3, that there are three objects of choice: the beautiful (kalon), the useful, and the pleasant. The good person is correct and the bad person is in error about each of these, Aristotle observes, and especially about pleasure—so much so that we can assess a person’s moral goodness by examining what pleases and pains him. Because Grosseteste here renders kalon as bonum, Albert finds no occasion to discuss beauty as such; his focus is Aristotle’s claim that a person’s pleasures and pain can serve as measure (mensura) of his moral character. Albert stresses that, to understand the truth of that claim, certain distinctions must be drawn, in particular a distinction between the pleasures of bodily sen-

\(^{16}\) For discussion of this idea and Albert’s uses of it, see Theodor W. Köhler, \textit{Homo animal nobilissimum: Konturen des spezifisch Menschen in der naturphilosophischen Aristoteleskommentierung des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts} (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 401–2.

\(^{17}\) “Ad primum vero dicendum, quod turpitudo, secundum quod est quaedam dispositio corporis tantum, non impedat actum felicitatis, sed secundum quod refertur ad interiorem defectum, cuius signum est, et ad exteriorum defectum, cuius frequenter est causa, efficit ad felicitatem. Magna enim turpitudo signum est pessimae complexionis, quae est ex pessima dispositione animae, quia, sicut dicit \textit{commentator} super \textit{librum de anima}, omnis diversitas quae est in materia, causatur ex diversitate formae. Propter quod natura dedit animalibus bus instrumenta ad operationes, quarum principium potest esse ipsa forma, ut patet in \textit{xiv de animalibus}, ubi dicit, quod homo manus habet propter multas operationes, quae possunt esse ab intellectu; propter quod videmus eos qui deformes sunt, esse moriones et indisciplinabiles; under dicit \textit{quidam philosophus}, quod qui est monstrum in corpore, est monstrum in anima. Huissusmodi etiam qui sic turpes sunt, non consueverunt committere gubernationes rei publicae, quia oportet, ut rector placeat etiam ex dispositione corporis sicut Saul” (\textit{Super Ethica} 1.10).
sation and the pleasures of the mind or spirit, and one must also recall that, while pleasure follows the attainment of one’s desires, human beings often desire the wrong things. Morally right desire is for ends whose acquisition is ordered to the attainment of the ultimate end, happiness; such desire seeks what is good always and everywhere, and not necessarily what our senses perceive as good in the moment (*ut nunc*). In noting this, Albert effectively urges caution regarding any inferences one might draw about a person’s moral character from the fact that some action he performs causes him bodily pleasure or pain. Such pleasure may, and quite commonly does, accompany the attainment of the wrong ends, and for that reason bodily pleasures are often unreliable measures of an agent’s moral character.

We have so far traced Albert’s responses to two passages in the *Ethics* in which Aristotle’s text might be taken to entertain the idea that beauty may have some moral significance. In them, Albert takes pains to distinguish bodily beauty from intellectual beauty, and to draw a parallel distinction between bodily and intellectual pleasure. Contra Aristotle, Albert refuses to allow that the absence of bodily beauty necessarily mars a person’s happiness. While Albert allows that virtuous activity is beautiful, he stresses that the beauty it exhibits is intellectual, not bodily. These remarks arguably downgrade or dismiss the moral importance of bodily beauty and bodily pleasure, both by denying them a role in the contemplative activity that constitutes happiness and by asserting that one can be happy without them. In other remarks, Albert will assert not just that bodily beauty and pleasure play no role in contemplative activity that constitutes happiness but that they actively impede it.

One such remark comes in *Super Ethica* 2.8. There Albert discusses Aristotle’s advice that those who would act virtuously should follow the example of the Trojan statesmen who began their political deliberations by first banishing Helen from the Assembly. Uncertain regarding the meaning of Aristotle’s metaphor, and in particular regarding the rationale for Helen’s banishment, Albert ventures the interpretation that the Trojans banished Helen from the Assembly because they feared being distracted by her great beauty in the midst of their political deliberations. One of the best ways to overcome vicious pleasures, Albert notes, is to flee the occasions that attend them—something the Trojan elders

---

18. *Super Ethica* 2.3.
understood well. In discussing that counsel, Albert quotes with favor the Greek commentator who had noted that, while the Trojan elders could not help but notice Helen's great beauty, for they were not without feeling, they nevertheless took pains to avoid the sight of her. In a similar way, Albert says, the virtuous person experiences pleasure but does not get "mixed up with it," for he knows that in order to recognize the virtuous path one must cast aside concern for pleasure. As he quotes and endorses the commentator's interpretation, Albert notes that Aristotle himself admits that his remarks on the moral importance of avoiding pleasure are brief and undifferentiated. He suggests that his own subsequent discussions of this theme will be better developed; we shall see his efforts to make good on this promise.

One such striking effort comes in Super Ethica 6.2, in the context of an examination of Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtues. There Albert reflects upon Aristotle's account of the hierarchy of the soul's powers as well as upon some observations about that hierarchy by the Byzantine commentator Eustratius. Eustratius's observations fall within an extended diatribe he launches against a line of reasoning that he attributes to the "pseudo-prophet Muhammad." According to Eustratius, Muhammad taught that concupiscence and anger are the powers of soul whose exercise gives rise to the greatest pleasures, and since God implanted those powers in human nature, it must be right for us to indulge them. Albert makes this line of reasoning the subject of a ques-

19."Deinde cum dicit: In omni autem, ostendit, a quo maxime cavendum est. Et dicit, quod maximam observare, idest cavere, debemus a delectabil et delectatione qui propter connaturalitatem suam non iudicamus eam non-accipientes, immo in iudicando de ipsa acceptamus eam, et adhaeret nobis. Et dicit, quod debemus nos habere ad delectationem, sicut senes plebis, idest sapientes, se habebant ad Helenam, quam rapuit Paris, et dicere etc., quia dicunt, quod vox illorum erat: Fuge, fuge! Timebant enim, ne insipientes ipsam propter maximam pulchritudinem allicerentur ab ipsa. Similiter debemus nos delectationes fugiendo vincere. Sed commentator dicit, quod senes se habebant ad Helenam commendando pulchritudinem eius et fugiendo commixtionem. Et vox illorum erat: Pulchra est, pulchra est. Et similiter nos debemus cognoscere delectationes et non miscere eas nobis, quia qui non cognoscit, est insensibilis. Et ultimo dicit, quod hoc faciendo, scilicet abiciendo delectationes et alia servando quae dicimus, maxime poterimus medium adipisci. Et hoc sit dictum in capitulo, idest breviter, et in universalit" (Super Ethica 2.8).

tion whose *solutio* contains some of the most forceful language in all of the *Super Ethica*. This teaching on concupiscence and anger (i.e., the one that Eustratius attributes to Muhammad) is, Albert says, profoundly flawed; it is contrary not only to the Catholic faith, but also to nature, good morals, and all civility.\(^{21}\) In support of those judgments, Albert notes that the human soul has both brutish and rational parts. These two parts and their respective perfections are directly opposed to one another, and the rational part is superior to the brutish part. For this reason, while the brutish part finds a kind of perfection in the attainment of physical pleasures, the perfection of the rational part consists in abstention from physical pleasure. The virtuous person is defined by his refraining from physical pleasures, and in particular the most intense bodily ones, which are the pleasures of sex, which are only to be enjoyed in the context of procreation.\(^{22}\)

One might wonder whether it is possible for a human being to abstain entirely from the pursuit of physical pleasure, let alone whether it is advisable for him to do so. Albert settles any doubt in *Super Ethica* 7.1, in the context of interrogating Aristotle’s remarks about continence and divine virtue, where he asks whether it is possible for a human being to attain divine virtue.\(^{23}\) Albert affirms that it most certainly is possible for human beings to attain that state.\(^{24}\) In explaining why, he reiterates the idea that a human being acquires virtue by using his reason to restrain his passions. Such restraint causes the passions to lose their force, thereby weakening them. Carried to completion, such restraint altogether eliminates the passions, resulting in the state of soul called divine virtue. Virtue is a habit that perfects the soul by expelling vices from it, including every passion that gives rise to vice. Albert acknowledges that some might doubt the view that any human being can attain a level of

\(^{21}\) “Dicendum, quod in veritate lex sua non solum est contra catholicam fidem, sed etiam contra omnem civilitatem et contra naturam et contra bonos mores; dicit enim, quod nulla concupiscentia peccatum est neque in feminas neque in masculos” (*Super Ethica* 6.2).

\(^{22}\) *Super Ethica* 6.2.


\(^{24}\) “Omne quod debilitat aliquid, si ipsum intendatur perfecte, destruet ipsum, quia ‘passio magis facta semper abicit a substantia,’ ut dicit Philosophus in Topicis; sed ratio retractando hominem a passionibus, debilitat eas; ergo tantum poterit cohibere, quod omnino destruet ipsas, et hanc dispositionem dicimus divinam virtutem; ergo possible, etc.” (*Super Ethica* 7.1).
perfection in which he no longer feels passion; an authority from Dionysius seems to affirm that it is indeed impossible, and that apart from Jesus Christ, no person has ever attained such perfection—not even John the Evangelist, who was the “most perfect of men.” Without abandoning his claim that it is possible for human beings to eliminate the passions, Albert saves the Dionysian authority by introducing a distinction between two ways of being touched by passions: physical and mathematical. Divinely virtuous people attain a state in which they are no longer touched physically by passion, although they are touched mathematically by them. While the meaning of this distinction is not obvious, Albert’s main line is clear: human beings can indeed attain a state of moral perfection that makes them immune to the physical touch of the passions.

As we have seen, while Albert finds relatively little occasion in Super Ethica to discuss beauty, in the places where he does discuss it, he distinguishes physical beauty from intellectual beauty, associating physical pleasure with the perception of the former and intellectual pleasure with the perception of the latter. By contrast, Albert finds multiple occasions to discuss pleasure; his doing so is not surprising given that he develops his moral philosophy through critical engagement with Aristotle’s Ethics, and that text of course includes two extensive treatments of the subject, in Books 7 and 10. Albert’s own discussion of the subject is extensive and complex. Whereas most contemporary readers recognize significant doctrinal differences between Aristotle’s two treatments, Albert regards them as fully compatible and endeavors to explain why it was necessary for Aristotle to discuss pleasure twice, and so differently. In interpret-
ing Aristotle, Albert faces a challenge in the fact that Aristotle does not present his own account of pleasure directly, but rather subsumes the presentation of it to his presentation and refutation of antihedonist arguments aimed at establishing two main claims: first, that no pleasure is good, and second, that no pleasure is the best good or ultimate end of human action. While Aristotle rejects the antihedonist claim that no pleasure is good (his own view is that many pleasures are good), he accepts the antihedonist claim that no pleasure is the best good (his own view is that it is contemplative activity in accordance with the virtue of wisdom that is the best good). However, Aristotle rejects a leading argument of the antihedonists in support of the claim that no pleasure is the best good, namely, Speusippus’s argument that pleasure is a becoming (genesis), and for that reason, no pleasure is good at all, let alone the best good. According to Aristotle, pleasure is properly neither a becoming (genesis) nor a motion (kinesis) but rather an activity (energeia).

It is within the context of expositing the dialectical engagement by Aristotle of the antihedonist argument of Speusippus that Albert asks, in Super Ethica 10.3, whether Aristotle is right to claim that pleasure is an activity (operatio) and not a motion (motus). As we shall see, in defending Aristotle’s claim that pleasure is not a motion, Albert introduces a distinction between two kinds of activity, one of which includes motion within its operation and another of which does not.

Albert begins by affirming, with Aristotle, that pleasure is not a motion. As evidence for this claim, Albert notes that pleasure only sometimes follows from a motion, whereas it always follows on activity. To clarify that point, he next specifies what he regards to be a significant difference between motions and activities: whereas an activity actualizes a natural form or capacity in some agent, a motion does not. Now, because such actualization flows from the nature of the agent, says Albert, it occurs automatically and reliably, as well as in a manner that is whole and complete from the moment it begins. Activities actualize capacities in a manner like that by which light illumines: that is, automatically and reliably. The reason that light illumines automatically and reliably is because it belongs to the nature of light to illumine. For the same reason, Albert claims, from the moment that light illumines, its illumination is wholly and completely present. By contrast, a motion does not actualize a natural form or capacity in some agent. Moreover, a motion has an end that is
external to itself—the end that the agent has in view when he undertakes it. Motions are actualizations that extend over time, and the degree of actuality they possess changes over their duration. As the motion proceeds toward its end, it attains greater actuality.28

Activities that follow from a thing’s form or nature, Albert adds, are not entangled with motion in any way. He offers a metaphysical reason for this: activities follow from an agent’s nature, and the natures of things are governed by eternal and immobile principles. Having made that claim, Albert immediately attaches an important qualification: activities that follow from a thing’s form or nature are not entangled with motion in any way if and only if the thing in question possesses a simple spiritual nature. In his view, human beings are not things of that kind; they do not possess simple natures but composite ones—they are composites of body and soul. Their bodies are subject to various motions, and that subjection influences the way that human beings participate in the form of humanity. This in turn affects human activities. One may distinguish within human activities a part that follows from the human form in a way that is unadulterated through any admixture with motion, and a part that follows from that form in a way that is adulterated through admixture with motion.29

This complexity in human activity, itself a consequence of our nature as composites of body and soul, explains for Albert why we become fatigued and inattentive in our performance of activities. He goes so far as to add a natural-scientific explanation as to why even intellectual activity becomes tiresome for us: intellectual activity requires the abstraction of intelligible species from phantasms, and this itself requires the circula-

28. “Dicendum, quod delectatio non est motus, sed est semper consequens operationem, non autem semper motum, sed quandoque. Differt enim operatio a motu, eo quod operatio est actus formae naturalis semper ipsum consequens, ut actus lucere est lucis, et cum aliquid huius actus non sit magis potentia quam aliud, set totum similiter est perfecte actus, constat, quod differt a motu, in quo, quanto plus acceditur ad terminum ad quem, est plus de actu” (Super Ethica 10.3).

29. “Haec quidem operatio ex parte ipsius formae non commiscetur motui, cum essentia rei sine motu sit, cuius principia sunt aeterna et immobilia; ex parte autem participantis formam, si sit natura composita, quae subiacet diversis motibus, admiscetur sibi motus, in natura autem simplici, quae participat formam sine motu, nullo modo adiungitur motus. Ex parte igitur formae considerata est nobilissimum, etiam ipsa forma nobilissius est perfectius, quia forma ordinatur ad ipsum sicut ad finem et sic etiam detectabilis est. Ex parte autem illa qua qua admiscetur motui, potest etiam poena esse, secundum quod motus inducit lassitudinem” (Super Ethica 10.3).
tion of spirits through the brain. When many spirits circulate, the brain gets overheated, and intellectual activity becomes painful and exhausting. Albert concludes his analysis by asserting the following: pleasure follows upon activity as upon its essential cause. Pleasure follows upon motion in an accidental way, insofar as motion is a concomitant of our activities as composite beings.

Stepping back from the details of his reply, the general shape of Albert’s argument is now clear: a solution that begins by affirming, with Aristotle, that pleasure is not a motion but an activity concludes by affirming, contra Aristotle, that human beings, in this life at least, perform no activities—not even intellectual ones—that are free of admixture with motion. Simple pleasure, free of admixture from motion and so free of lassitude and pain, is not possible for us in hac vita, which is why any experience we may have here of contemplative happiness will be a limited one. Albert’s engagement with Aristotle’s criticism of the antihedonism of Speusippus thus leads him to a new reason for denying complete pleasantness to contemplative activity in this life: the reason is that, in beings composed of a body and soul, the actualization of capacities in which pleasure consists can never be without motion, and with motion comes lassitude and pain.

Throughout this essay we have presented examples of how Albert’s discussion of beauty leads him to moral-philosophical conclusions substantially different from Aristotle’s own, regarding matters as diverse as whether physical ugliness mars happiness, whether it is possible for a human being to escape the influence of passions, and whether there are any human activities free of admixture with motion. We have argued that while Albert does not see some of Aristotle’s claims about beauty that are of interest to modern readers (due to Robert Grosseteste’s translation of

30. “Sicut patet in operatione intellectus nostri, in qua accidit fatigatio propter nimiam calefactionem cerebri ex discursu spirituum, cum oporteat species intelligibiles a phantasmatibus abstrahi. Et sic patet, quod delectatio consequitur operationem sicut causam essentialem, motus autem tantum per accidens concomitatur ipsam” (Super Ethica 10.3).

31. Albert defends the same conclusion in Super Ethica 7.16 in the question “Videtur quod naturae humanae, quae est composita ex corporali et spirituali natura, possit esse simplex delectatio.”

32. While limited, contemplative activity in this life can be quite elevated—so much so that it yields a kind of union with the separated intelligences. For a discussion of that idea and Albert’s concept of intellectus adeptus, see Jörn Müller, Natürliche Moral und philosophische Ethik bei Albertus Magnus (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001), 120–31.
the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Albert nevertheless does discuss the subject of beauty throughout his *Super Ethica*. In doing so, Albert routinely finds occasion to affirm and justify, in diverse ways, one of his key moral-philosophical doctrines, namely, that human beings cannot attain supreme happiness on earth but only in heaven. For what it is worth, that important finding is not one that Albert himself regards as a departure from Aristotle.33 Irrespective of how Albert regards the Aristotelian character of his finding, the finding itself is clearly a significant one. By pondering, as it were, what qualities human happiness must possess in order to be truly beautiful, Albert finds new reasons for believing that nothing so fine could ever fully be attained in hac vita.

33. That Albert sees the denial of the possibility of perfect happiness in this life to be Aristotle’s own teaching is clear from several places, including his analysis of “Solon’s Dilemma” in *Super Ethica* 1.11. Like his predecessors in the *Ethics*-commentary in the Arts Faculty at the University of Paris, Albert sees the Latin Aristotle’s use of the phrase “beatos ut homines” as proof positive that for Aristotle as for himself, supremely perfect happiness cannot be found in this life but only in heaven. For a discussion of Albert’s analysis of the phrase “beatos ut homines,” see Anthony Celano, *Aristotle’s Ethics and Medieval Philosophy*, 138–39.
Bonaventure is inscribed in one of the great and seminal masterpieces of Western art: the fresco cycle of The Life of Francis in the Upper Church at Assisi. Why is this so? At the very least, it is for the important reason that he wrote the official biography of the saint (Legenda major), and paraphrased passages from this biography are inscribed under the twenty-eight fresco panels of the saint’s life that surround the nave of Assisi’s upper church.\(^1\) But I think there are deeper reasons for this connection. It is surely not an accident that the very moment of the naturalist turn in Western painting is connected to Bonaventure. First of all, Bonaventure thought and wrote extensively about questions that fall under the modern study of aesthetics: What is beauty? What does it mean to call something beautiful? What is the foundation, if any, for this predication? What is involved in the experience of beauty? What is art, and how does the experience of beauty, whether in nature or in art, contribute to a fully human and moral life? Indeed, Bonaventure has a comprehensive vision of the unity of all the arts, especially insofar as they have the potential to lead us back to God, if the soul is awakened to the ways in which God is present in them. Beauty and its aesthetic experience, through nature or through art, have a vital role in this awakening. As Hans Urs von Balthasar writes, “Of all the great scholastics, Bonaventure is the one who offers the widest scope to the beautiful in his theology: not mere-

---

ly because he speaks of it most frequently, but because he clearly thereby gives expression to his innermost experience and does this in concepts that are his own."2

The deeper reasons for Bonaventure’s intimate presence at the naturalistic turn of Western art are rooted in his answers to these questions. His thought commits one to renewed appreciation of the natural world as revelatory of the divine: nature is an expression of God himself; hence the artist, in depicting nature, is prompting us to find God. Furthermore, because the corporeal is inscribed in the very definition of human nature and because that nature has been taken up in the Second Person of the Trinity in the Incarnation, there is a new awareness of the human being as a creature fittingly corporeal and who, precisely in being corporeal, is the mediator (medium) in creation—the microcosm (minor mundus) in the macrocosm (major mundus)—uniting its disparate parts and returning them to God. With this naturalism there is joined a radical appreciation for aesthetic experience, which leads us to recognize that such experience points beyond itself to the transcendent. That is, the quest for the beautiful now becomes a vital aspect of human life—a sort of aesthetic imperative—for beauty is that which awakens us to the great and defining narrative of human life—the journey of the mind to God.

This essay will not attempt to trace in detail Bonaventure’s literary influence on the fresco cycle. Rather, the aim here is, first and foremost, to explore the basic elements of Bonaventure’s aesthetics3 and, secondarily,


to establish a plausible case that it is in his aesthetics that we find the intellectual foundation for the dramatic artistic shift that transpired at Assisi. After briefly sketching the naturalism of the frescoes in the Upper Church, I will consider several reasons why Bonaventure’s thought moves the medieval world toward this naturalism. The first of these reasons is found in Bonaventure’s metaphysics, specifically in his exemplarism, or what is more insightfully called his “expressionism.” The second reason is found in Bonaventure’s theory of hylomorphism and its redefinition of human nature. Thirdly, the Franciscan reception of the doctrine of the Incarnation in its concrete corporeality prompts a new appreciation of the physicality of the Christian mystery. The fourth is found in Bonaventure’s seminal doctrine of beauty as a transcendental property of being; perhaps the Seraphic Doctor was the first “to describe clearly the beautiful as the transcendent.” A fifth reason for the naturalistic turn is that Bonaventure explicitly defends the beauty of naturalism in his discussion of the image. Finally, Bonaventure develops a new appreciation of the role of artistic beauty in the arc of a human life: the believer is given warrant to see in religious art both an object of devotion, which serves as a sign pointing to a divine mystery, and an object of art, which evokes an aesthetic appreciation for its intrinsic beauty. Bonaventure thus establishes an aesthetic imperative for the believer who would journey to God.

**Bonaventure’s Influence on the Arts**

One of the defining moments in the history of Western art is the building and decoration of the Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi. Alastair Smart’s valuable work of 1971, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto*, shows the extent of the *Legenda major’s* influence on the great fresco cycle of *The Life of Francis* in the Upper Church at Assisi. How do we know that

---


7. Alastair Smart, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto: A Study of the Legend of St. Francis in the Upper Church of San Francesco* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). See the appendix in Smart for the specific inscriptions under each fresco, which paraphrase the *Legenda major* (ibid., 263–93). Much of the original wording is now lost. The reconstruction of the inscriptions was first published in 1911 in Bonaventura Marinangeli’s “La serie di affreschi Giotteschi rappresentanti la Vita di S. Francesco nella Chiese superiore di Assisi,” *Miscellanea Francescana* 13 (1911):
Bonaventure’s *Legenda major* is the principal text for the twenty-eight scenes of this fresco cycle? Because passages from the *Legenda major* are inscribed beneath the fresco panels. In 1260, Bonaventure was commissioned by the General Chapter of Narbonne to write a new life of St. Francis. By 1263 Bonaventure had completed this task. In 1266, the General Chapter of Paris decreed that all other lives then in circulation were to be destroyed. Donal Cooper and Janet Robson’s 2013 book on the frescoes in the Upper Church at Assisi, *The Making of Assisi: The Pope, the Franciscans and the Painting of the Basilica*, further details the literary and narrative links between Bonaventure’s *Legenda major*, the biblical narratives, and specific frescoes. “One thing—perhaps the only thing—on which all Assisi scholars agree is that the primary textual source for the Saint Francis cycle is Bonaventure’s *Legenda major*.” Furthermore, while they clearly recognize that there are other sources, they conclude that “there are many good reasons for characterizing the Saint Francis cycle as Bonaventuran.” The textual links, of course, help illuminate the iconography of the frescoes themselves. The theological import of the life of Francis and its relation to Old and New Testament narratives is brought to life through the fresco cycle. The frescoes achieve this end by thematizing the parallels between the lives of the patriarchs, the life of Christ, and the life of Francis. One helps us to read the other.

The case grows even stronger for Bonaventure’s influence when we consider the fact that the one who prompted the frescoing of the Upper Church of S. Francesco at Assisi, *The Evidence of Copies and Considerations of Method*, in *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, ed. William R. Cook (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 113. See also Timothy J. Johnson on the liturgical setting of both *legenda*: the *legenda minor* was for choir-use among Franciscans during the octave of the feast of St. Francis, and the *legenda major* was for refectory reading during this same time as well as for the larger public (Timothy Johnson, “Into the Light: Bonaventure’s *Minor Life of Saint Francis* . . . and the Franciscan Production of Space,” in *Francis of Assisi: History, Hagiography, and Hermeneutics in the Early Documents*, ed. Jay Hammond, 229–49 (New York: New City Press, 2004).
Church at Assisi was the first Franciscan pope, Nicholas IV (pope from 1288–92), and that Jerome of Ascoli (as he was known before ascending to the papacy, born around 1225–30) had been Bonaventure’s successor as minister general of the order (elected in May 1274). It was Nicholas IV’s papal bull (Reducentes ad sedulae), issued in May of 1288, that served as the catalyst for prompting the Franciscans at the Sacro Convento to transform the Basilica of San Francesco.13

Yet the focus of this essay is the aesthetics, in its theological and philosophical foundation, which likely inspired these frescoes. For it is in the fresco cycle of the Upper Church that a revolutionary realism emerges. We find real bodies occupying real space in real time. Or to put it in other words, corporeal bodies occupy three-dimensional space in a historical moment of time. The scenes are no longer set against the timeless, gold background of the Italo-Byzantine tradition; now they are set in real landscapes at specific moments of history. Spatiality and temporality emerge in these frescoes, drawing the viewer into their world.

We have become so accustomed to this style of painting that we can easily miss the radical shift that transpired in the Upper Church. Yet before there could be this naturalistic turn, there had to be a new understanding of beauty itself and its role in human life.

THE MEANING OF “BEAUTY” IN BONAVENTURE’S THOUGHT

What does Bonaventure understand by beauty or the beautiful? Before answering this question, we would do well to consider that one of the important works in twentieth-century scholarship on medieval aesthetics, that is, Edgar de Bruyne’s three-volume Études d’esthétique médiévale,

13. Bonaventure’s secretary, Bernard of Busse, informs us that Jerome of Ascoli was “a lector of no small learning.” Where he served as lector is not known with certainty, but it was likely Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome. In May 1288, Nicholas called on the Franciscans of the Sacro Convento in Assisi to “maintain, repair, build, modify, enlarge, furnish, and decorate” the architecturally complete building (Cooper and Robson, The Making of Assisi, 1–8). Nicholas commissioned major art works, as we can see in the apse mosaics by Jacopo Torriti (1291, 1296) in the Roman churches of San Giovanni Laterano and Santa Maria Maggiore. Torriti is also the one who begins the frescoing of the Upper Church nave at Assisi: “Rare consensus surrounds Torriti’s authorship of the majestic Deesis vault in the Upper Church, which must have been one of the first frescoes executed under the authority of the Reducentes letters” (Cooper and Robson, The Making of Assisi, 36). Torriti likely executed some of the Old Testament frescoes of the Upper Church.
published in 1946, regards the aesthetics of Bonaventure to be absolutely unified.\(^{14}\) Any unity would have to be grounded in a concept that applies across different experiences of the beautiful. On a basic level, the beautiful is that which delights when apprehended by the soul.\(^{15}\) Bonaventure is very clear about this point: *pulchritudo* and *delectatio* are joined together. What is more, beauty and delight are closely tied to proportion (*proportio*). Following Augustine, Bonaventure argues that beauty consists in a “numbered equality” (*aequalitas numerosa*): “Beauty is nothing other than equality in number; and there the numerous causes are reduced to one.”\(^{16}\) Bonaventure regards this first definition as equivalent to a second, as we can see in a juxtaposition of these in the *Itinerarium*: “Beauty is nothing other than numbered equality, or a certain disposition of parts, together with a suavity of color (*quidum partium situs cum coloris suavitate*).”\(^{17}\) Bonaventure inherits this understanding of beauty as a proportioned equality from Augustine’s *De musica*.\(^{18}\) “Whether we translate *numerosa* as ‘proportional’ or as ‘harmonious’ is immaterial here, since every numerical harmony is a proportion.”\(^{19}\) As Philotheus Boehner puts it very succinctly, “Proportion or harmony is the basis of all beauty.”\(^{20}\) A third variation that Bonaventure employs is that beauty consists in plurality and equality (*in pluriatate et aequalitate*).\(^{21}\) A fourth is that beauty is a harmony of disparate things (*convenientia disparium*).\(^{22}\) As we will see, in Bonaventure’s account there

---

15. “Omne autem, quod delectat animam, delectate in ratione boni et pulchri” (Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 1, a. 3, q. 2 concl. [I, 41a] from *Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiærum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, vols. 1–4 of *Opera omnia* [Quaracchi: Ex typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902]). Translations of Bonaventure’s *Commentary on the Sentences* are my own.
16. “Pulchritudo nihil aliud est quam aequalitas numerosa” (Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 3 ad 5 [I, 544]). “Pulchritudo nihil aliud est quam aequalitas numerosa; ibi autem sunt rationes numerosae ad unum reductae” (Collationes in Hexaemeron VI, 7 [V, 361b–362a]).
20. Ibid., 11717.
21. Bonaventure, *In II Sent.*, d. 9, praenotata (II, 238a); *Breviloquium* prol., n. 2 (V, 204).
22. Bonaventure, *In II Sent.*, d. 9, a. un, q. 8 ad 2 (II, 256); *Itinerarium*, c. 2, n. 5 (V, 300).
is physical beauty—both in nature and the arts—spiritual beauty, and, above all, divine beauty.

**METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATION: BEAUTY ITSELF**

One might think that these criteria of beauty, which Bonaventure inherits, would not apply in any way to God. Bonaventure thinks they do. This is not to say that the criteria for the beautiful can be thought perfectly adequate to the divine Beauty. The beauty that can be captured in a definition, with its finite concepts and propositions, is necessarily looking at beauty “from below.” Nevertheless, this term can be applied to God by a certain analogy. With this caution in mind, it is still possible to say that Bonaventure’s theory of beauty is most succinctly understood top-down: God is Beauty itself. 23 The ultimate reason why anything is beautiful is because of Beauty itself. God is the principle and cause of beauty. “That which makes the beautiful and the more beautiful is beauty itself.” 24 Bonaventure is not defending a direct participation of the creature in God, but it is clear that, in his view, the cause of the beautiful among finite beings is Beauty itself. The finite and imperfect can only be explained by the infinite and perfect. Any beauty apart from Beauty itself is caused, dependent, finite, and necessarily multiple.

**EXEMPLARISM**

Bonaventure tells us that he thinks metaphysics is divided into three parts: emanation, exemplarism, and return. 25 Bonaventure follows Augustine in positing the Platonic forms as ideas in the divine mind. He is part of the larger, scholastic project of understanding how the plurality of ideas could be reconciled with the simplicity of the divine being. Taking the divine simplicity as a given, Bonaventure reasons that whatever is in God must be God. Hence, the divine ideas must differ only in

---

23. “Quoniam solus Deus est ipsa bonitas et pulchritudo, ideo in Deo solo est perfecta delectatio” (Bonaventure, *In I Sent.*, d. 1, a. 3, q. 2 concl. [I, 41a]). Augustine, *Confessions* XI.


25. “Hoc est medium metaphysicum reduens, et haec est tota nostra metaphysica: de emanantione, de exemplaritate, de consummatione, scilicet illuminari per radio spiritualis et reduce ad summum. Et sic eris verus metaphysicus” (Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaemeron* I, 17 [V, 332]).
a manner of speaking, that is, by a type of connotation. It is in this way that God himself is the exemplar of creatures. In short, God is the efficient and final cause of creation. But given creation’s multiplicity of form, God is also the formal, or more precisely, exemplar cause of the world. In this way scholastics like Bonaventure went about attempting to solve the problem of the one and the many.

Furthermore, Bonaventure reasons that knowing involves expression in a word. “A word is nothing other than an expressed and expressive likeness conceived by the power of an intelligent spirit by which it knows itself or another.”26 Hence God, in knowing himself perfectly, expresses himself from all eternity, and this expression is an interior Word. In this eternal Word God has perfectly expressed himself. This definitive expression of God involves an emanation through the divine nature. And this emanation is the Word, the consummate expression of God.

Any expression of God extrinsic to Himself is through this Word. This extrinsic expression is a creation, as the free, external expression of the divine Word, a word spoken in the medium. The world is the limited and transitory expression of God outside himself. Von Balthasar summarizes this view quite well: “This means nothing less than the grounding of the act of creation in the act of generation within the Godhead.”27 Bonaventure’s definitive analogy for understanding this sort of extrinsic expression is that of a book. The world is a book written by God. Indeed, God has written three books: the Eternal Book that is the Eternal Word, the book that is the natural world, and the book that is sacred Scripture. Sacred Scripture is the book to teach human beings how to read rightly the book of nature after the fall. There will thus be a “threelfold existence of things—in matter, in the understanding (human), and in the eternal art.”28 After the fall, the world had become like Greek to those who did not know how to read Greek. Another analogy Bonaventure uses to understand this expression of God is that of a mirror. The world is as a mirror through which and in which we can see God (per speculum et ut in speculo).29 “Let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, setting the whole visible world before us as a mirror [tanquam speculum]

27. GL II, 291.
through which we may pass over to God the Supreme Creative Artist \[opificem summum].^{30}

Bonaventure’s Trinitarian theology is crucial to understanding his account of beauty. “Beauty” is appropriated to the Second Person of the Trinity. We see this appropriation of particular names to the particular persons of the Trinity over and over again throughout Bonaventure’s writings. For example, we find it in detail in the first book of the Sentences. In a question on whether eternity is rightly appropriated to the Father, likeness to the Image, and gift to the Spirit, Bonaventure answers on the basis of the twofold emanation of the persons of the Trinity, one through the mode of nature, one through the mode of will. He reasons that since the Spirit proceeds through the mode of the will and love (\[per modum voluntatis et amoris\]), it is fitting that the name that expresses “will” be appropriated to the Spirit, hence “the Useful One” or “the Gift” (\[usus\] or \[donum\]).^{31} The Son emanates through the mode of nature (\[per modum naturae\]), and so the name appropriated to him is “Expressed Likeness” (Expressa Similitudo). Because the Son, as the perfect likeness of the Father, is, in himself, the principle and exemplar of all things, he is the principle of beauty. The beautiful exists in relation to him. “The Most Beautiful himself, bearing with his mind the beautiful world, possesses beauty in comparison to every beautiful, expressed thing.” The Son is the “full art” (\[ars plena\]) of all the principles of living things. The principle of all beauty (\[ratio omnis pulcritudinis\]) is truly found in the Son.^{32} In short, the Son is the Beauty of the Father (Species Patris).^{33}

Bonaventure asserts that “number is the principal exemplar in the mind of the Creator.” As a result, numbers in created beings are the principal vestige leading us back to Wisdom. Indeed, there are seven differences of numbers in sensible things. There are numbers in bodies, especially in sounds and voices (sounding numbers); when these numbers are drawn from these and received in the sense faculty, they are occurring numbers. There are numbers that proceed from the soul into the body in gesturing and in dancing (forthcoming numbers). There are num-

30. Bonaventure, Itinerarium, c. 1, n. 9.
31. Bonaventure, In I Sent., d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 3 ad 1 (I, 544). “Gift designates Him as the One who is given through the will” (Bonaventure, Breviloquium, p. 1, c. 3, n. 9).
32. Bonaventure, In I Sent., d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 3 ad 5 (I, 544).
33. Bonaventure, In I Sent., d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 3 ad 5 (I, 544).
bers in the pleasure of the senses when the likenesses of things are perceived (sensuous numbers). There are numbers in the memory (memorial numbers). Numbers are used when we judge things (judicial numbers). These numbers by which we judge are also impressed on our minds, and then they serve as artistic numbers (numeri artificiales). These numbers are then present in the making of artefacts. This final set of numbers is Bonaventure’s own addition to Augustine’s reckoning of numbers in De musica. As Boehner explains quite accurately, what Bonaventure means here by number includes ratios, harmonies, proportions, and rhythms.34 After setting forth this hierarchy of numbers, Bonaventure then reasons: “Therefore, since all things are beautiful and in some way delightful, and since beauty and delight do not exist without proportion [abseque proportione], and proportion exists primarily in numbers, all things are subject to number.”35

What Bonaventure means by artistic numbers, in Boehner’s view, are conceptions of the artist “who by an impression from the eternal reasons or judicial numbers, through appropriate actions of the body [progressores], is able to express beautiful and well proportioned things.”36 Artists express the eternal as present in their own experience.

Bonaventure divides up the degrees of likeness to God into three: vestiges (vestigia), images, and likenesses. In his account, the vestige is the most remote and is found in all things; the image of God is found in the human mind; the likeness of God is found in the human mind insofar as it has been reformed by grace. The distinction between the human mind as an image and as a likeness is found in the analogy of the image in the mirror that is polished and so becomes distinct and clear.

BONAVENTURE’S HYLOMORPHISM

In the 1250s, Bonaventure developed his view of the created world while commenting on the interpretation of the Genesis account of creation found in the Church Fathers, as these are present in Peter the Lombard’s Sentences.37 This essay is not the place for a detailed exposition of the

34. Boehner, Commentary, 119n11.
35. Bonaventure, Itinerarium, c. 2, n. 10.
36. Boehner, Commentary, 119n11.
37. The twelfth century’s renewed interest in the natural order has been studied and ex-
many complexities of Bonaventure’s hylomorphism (not the least of which are his distinctive doctrines of “universal hylomorphism” and *rationes semenales*). Central to his own hylomorphic theory, though, is Bonaventure’s reception of the Aristotelian thesis that the rational soul is the form of the body. Matter thus enters into the very essence of the human being. Matter has a desire (*appetitus*) for form and form for matter (*unibilitas*), and it is this tendency that disposes matter to receiving form and form to uniting with matter. In this view man is a unified, matter-form composite substance. What is true in the ontological order with the doctrine of hylomorphism is now capable of being expressed in the artistic order with human beings whose bodies give expression to spirit. Bonaventure combines exemplarism and hylomorphism and thereby transforms the medieval view of nature, both from within and from above.

**The Incarnation**

Another reason for the shift to naturalism is likely found in the Franciscan reception of the doctrine of the Incarnation. This doctrine took on particular emphasis within the life of Francis, and this understanding was to shape the life and culture of his followers. We can see this distinctive reception in the Franciscan devotion to the nativity of Christ in all of its natural details. Such devotion is vividly portrayed in the nativity scene of the Upper Church at Assisi. The Incarnation hallows the natural world, of course, but this hallowing is appropriated in Franciscan spirituality in all of its tangible and corporeal details, above all in the infant body of the Word. Furthermore, the Incarnation is understood in this spirituality to find its consummation in the Passion of the Word, specifically insofar as the wounded body of the Savior completes his sacrifice on the cross. The wounds of the Crucified receive a special focus, for they affirm the reality of the Incarnation in all its corporeality as well as the depths of his love expressed in the embrace of the pain of the wounding.

---

The vocation of Francis began when an image of the Crucified spoke to him in the church of San Damiano. The Crucified was present again at the consummation of Francis’s life in the cave at La Verna. The stigmata of Francis shows, in vivid corporeality, the truth of St. Paul’s thesis in Romans 6:5: “For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.” The Franciscan focus on the stigmata as a defining moment in the life of Francis is of a piece with the understanding of the Incarnation. Bonaventure does not merely recount the story of the stigmata in his *Legenda*. He makes a pilgrimage up the hill of La Verna to the cave where Francis received the stigmata. “I withdrew to Mount Alverno … There occurred to me … that miracle which in this very place had happened to the blessed Francis—the vision he received of the winged seraph in the form of the Crucified.”

Bonaventure then places this event at the heart of his most famous work, the *Itinerarium*. Bonaventure’s theology of the stigmata is well known. What is important to see, however, is the connection between this theology and Bonaventure’s aesthetics.

**Beauty as a Transcendental**

Building on the work of scholastics before him, Bonaventure holds that there are certain universal modes of being: unity, truth, goodness, and beauty. In de Bruyne’s narrative, Bonaventure’s most original contribution is his view that beauty is a transcendental property of being. Later scholars, such as Spargo, Peters, and von Balthasar, concur that Bonaventure regards beauty as a transcendental. We find this character in a number of places in Bonaventure’s corpus. In the *Sentences* commentary in his discussion of the nature of evil as a privation, Bonaventure argues that everything that is a being has some form; and everything that has some form has beauty.

Again in the second book of the *Commentary*: “Omne bonum et pulchrum est a Deo bono; sed omnia visibilia bona sunt et pulchra.” Furthermore, beauty presupposes the good; the good
presupposes the true; the true presupposes the one; therefore, beauty presupposes all of these notions.

In the question already discussed from the first book of the Sentences on the appropriation of names in the Trinity, we find beauty affirmed as a transcendental in reply to the objection attributed to Dionysius that the good and the beautiful are the same. Bonaventure argues that Dionysius did not intend to say that the good and the beautiful are the same in notion; rather, he maintains that Dionysius holds they are the same in reality.42

THE BEAUTY OF THE IMAGE

In this same question Bonaventure also takes on the objection that the beauty of the image refers only to the prototype and not to the image. He argues, on the contrary, that there is a beauty in the image as well as in the prototype. This is because there is a twofold type of beauty: there is the beauty of an image from its being well-crafted, but there is also the beauty of an image “when it represents well that of which it is an image” (quando bene repraesentat illum ad quem est).43 According to this second type, the image of the devil is called beautiful even when it represents well the ugliness of the devil.44 In Bonaventure’s aesthetic theory, the image speaks to the human being on both levels. It is here in this passage from the first book of Bonaventure’s Commentary on the Sentences, likely dated 1250–52, that we find the intellectual basis for the turn to naturalism, for now there is a twofold beauty: the beauty of fine craftsmanship and the beauty of representing being as it is. Verisimilitude has become a criterion for the beautiful.

THE ARTS AND THE AESTHETIC IMPERATIVE

Bonaventure launches a full-scale apology for the arts in his opusculum, De reductione artium ad theologia.45 This work is an exposition on the

42. Bonaventure, In I Sent., d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 3.
43. Bonaventure, In I Sent., d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 3.
44. Bonaventure, In I Sent., d. 31, p. 2, a. 1, q. 3.
mechanical and liberal arts and deserves attention as one of the more comprehensive and articulate visions of the unity and purpose of the arts in the Middle Ages. His defense of the arts rests on the capacity of the arts to lead us back to God, insofar as they bring to light his divine wisdom hidden within.

Bonaventure’s *De reductione* is, first of all, a detailed, scholastic division of the domain of human knowledge. He begins by demarcating four sources of human cognition, four “lights” as he calls them: (1) an external light, that of the mechanical arts (*lumen artis mechanicae*); (2) a light from below, namely, the light of sense cognition (*lumen cognitionis sensitivae*); (3) an interior source found in the light of philosophical knowledge (*lumen cognitionis philosophicae*); and (4) a light from above, the light of sacred Scripture (*lumen sacrae scripturae*). The light of philosophical knowledge is further broken down into three: rational, natural, and moral philosophy. Rational philosophy is concerned with the truth of speech (*veritas sermonum*), natural philosophy with the truth of beings (*veritas rerum*), and moral philosophy with the truth of action (*veritas morum*). All philosophy is the quest for truth through the interior light of reason. In short, it is the quest for a threefold truth (*triplex veritas*).46

Each of these three branches of philosophy is further divided. Under rational philosophy we find the medieval trivium: grammar, logic, rhetoric. Natural philosophy is divided into physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. It is under mathematics that we find two more of the liberal arts, namely, arithmetic and geometry. Moral philosophy is further subdivided into personal, domestic, and political. Of course, missing from the common medieval enumeration of the liberal arts are music and astronomy.

It should be noted that Bonaventure assumes the rationality of all the arts, whether liberal or mechanical; they are quite clearly grounded in reason and knowledge. We can see this grounding quite strikingly in Bonaventure’s careful explication of arts as refractions of light and thus of a cognition that makes its object appear. Bonaventure sides unambiguously with Hugh of St. Victor on the point that the arts should be considered knowledge. Hugh had rejected an earlier tradition that denied

---
this.\textsuperscript{47} In Hugh’s view, all the arts are forms of knowledge meant to help restore what was lost in the fall.\textsuperscript{48} The light of the mechanical arts illumines artefacts (\textit{ad figuras artificialis}) and thus shines in forms external to the human being.\textsuperscript{49} Drawing directly on Hugh’s \textit{Didascalicon}, Bonaventure enumerates seven mechanical arts: weaving, armor-making (\textit{armature}), agriculture, hunting, navigation, medicine, and dramatic art (\textit{theatrica}).\textsuperscript{50} It is clear that the seven mechanical arts are commonly thought to be parallel to the seven liberal arts. The whole aim of the mechanical arts is the production of artefacts (\textit{artificialium productionem}).\textsuperscript{51} Bonaventure distinguishes the seven mechanical arts into two general groups based on whether their end is “solace” or the useful. “Every mechanical art is intended either for our solace or our benefit [\textit{commudum}]. It is for removing either sadness or need; it is useful or enjoyable.”\textsuperscript{52} He quotes Horace for support: “Poets desire either to be useful or to please.” Six of the mechanical arts aim at the useful. Only one aims at solace and delight: “If the art aims to provide solace or delight, it is theatrical, or the art of entertainment [\textit{ars ludorum}].”\textsuperscript{53} This \textit{ars ludorum} includes every mode of entertainment, whether it be in songs (\textit{in cantibus}), in musical instruments (\textit{in organis}), in images (\textit{in figmentis}), or in dances (\textit{in gesticulationibus corporis}). One might well ask where architecture is. In Bonaventure’s division it would seem to fall under armor-making, since armature is one of the arts and is aimed at making metal, wood, or stone useful.

Bonaventure’s division of the arts into the useful and the consoling finds precedent in Augustine’s \textit{City of God}: “There are all the important arts discovered and developed by human genius, some for necessary uses, others simply for pleasure.”\textsuperscript{54} This division, however, is found in...
various ancient sources.\textsuperscript{55} Bonaventure sets the arts in a context that seems very much in keeping with Augustine. Now they can be part of the sapiential contemplation of God.

In his discussion of the mechanical arts, Bonaventure examines them from the standpoint of the making itself, the effect of the making, and the fruit of the making. First, he says, if we consider the making itself, we see that the work comes from an exemplar in the mind of the artist. If we consider the effect, we shall see that every artisan aims to produce a work (opus) that is beautiful (pulchrum), useful (utile), and enduring (stabile).\textsuperscript{56}

**The Itinerarium Mentis in Deum**

We can take Bonaventure’s reappraisal of the role of the arts in manifesting the light of God and read it in conjunction with his later masterpiece, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. In this, his most famous work, Bonaventure thematizes human life as a journey of the mind to God. This journey motif provides the grand narrative for understanding human life. Into this grand narrative, he has inscribed aesthetic experience. We see this with utter clarity in the first step in the journey—that of perceiving the sensible world. “The whole of this visible world, then, in its three classes of things, enters the human soul through apprehension.”\textsuperscript{57} For the reason that number is found in all apprehension, there is also delight born of the

---

\textsuperscript{55} Whitney, *Paradise Restored*, 33.
\textsuperscript{56} Bonaventure, *De reductione*, 13.
\textsuperscript{57} Bonaventure, *Itinerarium*, c. 2, n. 5.
proportion or beauty perceived in apprehension of the sensible world. “The senses are delighted in an object, perceived through the abstracted similitude, either by reason of its beauty [speciositatis] as in sight, or of its sweetness as in smell or hearing, or of its wholesomeness as in taste and touch, by way of appropriation. For all pleasure is founded in a proportionality.”58 Bonaventure then argues that the sensible beautiful leads us to realize that there exists a first beauty (prima speciositas), and it is the contemplation of the beautiful that occupies the first two stages of the mind’s journey. These considerations of beauty now constitute essential steps in a larger journey.

**CONCLUSION**

In his *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure compares the course of the world to a beautiful poem in which one can find the wisdom of God. “And so the whole course of the universe is shown by the Scriptures to run in a most orderly fashion from beginning to end, like a beautifully composed poem (ad modum cuiusdam pulcherrimi carminis ordinati) in which every mind may discover through the succession of events, the diversity, multiplicity, and justice, the order, rectitude, and beauty, of the countless divine decrees that proceed from God’s wisdom ruling the universe.”59 The world is as a very beautiful song composed by God to draw us home. In this passage Bonaventure is referring to the course of salvation history in particular. But what he says here is also true of the entire created order established by God. As we have seen, the arts refract the natural beauty as lights that can light our way, as the art of the Upper Church at Assisi has illumined its countless pilgrims across the centuries.

Bonaventure’s work presents us with a highly unified and systematic aesthetics, grounded both in his philosophy and theology, and it is through this new aesthetics that the case can be made that he influenced the development of Western art, specifically in its turn to naturalism. For nearly seventeen years as minister general, Bonaventure shaped the Franciscan order. Insofar as a particular culture is expressed in its ar-

tistic works, we can say with confidence that Bonaventure shaped profoundly the culture that we find expressed in the Upper Church at Assisi. As a result, we find a singular phenomenon—an aesthetic theory embedded in a grand theological synthesis—that comes alive and is given concrete artistic expression in one of the great masterpieces in the history of art.
Hans Urs von Balthasar’s widely celebrated theological aesthetics relies on the idea that beauty is a transcendental property of being.1 And yet, Balthasar has been charged with simply asserting that beauty has full transcendental status, rather than engaging with the highly debatable question of whether beauty in fact occupies such a position.2 This chapter argues that Balthasar synthesizes and creatively appropriates Bonaventure’s remarks about beauty in order to articulate a distinctive account of the so-called ratio pulchri (i.e., the conceptual distinction that beauty “adds” to being). Although Balthasar examines a wide array of medieval figures, he finds Bonaventure most promising, and it is here that one observes his only explicit discussion of the ratio pulchri. Balthasar places this reading of Bonaventure in conversation with the thought of Martin Heidegger, and through this subtle exchange Balthasar develops his own position: beauty adds to our conception of being in that it highlights being’s “manifesting” aspect. Beauty, in other


words, is the *perceptibility* of being. Simply to be is to appear. Importantly, too, precisely because beauty is a transcendental (because it describes *all* things that have being), Balthasar holds that even those dimensions of being that might not seem eligible for appearing do in fact manifest. He maintains that the “depths of being,” as he puts it, present themselves to the human observer even though they are “invisible.”

A number of consequences follow from Balthasar’s distinctive formulation. First, if on the “objective” side, so to speak, being manifests not only its surface but also its depths, then on the “subjective” side, a multilevel sense perception must play an integral role in apprehending this invisible dimension of being. Balthasar intriguingly develops the notion of a “transcendental sense perception,” as he calls it, which is capable of penetrating surface appearances in order to grasp the depths of being. Second, Balthasar holds that the beauty of being provokes wonder at being as a whole, at the very fact that anything *is* at all. Beauty thus further adds to the concept of being a palpable awareness of its non-necessity. The astonishment that accompanies beauty therefore prompts a consideration of the metaphysical question (i.e., why is there something instead of nothing?) that is driven by *aesthetic experience* rather than by purely rational reflection. Third, Balthasar maintains that being’s manifesting aspect presents being to the senses while also paradoxically concealing it. The fundamentally enigmatic quality of being is preserved by its mysterious shining forth as beauty.

**WHAT IS THE RATIO PULCHRI? MEDIEVAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL STATUS OF BEAUTY**

Medieval discussions of the transcendentals confront one with two requirements that seem mutually exclusive. On the one hand, for a property of being to qualify as a transcendental (in the Aristotelian sense), it must permeate everything that exists. It must transcend particular categories (it should be “transcategorical”) and be coextensive with being. On the other hand, however, each property must add something *distinctive* to being in order to avoid pure synonymy with being. Goodness, for instance, should describe being in a way that can be distinguished from truth. If it cannot, then goodness would simply be tautologous with truth, and one of the two terms could be eliminated without anything
being lost. The question, then, is how the transcendental properties of being can be said to add to being, when being by definition includes everything. Nothing has been left out of being such that a “gap” presents itself to be filled.

Faced with this challenge, a number of medieval figures developed the idea that the transcendentals add to being “conceptually” (in ratione). That is, each transcendental has a distinct ratio that draws out an aspect of being that would otherwise remain only implicit. For example, according to Thomas Aquinas, the ratio of the good is that it “expresses the correspondence of being to the appetitive power.” In other words, human beings desire the good, and goodness permeates all of being. Goodness, then, “adds” to being in that it draws out and makes explicit an aspect of being that would otherwise remain unexpressed. The desirability of being is not communicated by the term “being” alone.

Concerning beauty, then, we must address two sets of questions. First, at the most basic, exegetical level, do medieval figures mention beauty in their lists of the transcendentals? If beauty does not appear in a proper list of transcendentals, do the figures at least discuss beauty as coextensive with being elsewhere in their writings? This proves difficult to establish in many cases. For instance, Philip the Chancellor, who is widely viewed as first developing a definition of the transcendentals in the medieval period, includes only being, oneness, truth, and goodness. Similarly, Alexander of Hales regards “the divine unity, goodness, and truth” as transcendentals. Figures such as Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas do not devote a treatise to the beautiful as such; as a result one is forced to work with material that is spread across their voluminous writings.

The second question, as intimated above, is “does beauty have a ratio that would distinguish it from goodness and truth?” Here we move beyond the task of simply tracking down various remarks about beauty that

any given figure might make, and we engage in the much more arduous enterprise of articulating what beauty adds to the concept of being. If the *ratio pulchri* can be established, then beauty would meet the standard developed during the medieval period and qualify as having full transcendental status. In this effort, one should keep in mind the inevitable artificiality of suggesting that beauty can be singled out in a treatment of being. A transcendental by definition does not describe only a part of being but rather being as a whole. I suggest below that considering beauty deepens one’s understanding of being by adding to it conceptually, but one must understand that beauty *as such* does not exert agency; it is not separable or different from being. Instead, it is being-*as-beauty*, one might say, that drives one to an understanding of being that could not be achieved otherwise. Ultimately, the value of such an inquiry lies in the resources it offers to the effort at defending the transcendental status of beauty.

**BALTHASAR’S INTERPRETATION OF MEDIEVAL FIGURES**

Although portions of Balthasar’s writings might suggest that he simply asserts that beauty is a transcendental without acknowledging the difficulty of the question, he in fact enters into detailed discussions of beauty’s transcendental status at a number of points. He indicates familiarity with major studies of the theme by Edgar de Bruyne, Henri Pouillon, and others, and his treatments of particular medieval figures respond to some of the most current studies available at the time. Balthasar, then, is fully aware of just how debatable his view of beauty is, and he

---

6. The most significant portions of his aesthetics are as follows: “Transcendental Aesthetics” (*GL* IV, 372–92), which treats of Philip the Chancellor, Francis of Assisi, Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great, Ulrich of Strasbourg, and Mechthild of Magdeburg; the portion of his discussion of Thomas Aquinas titled “Metaphysics as Aesthetics” (*GL* IV, 407–12); and the section of his treatment of Bonaventure titled, “The Structure of Beauty,” (*GL* II, 333–52).


seeks to address the concerns of those who might be inclined to withhold its full transcendental status. To address these questions, he turns in particular to Bonaventure’s writings.

Balthasar’s first task is to examine Bonaventure’s texts to see if he does in fact mention beauty in his list of the transcendentals. Given Balthasar’s reputation for interpreting patristic and medieval figures in a manner that supports his own theological agenda, it is surprising that he does not use a text that some claim was written by Bonaventure, as it would offer a considerable resource for his efforts. The author of that text claims that there are “four conditions of a being, namely that it be one, true, good, and beautiful.” Balthasar acknowledges that the author might have been Bonaventure in his youth, but he does not base his own argument on this text, and he refers to its author only as “the anonymous writer from Assisi.” However, using the work of Karl Peter and Emma Jane Spargo as his guides, Balthasar does bring his reader’s attention to portions of Bonaventure’s writings in which the beautiful is described as permeating all that exists. For instance, in his *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure maintains, “All [things] are beautiful and in some manner delightful.” Additionally, in Bonaventure’s commentary on Lombard’s *Sentences*, he remarks, “Whatever has being has form, and whatever has form has beauty.” Although Bonaventure’s comments about beauty are not extensive, they suggest that Bonaventure could indeed consider beauty to be coextensive with being.

What is lacking, however, in Bonaventure’s texts themselves is an articulation of the *ratio pulchri*, and Balthasar clearly holds that such

11. GL IV, 372, 383. Cf. GL II, 260. Balthasar also notes the tension between Bonaventure’s understanding of the beautiful and that of the “treatise in the Assisi Codex,” as the latter “bases the beautiful immediately and especially in the good,” but Bonaventure does not do so, according to Balthasar’s interpretation (GL II, 334).
14. With that said, Balthasar could produce a larger amount of textual evidence than he does; Spargo and Peter offer more in their treatments.
an argument should be summoned: “We must ask what the ratio pulchri is, over against the other fundamental properties of being.” Using Bonaventure’s Breviloquium as a jumping-off point, Balthasar (with Karl Peter as his guide) extends Bonaventure’s remarks in order to articulate a rationale for the transcendental status of beauty. Balthasar first considers the threefold treatment of being as one, true, and good that can be found in Bonaventure’s text itself. The one “is the basis of [being’s] numerability, because it is not separated from itself”; the true “is the basis of [being’s] ability to be known, because it is not separated from its image (species)”; the good “is the basis of [being’s] communicability, because it is not separated from what it itself does.” Balthasar then explains, “If one wished to deduce a corresponding formula for the beautiful from what Bonaventure elsewhere says about it, then (following Peter) this would have to run somewhat as follows: the beautiful is the basis of its physical appearing, because what is is not separated from being.”

The Heideggerian overtones running through this lapidary formulation are somewhat obscured in the English translation of Balthasar’s text. Balthasar’s German reads, “Das Schöne begründet sein sinnliches Erscheinen auf Grund der Ungetrenntheit des Seienden vom Sein.” Heidegger prominently deploys the term Erscheinen (“appearing”) throughout many of his writings, and the distinction between beings and being (Seienden and Sein) also plays a crucial role in his treatment of the ontological difference, which will be examined in some detail below. An alternate translation of the text that preserves this Heideggerian influence could read, “The beautiful constitutes its sensuous appearing because of [literally ‘on the ground of’] the inseparability of beings from being.” In addition to making clear that Heidegger is an interlocutor for Balthasar in his reformulation of the ratio pulchri, this rendering also has the advantage of not subtly forcing the German term sinnlich to mean specifically “physical” appearing, as the existing English translation does. As will be more firmly established below, Balthasar intends in this passage a more expansive notion of appearing that can include the nonphysical.

15. GL II, 334.
17. GL II, 335.
According, then, to Balthasar’s creative appropriation of Bonaventure’s thought, beauty adds to the concept of being in that it makes clear that being manifests. Mention of “being” alone leaves unsaid the claim that being presents itself, that the sensory dimension of being is inextricable from being itself. Furthermore, as we will examine below, Balthasar maintains that much more appears to the senses than one might initially expect. An immaterial, “invisible” dimension of being is manifested along with being’s physical, visible aspect.

Balthasar turns to his notion of form (Gestalt) to develop the idea that the depths of being show themselves to the human observer. He puts this point memorably in a frequently quoted portion of his aesthetics:

The appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, and it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths. . . . Both aspects are inseparable from one another, and together they constitute the fundamental configuration of Being. We “behold” the form; but, if we really behold it, it is not as a detached form, rather in its unity with the depths that make their appearance in it. We see form as the splendour, as the glory of Being. We are “enraptured” by our contemplation of these depths and are “transported” to them. But, so long as we are dealing with the beautiful, this never happens in such a way that we leave the (horizontal) form behind us in order to plunge (vertically) into the naked depths.19

Several features of this description of form stand out as noteworthy for our purposes. First, form has two aspects, a surface and a depth, or, as Balthasar puts it elsewhere, a material and immaterial dimension (still elsewhere, he describes these two components as “visible” and “invisible”). In every beautiful form, there is something material that is readily apparent; however, there is also something more that eludes easy observation, and Balthasar characterizes this enigmatic, immaterial aspect as the “depths” of being.

Second, these two components of the form are inseparable from one another, according to Balthasar’s model. It is not the case that the material surface is a mere husk or vehicle that provides an ultimately dispensable access to a “more real” reality lying beneath the exterior of the form. Instead, the material, particular features of the form remain tied, as it

were, to the manifesting depths. As D. C. Schindler has demonstrated, form for Balthasar cannot be reduced to its inner, unifying principle.\(^{20}\) Instead, the outer, material components of the form are permeated by the inner, immaterial aspect. The material and immaterial, then, are inextricably intertwined with one another in Balthasar’s model. As he puts this point in his *Theo-Logic*, “Beauty … is the inexplicable active irradiation of the center of being into the expressive surface of the image, an irradiation that reflects itself in the image and confers upon it a unity, fullness, and depth surpassing what the image as such contains.”\(^{21}\)

Third, this claim that the immaterial depths of being irradiate the expressive surface of the form leads to Balthasar’s notion that the depths of being, even though they are invisible to the bodily senses, nevertheless manifest themselves to the human being. They do not lie categorically hidden from view, irretrievably submerged, but instead rise up to the surface through the form and bedazzle the viewer with their splendor. Although it is counterintuitive, to say the least, to speak of the invisible showing up to the senses, this is precisely what Balthasar claims at many points throughout his corpus. For instance, in his aesthetics, he insists, “In order to read even a form within the world, we must see something invisible as well, and we do in fact see it.”\(^{22}\) We will examine below the way in which Balthasar accounts for this perception of the invisible; for the moment, however, we summarize our findings thus far.

Balthasar maintains that beauty should be considered a transcendental property of being not only because figures such as Bonaventure deploy phrases like “all [things] are beautiful,” but also because beauty adds something distinctive to the concept of being that would otherwise remain obscured. Specifically, Balthasar maintains that beauty conceptually adds to being in that it is being’s *appearing* aspect. All of being shows up, and its manifesting is its beauty. With this initial understanding of beauty in place, we now turn to the implications of Balthasar’s position.

---

22. *GL* I, 444 (emphasis added).
Balthasar on “Transcendental Sense Perception”

Balthasar’s notion that being manifests itself to the senses leads him to a number of additional claims. First, directly following from his reframing of the ratio pulchri, he makes clear that his conception of the subjective, anthropological side of this “showing” again pushes beyond Bonaventure himself. Quoting Karl Peter once more, Balthasar explains that his formulation “could be achieved ‘at a price which Bonaventure was not willing to pay … that of the elevation of sense-perception into the rank of irreducible being,’ something that the Platonic-Augustinian depreciation of sense-perception did not allow.”

Balthasar further develops this elevated model of perception as follows: “If one were to take ‘sense-perception’ as ‘a direct act of permitting to appear’ at all levels … then one might step beyond the general scholastic manner of thinking and speaking and speak of a ‘transcendental sense-perception.’” Perception, according to this understanding, functions at a number of different levels: most straightforwardly, at “the level of the five bodily senses”; one step higher, “at the level of the intellect, when it simply permits itself to be met as simplex apprehensio, before it forms any judgment”; and finally, “at the level of mysticism, where the spiritual senses permit a direct meeting with the divine essence.”

As we saw above, Balthasar advocates a model of form that mediates not only a material aspect of being as picked up by the bodily senses, but also an immaterial dimension that presents itself. This objective structure of being is complemented by the human perceptual apparatus, which consists of senses capable of perceiving both the material and the immaterial aspects of the form. Balthasar draws from the so-called “spiritual senses” tradition in order to develop the transcendental sense perception to which he alludes briefly in his treatment of beauty in Bonaventure. This tradition, beginning with Origen of Alexandria, holds that the human being can be made capable of perceiving in a non-

23. GL II, 335.
24. GL II, 335.
25. GL II, 335.
26. For a detailed account of Balthasar’s creative appropriation of the spiritual senses tradition, see Mark McInroy, Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
corporeal, “spiritual” register. Balthasar retrieves the doctrine of the spiritual senses for his theological aesthetics; in so doing, he repurposes the idea such that the spiritual senses do not perceive discrete, nonbodily entities (such as angels), but rather the immaterial dimension of the form, which shines forth as splendor from the form’s depths. In short, if being manifests not only physically but also “spiritually” (or immaterially), then the human being will need a comprehensive sensory apparatus in order to perceive both dimensions of being.

PROVOKED BY BEAUTY, LED TO WONDER: SENSING AND METAPHYSICS

As we turn to the second consequence of Balthasar’s “sensualization” of the encounter with being, we depart from his overt treatment of the ratio pulchri (and his discussion of Bonaventure), and we move to other remarks he makes throughout his corpus that can be pressed into service to address the same concern. His interlocutors here are Heidegger and Thomas Aquinas (even if they receive explicit mention only occasionally), and behind them Gustav Siewerth, who considerably shaped Balthasar’s view of this topic. To be clear, Balthasar himself does not explicitly state that these features of beauty add to the concept of being so as to establish it as a transcendent. Nonetheless, his remarks allow us to gain a firmer idea of what, exactly, beauty does for a consideration of being. In particular, our interpretive efforts will result in a more metaphysically rigorous understanding of what exactly Balthasar intends by the “depths” of being to which he refers somewhat enigmatically above.

One of Balthasar’s most significant treatments of metaphysics is developed in what he calls the “fourfold distinction,” which can be found at the conclusion of the fifth volume of his aesthetics. It is among the most well-known portions of The Glory of the Lord, yet the consistent-

27. For Origen, the cherubim and seraphim are “obvious instances” of the objects of the spiritual senses. Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 44.

ly aesthetic dimension of this multifaceted encounter with being often escapes the attention of his commentators. As I will demonstrate below, at each juncture the sensorially manifested beauty of being provokes one to an increasingly profound wonder, which in turn drives metaphysical reflection to four distinct claims.

Balthasar begins this section of his aesthetics with a prologue of sorts in which he laments the loss of wonder in philosophy: “Being becomes identical with the necessity to be, and when this identity has been taken up by reason, then there is no longer any space for wonder at the fact that there is something rather than nothing.” Balthasar insists later in the same volume that the metaphysical question is no longer asked when, as he puts it, “a fateful loss of sight ... befalls whole generations.” Interestingly, then, metaphysics begins from a primal phenomenon that involves seeing reality correctly. Part of this proper perception entails directing one’s gaze not only at that which “appears so wonderfully and ‘beautifully’ ordered within the necessity of Being,” but also at a more fundamental sort of beauty.

In an effort to develop this point, Balthasar appeals to Heidegger, even if ultimately to move beyond him. Balthasar holds that “wonder at Being is not only the beginning of thought, but—as Heidegger sees—also the permanent element (ἀρχή) in which it moves.” Astonishment at the very fact that there is anything at all should not be experienced only once and thereafter taken for granted as one goes about one’s intra-worldly investigations. Instead, wonder should be a continual attitude. On this point, Heidegger is right, as far as Balthasar is concerned. However, whereas Heidegger ultimately marvels at the fact that it is human beings who are capable of such wonder, Balthasar insists that the amaze-
ment should be directed to being itself: “This means—contrary to Heidegger—that it is not only astonishing that an existent being can wonder at Being in its own distinction from Being, but also that Being as such by itself to the very end ‘causes wonder,’ behaving as something to be wondered at, something striking and worthy of wonder.”34 It is being itself that fascinates, when seen for what it is.

With this brief exposition of the prologue in place, we turn to the fourfold distinction proper. The first distinction (which is itself multifaceted) begins with Balthasar’s famous account of the mother’s smile (borrowed from Siewerth), which the child perceives through his or her senses. To Balthasar, the smile awakens the child to the distinction between self and other, but also much more broadly to the fact that he or she has been “granted entrance into a sheltering and encompassing world.”35 This is the primal phenomenon; “the experience of being admitted is the very first thing it knows in the realm of Being.”36 A palpable love, then, fundamentally characterizes being for the child, and his or her response is pure joy at this generously bestowed gift. The child is welcomed into being as “the graciously-opened whole in which every space is granted to tumble around as much as one wills: existence as play.”37 Having distinguished oneself from the world, a twofold astonishment follows: first, one realizes, “I cannot attribute to myself . . . the degree of necessity which the world as a whole possesses.”38 The world could have been without me, could be much as it is now without my ever having existed. My own being, then, is contingent. And yet, to Balthasar, our astonishment does not stop at this fact, for we also realize, secondly, that it is not just the individual who is contingent but the world as a whole: we “can attribute to the Being of the world no necessity within itself which would excel our wonder at its existence.”39 The aesthetic character of Balthasar’s stance easily goes unnoticed here; he suggests that we experience an unsurpassable wonder at the fact that, although the world could not have been, it nevertheless is. The alternative view, that the world exists necessarily and simply as a matter of course, fails because it cannot match its rival on

34. GL V, 615.
35. GL V, 616.
36. GL V, 616 (emphasis added).
37. GL V, 617.
38. GL V, 618.
39. GL V, 618.
aesthetic grounds. Simply put, one comes to see the world as radically contingent because the beauty of the world drives one to such a conclusion. Ultimately, it is the more aesthetically rewarding view to hold.

The second distinction directly follows from awareness of the non-necessity of the world. At this stage one comes to marvel further at the fact that, “although all existents partake in Being, … they never exhaust it nor even, as it were, ‘broach’ it.” The distinction at this stage, then, is between beings and being. Regardless of how large our conception of the totality of beings might become, to Balthasar, “it still cannot match my most primitive experience of Being.” Balthasar once again configures this deepening metaphysics through beauty: “The Neoplatonists are therefore right when they refuse to identify the ‘beauty’ of the totality of that which is with the ‘glory’ of Being itself which prevails beyond it. … And in the same way Thomas Aquinas is right when he attributes to the actus essendi its own bonum-pulchrum in which the individual essentiae and the world which is constituted by them only participate.” In this stage, Balthasar suggests (in something of an Augustinian manner) that no beauty within the world can satisfy us because we have had an aesthetic encounter with a greater beauty, namely, the glory of being itself. And, although he does not explicitly refer at this point to the notion of “transcendental sense perception” or the spiritual senses tradition that he develops elsewhere, we can appreciate based on our argument above that these forms of sensation do indeed allow one to perceive being’s splendor.

One might be tempted to stop one’s search here, having penetrated to the glorious being in which all beings participate. Balthasar, however, in the third distinction moves to a somewhat unexpected deficiency in being, namely, that it requires beings in order to be actualized. After all, being as such does not subsist; it needs beings as much as beings need it. Fergus Kerr succinctly summarizes this feature of Balthasar’s thought: “Being without beings would be nothing.” In building to this distinction, Balthasar once more suggests that the key realization is a direct result of being giving itself to the senses and provoking wonder: “I cannot

40. *GL V*, 618.
42. Balthasar typically reserves the term “glory” for God. This description of the glory of being stands out as atypical.
appease [beruhigen] my primal and overpowering wonder at the fact that 'something is' through gazing at Being, in which those things participate and thus exist.”44 In other words, although the glimpse of glorious being described in the second distinction drives one beyond the beauty of beings, one’s restless wonder remains unsatisfied in looking at being alone. “Rather, my wonder is directed at both sides of the Ontological Difference, whether this is construed in Thomist or Heideggerian terms, for the fact that an existent can only become actual through participation in the act of Being points to the complementary antithesis that the fullness of Being attains actuality only in the existent.”45

Balthasar submits here that after we have been bedazzled by the depths of being, our marveling should actually be redirected at beings. Why, though, would beings be of interest after we have seen the glory of being? To Balthasar, we should return to beings because what we will see there are entities that possess essential form, which determines not simply that they are, but what they are. How exactly this possession of essential form occurs remains unresolved even after the turn to being has been made, and this enduring question should therefore cause deeper wonder. As Aidan Nichols notes the key issue, “being as such is no sufficient ground for the way that beings possess essential form.”46 Being alone rather indiscriminately brings things into existence, but what they will actually be is another issue entirely. One feels the weight of the problem, Balthasar holds, when the beings in question possess freedom, for if being is simply a “force,” it is not free, and it would not be sufficient to account for free creatures through being alone. As D. C. Schindler helpfully describes the concern, being should not be “identified with its ‘self-explication’ in beings.”47 Being should not be regarded as simply inevitably expressing itself in beings. Such a view would ultimately collapse the distinction between being and beings all over again, and it would reintroduce necessity to metaphysical speculation, even if through a more subtle means than before.

As he prepares to turn to the fourth distinction, Balthasar therefore claims that being is not sufficiently grounded. “The third distinction

44. GL V, 619.
45. GL V, 619.
47. Schindler, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth, 42.
leaves actual Being just as much . . . hanging in the air, as I found myself to be hanging in the air.”48 Both beings and being require a prior foundation. Therefore, a fourth distinction must be made, this time between being and beings together and something deeper still. “The Ontological Difference must already, as bifurcation, be referred back to a unicum.” Once again, aesthetic considerations animate the deepening metaphysic. To Balthasar, “non-subsisting Being can be secured in its ‘glory’ in the face of all that exists only if it is grounded in a subsisting freedom of absolute Being, which is God.”49 Preserving the glory of being is portrayed here as the overarching concern. If being is to live up to the glory that was first glimpsed during the second distinction, then one must account for being’s ability to grant freedom, which in turn suggests the need for ultimately free, absolute being underlying it. Crucially, too, this process is not portrayed as an exercise in logic; instead it is sensing that drives Balthasar’s metaphysics to its deepest point. In one of the most extraordinary claims for perception found throughout his aesthetics, Balthasar insists, “One’s gaze [Blick] must seek to penetrate beyond the Ontological Difference . . . to the distinction between God and world, in which God is the sole sufficient ground for both Being and the existent in its possession of form.”50 It is precisely through this penetrating gaze that one arrives at God as the ground of both being and beings.51

As a result of Balthasar’s thoroughgoing sensualization of our encounter with being, we have seen that metaphysics for him is most fundamentally a matter of seeing. When being as such is made available to the senses, it provokes an enduring wonder that leads one into an ever-deepening awareness of reality. At each step within Balthasar’s fourfold distinction, beauty exposes a new degree of contingency within being that prompts a cascading progression of metaphysical claims. Balthasar only finds an aesthetically satisfying solution in the claim that God, as Absolute Being, lies “beneath” even the most fundamental distinction

48. GL V, 625.
49. GL V, 625. Similarly, Balthasar holds, “If we close the circle, no matter how, between Being and essence (the existent), then ‘glory’ as a metaphysical category is lost” (GL V, 621).
50. GL V, 624.
51. One may be inclined to regard Balthasar’s use of terms associated with perception as simply metaphorical or figurative, such that their sensory meaning is not preserved. For a word of caution against such an interpretive move, see McInroy, Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses, esp. 1–15, 150–60, 189.
within created being. Returning to our original concern about the *ratio pulchri*, then, we can say that beauty “adds” to the concept of being an unmistakable, perceptible awareness of its non-necessity that animates a searching metaphysical quest for the ground of all that is. Subtly recasting beauty as Balthasar does, then, has far-reaching implications not only for aesthetics, but also for metaphysics and theology.

**BEAUTY AND MYSTERY: THE INASSIMILABLE ENIGMA OF BEING**

Thus far our treatment of beauty in Balthasar’s thought has focused on the extraordinary capacity of being to reveal. It is important in this final section to demonstrate that, for all the “presenting” that takes place in being’s beautiful manifestation, being does not come into full presence to those who perceive it. Instead, Balthasar emphasizes that concealing accompanies revealing (or, as he often puts it, veiling accompanies unveiling). This point underscores a final addition beauty makes to the concept of being, namely that it preserves being’s inexhaustibly mysterious character.

Balthasar periodically seems to revel in paradox, and this tendency arguably reaches its height in his treatment of our theme. In the portion of his *Theo-Logic* titled “Unveiling and Veiling,” he announces, “Precisely the unveiledness of being is as such its deep veiling;”52 he also proclaims, “The essence, while appearing, always also remains hidden in its intimacy.”53 What is Balthasar saying here, and what is at stake in his formulation?

We receive a glimpse of Balthasar’s concern later in the same section, in which he explains, “Insofar as the appearances emerge from this ontological depth, this depth becomes manifest as the precious and holy mystery of being, whose sheer interiority protects it from absolute alienation and objectification.”54 To Balthasar, then, the fact that being will always remain in a crucial respect hidden ensures that it will not be objectified by the human observer. Along similar lines, later in his *Theo-Logic*, Balthasar describes beauty as follows: “Beauty is in the first instance the

immediate manifestation of the never-to-be mastered excess of manifestation contained in everything manifest, of the eternal ‘ever more’ implicit in the essence of every being.’

Although the imagery consists in this instance of an overwhelming plenitude, rather than undisclosed depth, the overarching message bears affinities with that of the previous quotation. Being-as-beauty resists appropriation; it cannot be mastered. More straightforwardly, Balthasar at one point simply claims, “Beauty … cannot be fit into any definition.”

Interestingly, rather than frustrating one to the point that he or she gives up and moves on, this resistant aspect of being actually enthralls. Balthasar develops this idea in the first volume of his aesthetics: “Along with the seen surface of the manifestation there is perceived the non-manifested depth: it is only this which lends the phenomenon of the beautiful its enrapturing and overwhelming character.”

Beauty presents us with something inassimilable, yet we actually enjoy the frustration it occasions.

To speak of the beauty of being, then, makes clear that being is fundamentally characterized by a mystery that will never be overcome or explained by human beings. “The kingdom of beauty (of the Thomist esse non subsistens) is as a whole, as being … only comprehensible as mysterium, which is, as a hidden primordial ground, radiant glory.”

More succinctly, Balthasar holds that there is a “mysterious shining which inheres within Being.” Returning once more to the question of the ratio pulchri, we can say that beauty further adds to the concept of being by conveying and protecting the mystery that lies at the heart of all that is.

With this important corrective issued in order to guard against a possible misunderstanding of our above emphasis on being manifesting itself through beauty, we must also make clear that there are some views of mystery that Balthasar will not countenance. First, in the context of our treatment of the fourfold distinction above, Balthasar insists, “It is therefore impossible to allow, as Heidegger does, the distinction between Being and the existent to be suspended as an ultimate mystery.”

57. GL I, 442.
58. GL IV, 375.
59. GL V, 632.
60. GL V, 624.
can, in effect, play one’s “mystery card” too early in one’s metaphysical searching. Heidegger’s approach, according to which the difference between being and beings is the unsurpassable mystery, results in a truncated looking that never penetrates to the deepest metaphysical level. One must push through some mysteries in order to find the proper balance between revealing and concealing.

Second, along similar lines, Oleg Bychkov has recently distinguished Balthasar’s thought from those attempts at avoiding ontotheology that heighten the mysteriousness of God through a radically apophatic approach. Bychkov suggests that Balthasar succeeds in preserving the mystery of God while nevertheless emphasizing that we are given “something to see, some form and structure.” Analogous claims could be made of being, namely, that being presents something to the human observer even as it remains mysterious; its depths are not categorically hidden from view and unknown. This nuancing of Balthasar’s emphasis on mystery helpfully draws out the fact that one need not choose between either attempting to know comprehensively or relinquishing all claims to knowledge in the name of epistemological humility. Instead, Balthasar offers a model whereby the beauty of being does indeed present a “shining,” a showing forth, that does not submit to mastery, but that nonetheless displays extraordinary aspects of being to the human observer.

CONCLUSION

Although we risk misleadingly separating beauty from the other transcendentals by emphasizing its distinctive addition to the concept of being, our examination has sought to elucidate the manner in which Balthasar both explicitly and implicitly establishes beauty as a transcendental. In this effort, we have advanced a fundamental claim from which three sets of consequences follow. Most centrally, Balthasar synthesizes and extends Bonaventure’s somewhat scattered remarks on beauty in order to claim that the ratio pulchri should be organized around the idea that beauty is being’s manifesting aspect. Further, as examined in some detail, Balthasar holds that even the invisible depths of being manifest themselves to the human observer.

62. Ibid.
Following from this foundational claim, we saw, first, that the senses (described as “transcendental” or “spiritual”) play a crucial role in apprehending being, not only in its material manifestations but also in its immaterial depths. Additionally, we argued that, to Balthasar, the beauty of being provokes wonder at being as a whole, and that aesthetic experience therefore animates a profound, multilayered response to the metaphysical question. Lastly, we noted that speaking of being as beautiful highlights the inherently mysterious nature of being. Ultimately, these claims should not be confined to examinations of Balthasar’s thought; instead they stand to inform discussions of the transcendental status of beauty in philosophy and theology today as scholars continue to debate the nature and place of beauty.
Beauty, according to Thomas Aquinas, is attributed to those things that please when seen (*quaes visa placent*). The significance of this lapidary description is obscure, especially as it pertains to aesthetic perception.
and Aquinas’s doctrine of beauty. If taken literally and univocally, does this description exclude beauty that is heard, tasted, smelled, or felt? What about the intelligible beauty of poetry, a rhetorical argument, a perfect mathematical demonstration, a person of exemplary moral character, or the intellectual vision of God? Furthermore, what could it mean for vision, a power of sensory apprehension, to be pleased—pleasure being a passion in a sensory appetite? Alternatively, if this description of beauty is just a colorful metaphor, then it tells us very little about the details of Aquinas’s understanding of human aesthetic perception of beauty.

A similar series of questions concern the beautiful itself, the object of that visa placent. Is beauty a mere per se sensible that is confined to the proper sensible of color and such visible common sensibles as motion, rest, number, magnitude, and shape? What about the myriad forms of embodied intelligible beauty found throughout nature and art? Such forms of beauty seem to be neither mere per se sensibles nor strictly immaterial intelligibilities, but fully enmattered and yet intelligible manifestations of beauty, like the beauty of the Crucified.

My primary concern in this essay is to address these exegetical questions by fleshing out the implications of Aquinas’s explicit remarks and positions on beauty and human perception with a view to a constructive Thomist account of aesthetic perception. There is no shortage of works that bring together Aquinas, beauty, fine art, and aesthetics in some fashion or other.2 The authors of these works are right to begin with a hermeneutical prolegomenon that makes clear why neither an aesthetic theory

---

nor a philosophy of the fine arts can be ascribed to Aquinas. “All we find in [his writings] are the elements of a calology which might have been suggested to him by a reading of the Neo-Platonist Dionysius the Areopagite.”

Unlike being, thing, one, truth, and goodness, Aquinas does not dedicate any *quaestio* to beauty. Attempts to present a Thomist calology, theory of fine arts, or even a Thomist aesthetics require engaging in a constructive hermeneutical project, one that comprises looking to a range of texts on diverse topics that occasioned some comments on beauty by Aquinas. Mark Jordan nicely sums up the challenges facing exegetes interested in the application of Aquinas’s thought to beauty and aesthetics.

The existing remarks [by Thomas] on beauty ought then to be read as just what they are, namely, asides in discussions directed to other ends. The remarks are not to be dismissed, but neither are they to be treated as if they came from a full-scale work on the beautiful, structured according to Thomas’ judgment and supplied with justifications and explicit reasonings. Such scattered remarks must be treated, not as fragments of an accidentally missing whole, but as specimens of a variegated language that might have been reworked by Thomas into a single account.

In this essay, I draw upon a number of erudite studies on beauty and aesthetics in Aquinas, studies that have already completed the exegetical heavy lifting required for saying something constructive about Aquinas and aesthetic perception. I will define “aesthetic perception” in the course of addressing the parade of questions introduced earlier. Before we clarify the psychology of aesthetic perception and the experience of admiring beauty, we first must say what Aquinas took beauty to be. Once beauty as an object of perception enters more clearly into view, we can then apply Aquinas’s psychological taxonomy to differentiate which operations and powers enable us to admire beautiful objects.

**AQUINAS ON BEAUTY**

A thicket of obstacles stands in the way of investigating Aquinas’s view on beautiful objects admired by aesthetic perception. Fortunately, much of the brush has been cleared away by the aforementioned erudite stud-
ies; these pathfinding works will direct us on our way by highlighting a number of issues about beauty that we must take a position on before moving on. I begin with an easy one: whether Aquinas describes beauty as *id quod visum placet*.

At least since the publication of Jacques Maritain’s fine book *Art and Scholasticism*, many authors have mistakenly ascribed to Aquinas the description of beauty as *id quod visum placet*. Pithy as it is, this exact statement cannot be found in Aquinas. It is, nevertheless, a defensible interpretation of what Aquinas says in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1, namely, *pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*. This account of beauty shows up in Aquinas’s treatment of the good in general and its connection to formal causality.

Good and beautiful are the same in the subject, since they are grounded in the same reality, viz., the form, and it is for this reason that the good is praised as beautiful. However, they differ conceptually. For good has to do properly with desire, since everything desires the good. And because of this it has the nature of an end, since desire is, as it were, a sort of movement toward a thing. Beautiful, on the other hand, has to do with the cognitive power. For things are called beautiful because they are pleasing to look at. *Pulchrum autem respicit vim cognoscitivam, pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent.* Hence, the beautiful consists in due proportion, since the sensory power delights in things that are duly proportioned, because they are similar to it. For the sensory power, like every cognitive power, involves a kind of proportion. And because cognition is accomplished through assimilation, and because similarity has to do with form, the beautiful properly pertains to the nature of a formal cause.5

This text answers a few other questions for us as well. Here is another easy question: does beauty pertain to appetition or cognition? Aquinas tells us that beauty and the good are the same in subject, since they are both rooted in the form of any reality; however, they highlight distinct aspects (*rationes*) of that reality. It is the good that pertains to appetite or desire, not beauty; beauty pertains to cognition, for it is that which pleases when seen. Is beauty restricted to sight? Aquinas often employs the language of *vision* metonymically, and sometimes analogically and metaphorically, to stand for cognitive powers and operations in general.6

5. *ST* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1 (trans. Freddoso; emphasis added).
6. Aquinas often employs the language of vision and seeing to describe the operations of
Even though Aquinas does not say so here, elsewhere he makes clear that beauty is not proprietary to the power of vision.

The beautiful is the same as the good and differs from it only in concept (sola ratione). For since the good is what all things desire, it is part of the notion of the good that the appetite comes to rest in it, whereas it is part of the notion of the beautiful that the appetite comes to rest in beholding it or knowing it [sed ad rationem pulchri pertinet quod in eius aspectu seu cognitione quietetur appetitus]. Hence, the senses that are principally directed toward the beautiful are those that are especially cognitive, viz., seeing and hearing at the service of reason. For we talk of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. By contrast, in the case of the sensible objects of the other senses, we do not use the name “beauty.” For instance, we do not call tastes and odors “beautiful.” So it is clear that beautiful adds to good a certain ordering toward the cognitive power, so that the good is that which pleases the appetite absolutely speaking, whereas the beautiful is such that the apprehension of it is itself pleasing [pulchrum autem dicatur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet].

Aquinas clearly affirms that the appreciation of beauty is not confined to seeing beautiful visible objects. Beautiful things can be admired through a variety of sensible media, even if ordinary language tends to focus chiefly on sights and sounds and does not readily lend itself to describe the pleasures of smell, taste, and touch as beautiful. Beauty, however, is not restricted to the sensible; moral action and intellectual speculation manifest beauty as an intelligible reality. Beauty is found preeminently in God, who transcends creation, for the beauty of the creature is nothing other than a likeness of the divine beauty that is in created things by virtue of their participation in divine beauty. So beauty, for Aquinas, spans across the created orders of being to the uncreated divine beauty that all created sensible and intelligible beauty imitates.

Aquinas claims that beauty is distinct from the good insofar as it is distinct from the intellect, especially in the case of the beatific vision. ST I, q. 12, aa. 1–4 (esp. q. 12, a. 3, ad 3); ST II-II, q. 73, a. 2; ST II-II, q. 74, a. 1, ad 3; ST II-II, q. 74, a. 2; ST III, Suppl., q. 92, aa. 1–2.

7. ST I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3 (mod. trans. Freddoso).

8. ST I-II, q. 109, a. 7; ST II-II, q. 116, a. 2, ad 2; ST II-II, q. 145, aa. 2–3; ST II-II, q. 180, a. 2, ad 3; ST III, q. 87, a. 2, ad 3; Maurer, About Beauty, chaps. 4 and 6.


10. Maurer’s About Beauty details this ascendency from the beauty of creation to the beauty of the human person and art to divine beauty.
(1) cognitive, (2) brings the appetite to rest through a pleasing apprehension, and (3) concerns formal causes. The good pertains to the form of being as a final cause that draws and moves the appetite to a being that is not yet possessed. Beauty calms the appetite by cognizing the splendor of a being’s form; beholding the beautiful quiets the appetite. In short, beauty is convertible with the good since they share the same subject in reality. They are, however, distinct in notion (ratio) insofar as beauty signifies these three characteristics not signified by the good.

These three characteristics of beauty, especially its connection to cognition, might puzzle some of Aquinas’s readers. This is because Aquinas states in a variety of works that truth and goodness are the same in subject, but distinct in notion (ratio) insofar as truth concerns being as cognized or known, and the good concerns the very same being as desired. Aquinas’s association of beauty with cognition raises the issue: what distinguishes beauty from truth? This question hits upon the central concern of this essay. While a more nuanced answer will be forthcoming, we can be satisfied for now with the claim that the difference between beauty and truth is found in the way beauty integrates a pleasing cognitive apprehension with an appetite resting in admiration.

Does this mean that beauty is simply the unity, synthesis, or nexus of being, one, truth, and goodness? Maritain once contended that beauty “is in fact the splendor of all the transcendentals together.” As Eco points out, Maritain’s claim, “if it is not in the nature of a conclusive discovery it is at least well expressed.” I shall be at pains to show that we can arrive at a more exact answer than Maritain’s felicitous claim. But before we do so, we must first take a stand on beauty as a transcendental in Aquinas, and then distinguish between beauty that is a transcendental from the instances of transcendental beauty that evoke aesthetic experiences in human persons.

11. Aquinas appropriated this trio of characteristics of beauty from Albert the Great. For the influence of Aquinas’s predecessors on his account of beauty, see Eco, Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas; Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals; Jordan, “Beauty.”

12. “In contrast to the desire of the good, the experience of the beautiful is disinterested” (Maurer, About Beauty, 18).


Is Beauty a Transcendental for Aquinas?

Is beauty a transcendental for Aquinas? Debates over Aquinas’s “doctrine of the transcendentals of being” can go awry in a number of ways, independent from complications pertaining to Aquinas’s scattered remarks on beauty. I will flag two problematic approaches relevant to beauty. First, it is misleading and anachronistic to read into Aquinas a more determinate form of a question than is merited by any of his treatments of the “transcendentals of being.” While Thomas does discuss nominum transcendentium (De veritate 21.3), modus generalis consequens omne ens (De veritate 1.1), and similar expressions, Aquinas does not take up the precise question of what the transcendencia are, and he never asks our question of whether pulchrum is among the transcendencia. Second, concerns about historical exactness and hermeneutical precision do not render our question unanswerable. Indeed, we would overlook another historical point of importance if we took these potentially anachronistic oversights to suggest that there can be no adequate formulation of the question. For we can say at least this much: Aquinas has a clear doctrine of “transcategorical notions”—that is, notions that can be truthfully said intra-categorically of substance, quantity, quality, etc. and extracategorically of God—that are analogically convertible with being. These notions are, in Aquinas’s own words, “in transcendentibus, quae circumvent omne ens.” He states that “one naturally belongs to all of the different categories and not just to one of them; that is, it does not pertain just to substance or to quantity or to any other category. The same thing is also true of being.” Furthermore, Aquinas clearly understands his treatment of these transcategorical notions (ens, res, unum, aliquid, verum, bonum, pulchrum, etc.) said analogically of creatures and God to be contributing to a discussion that includes such participants as Albert the Great, Philip the Chancellor, Avicenna, Pseudo-Dionysius, Boethius, Aristotle, and others. Those who later codified these discussions as concerning the doctrine of the transcendentals were justified in doing so.

15. Aquinas uses the term transcendencia fourteen times in the sense relevant to the transcendentals (Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals, 91n52). As Aertsen notes, the term is not used in the three basic texts on the transcendentals, but it does appear in De veritate 21.3 (Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals, 335).
16. De virtutibus, q. 1, a. 2 ad 8.
17. In X Meta. lt. 3, n. 1975 (mod. trans.).
Where then does that leave our question about transcendental beauty? The importance of flagging these worries—ostensibly pedantic for some and anachronistic for others—becomes obvious when we are prompted to take a stand on whether Aquinas included beauty among the transcendentals. One of the most prevalent arguments against its inclusion draws attention to the absence of *pulchrum* from the lists of transcendentals presented by Aquinas in the three basic texts on his “doctrine of the transcendentals of being.”18 These texts are *In I Sent.* 8.1.3, *De veritate* 1.1, and *De veritate* 21.1. The plausibility of this argument from omission is controverted by its reliance on two anachronistic assumptions. First, there is the baseless assumption that these “three basic texts” contain Aquinas’s overt presentation of his “doctrine of the transcendentals of being.” Second, there is the untenable conjecture that Aquinas’s aim in these passages is to present a decisive canonical statement concerning which notions count as transcendentals.

It would take us too far afield to address all the difficulties with these problematic assumptions, assumptions that are frequently shared by defenders and critics alike of the transcendental status of beauty in Aquinas. Let us instead be satisfied with pointing out, first, that a *quaestio* on the transcendentals of being never arises in Aquinas’s own words. Second, the overt questions addressed in the so-called “three basic texts” on the transcendentals are never about the transcendentals. Aquinas never mentions the term “transcendentia” in any of these texts.19 Third, each of these three basic texts neither presents the exact same transcendental notions—although they all present *ens, unum, verum,* and *bonum*—nor provides the same rationale for how each is to be distinguished. To be clear, these three texts certainly are the best place to begin for any coherent interpretation of Aquinas’s understanding of the transcendentals of being, but let us not confuse Aquinas’s intention to answer some question through a presentation of the transcategorical notions convertible with being (*ens*), with our own questions about Aquinas’s doctrine of the transcendentals. In sum, along with Maritain, Gilson, Eco, Maurer, Jordan, and many oth-

---

18. “If the beautiful were such a central transcendental for Thomas, as they suggest, why does he omit it in his most complete account in *De veritate* 1.1?” (Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, 336).

19. See note 15 above. *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 3 is on “Utrum hoc nomen qui est sit primum inter nomina divina.” *DV* 1.1 concerns “quid est veritas” (Leon. 3:2) and *DV* 21.1 addresses “utrum bonum alicui addat super ens” (Leon. 591:2).
ers, I think this argument from omission fails to demonstrate anything relevant to the transcendental status of beauty in Aquinas.

Few scholars have contributed more to our understanding of medieval doctrines of the transcendentals than Jan Aertsen. Given his erudition on the subject, we should examine carefully why Aertsen rejects the view that beauty is a transcendental in Aquinas. Aertsen presents another argument from omission against the transcendental status of beauty in Aquinas. To be fair, any contention that beauty is a transcendental for Aquinas requires several hermeneutically debatable presumptions. Since Aquinas provides no overt claims about beauty being a transcendental, any illation in its favor rests on the implications of what Aquinas does say about the transcendentals and beauty. The contention introduced by Aertsen, however, concerns the criteria for being a transcendental according to Aquinas. Most interpreters of Aquinas take convertibility with being to be a sufficient criterion for graduating a notion to the rank of a transcendental. Convertibility with being requires that a notion be universal in scope and share in the same subject as being, but add a notion (ratio) or intention (intentio) to being that is not signified by being. Said otherwise, the transcendentals of being have the same extension as being, but are distinct in intension. Aertsen seems to affix another criterion to this, namely, that transcendental notions are those Aquinas has explicitly subordinated to being. Unlike res, unum, verum, and bonum, beauty fails in this respect. This is because the most important textual evidence appealed to by defenders of the transcendental status of beauty never evince Aquinas stating that beauty is convertible with being, but only that beauty is convertible with the good.

20. Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals, chap. 8, 335–59. Two recent treatments of beauty in Aquinas by O’Reilly and Sevier both concede that Aertsen’s arguments against the transcendality of beauty are at least persuasive, if not decisive, and that they have not yet been adequately responded to (see O’Reilly, Aesthetic Perception, 108; Sevier, Aquinas on Beauty, 125–26). I contend to the contrary that Aertsen’s arguments are not persuasive, are far from decisive, and were adequately anticipated and resolved by the interpretations of Eco and others. Indeed, it is Aertsen who has failed to address adequately the cogent interpretations of his predecessors.

21. This universality encompasses the way transcendental notions can be truthfully predicated analogously of created beings and the uncreated divine being. Beauty meets this universality for Aquinas, who attributes it both to creatures and to God; it is because God is beautiful that God creates creatures that are beautiful. See Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals, chap. 9, 336–415; Jordan, “Beauty;” Maurer, About Beauty; Gilson, Elements of Christian Philosophy, chap. 6; Ramos, Dynamic Transcendentals, chap. 1.
The guideline in our investigation is the thesis that the question as to the transcendentality of the beautiful cannot be resolved until it has become clear what universal mode of being the beautiful expresses that is not yet expressed by the other transcendentals, and what its place is in the order of these properties. The result of our inquiry will prove to be diametrically opposed to the dominant trend in modern research. Beauty is not a “forgotten” transcendental; the view that it is a distinctive transcendental finds no support in Thomas’s work.22

Aertsen concludes that “the attempts of various scholars to find a distinct place for beauty as a transcendental must be regarded as having failed.”23

But even granting Aertsen’s exegetical correction (a point Eco had already made),24 namely, that Aquinas never states beauty is convertible with being, only that it is convertible with good, few defenders of the transcendental status of beauty will find Aertsen’s interpretation convincing. After all, Aertsen’s interpretation of the passage on the convertibility of beauty and good quoted from Summa theologiae I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1 requires that we regard Aquinas’s treatment of the convertibility of being and good from the opening article of the same question (Summa theologiae I, q. 5, a. 1, and ad 1) as irrelevant to the convertibility of beauty with being. If Aquinas holds that being is absolutely universal, and the good is convertible with being but adds a notion to being, and beauty is convertible with good and adds a notion to the good, then it seems beauty must be convertible with being and adds a notion to being not signified by being or good. Just as there is some being that moves desire and so is good, so also is there not some being that evokes pleasure when cognized and so is admired as beautiful? Because Aquinas has unequivocally asserted that beauty is convertible with the good and that the good is convertible with being, the inference to the analogical convertibility of beauty with being seems so straightforward as not to merit rehearsal. Aertsen anticipated this objection from the transitivity of extensional identity.

If one should object that the good is convertible with being and that an addition to the good therefore implies an addition to being, then the place of the beautiful remains problematic in this argumentation. According to Thomas the beautiful adds “an ordering to the cognitive power,” but in his order of the transcendentals, the good presupposes the true and the relation to the cognitive power

22. Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals, 337.
23. Ibid., 353.
is that which “the true” adds to “being.” One can therefore not interpret the addition of the beautiful to the good in such a way that this addition would be equivalent to an addition to being.25

Aertsen’s response is far from clear, and it is particularly disappointing as a critique of Eco’s interpretation. This last point is noteworthy because Aertsen’s analysis of the arguments for and against the transcendentality of beauty seem to follow closely the dialectical arguments presented by Eco, who concluded in favor of the transcendental status of beauty in Aquinas. Aertsen essentially rehearses the dialectic of Eco, but arrives at a different conclusion. Why?

Eco contends that the two texts quoted earlier from the *Summa theologiae*, seen in light of Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Divine Names*, provide “definitive” evidence that beauty is a transcendental: “Beauty is identified with being simply as being. This theory is implicit rather than explicit, however; Aquinas never expressly states that ens and bonum and pulchrum are interchangeable. Instead, beauty adheres to being only through the mediation of the good.”26 Aquinas’s texts make clear that beauty is not simply identical to the good but adds a notion to the good, namely, the characteristics mentioned earlier: formal over final causality, ordered to cognition over appetition, and appetitive rest over movement. “Furthermore, and this is of great importance, both of them are grounded in form, which means that they are grounded in actuality, in the concreteness of being. They can be identified, therefore, with ens or being.”27

Aertsen concedes that beauty adds these notions to the good, but nevertheless insists that beauty merely specifies the good without adding any notion to being. In response to Eco’s conclusion, Aertsen contends:

But this “definitive” conclusion can certainly not be inferred from these two texts. The beautiful is not identified with being, but with the good. The two texts in fact present a further elaboration of Thomas’s observation in his commentary on Dionysius that the beautiful adds to the good a relation to the cognitive power. But in both texts the transcendental status of the beautiful remains unclear.28

But this response only goes halfway and even misrepresents Eco’s carefully worked-out interpretation. As we just saw, Eco is very clear here; he did not say Aquinas explicitly connects beauty with being, but with the good, which mediates its implicit connection with being. Moreover, Aertsen himself presents as the correct interpretation of Aquinas the view that the one mediates what truth adds to being, and truth mediates what the good adds to being. So Aertsen cannot, without being inconsistent, object to the view that Aquinas holds that the good mediates the connection beauty has to being. More importantly, what Aertsen fails to engage is Eco’s argument that, by grounding beauty and the good in form, Aquinas has connected beauty to being. I think the cogency of Eco’s interpretation here and Aertsen’s failure to address it reveal the implausibility of Aertsen’s view and the groundlessness of his insistence that beauty adds a notion to the good, but does not add any notion to being.

Aertsen does have another line of argumentation that, while unable to dislodge the interpretation of Eco, Maurer, and others, might actually show (contrary to Aertsen’s intentions) that Aquinas’s collective remarks on beauty amount to no more than an incoherent collage. In his critique of various efforts to develop Maritain’s claim that beauty is the splendor and synthesis of the transcendentals, Aertsen argues:

It is doubtful whether this “synthetic” view of the beautiful fits into the doctrine of transcendentals. Transcendentals do not stand apart from each other, but are marked by a progressive explication of being. As we found in the previous chapters, there is an order of the transcendentals: being is the first, next comes the one, then the true, and finally the good. In this order, what is later includes conceptually what is earlier: the good presupposes the true. Given this cumulative structure, there is no reason (and no room) for a unique transcendental, the beautiful, that would synthesize the other transcendentals. Transcendentals


have as such a real unity, which is founded in the first, “being,” and a conceptual order, which is completed in the ultimate, the “good.”

Based on this and earlier quotes, Aertsen’s counterargument for why beauty cannot be a transcendental seems to be twofold: first, beauty does not (and cannot) add a notion to being not already signified by truth and goodness. The relation of being to cognition and appetition exhausts the possibilities of notional amplifications of being. Second, if beauty were a transcendental, then it would undermine the “order of the transcendentals” insofar as beauty requires both being posterior to the good because it adds a notional specification to the good, and yet being prior to the good, like the true, because it is related to cognition.

Aertsen’s counterargument fails on both fronts. First, given Aertsen’s own criterion, if “the beautiful expresses a general mode of being” by adding a notion to being not signified by any of the other transcendentals, then “it would have to be included on the list as a new transcendental.”

But Aquinas maintains—as Aertsen clearly details for us—that beauty does add a notion to the good not signified by the good. And since the good adds appetition to being, and beauty adds pleasing cognition to the good, and since there is no instance of good that is not an instance of being, and no instance of beauty that is not an instance of good, then these specifications of the good are also specifications of being. Aertsen needs to show that what beauty adds to good is not thereby also a notional amplification of being. This brings us to the second feature of Aertsen’s argument, namely, that there is no room for beauty within the conceptual ordering of the transcendentals of being.

The difficulty with this argument is that few defenders of the transcendentality of beauty would hold that beauty must be conceptually prior to the good due to its relation to cognition; indeed, we have seen that this is not Eco’s view. Aertsen is correct that for Aquinas the true is conceptually prior to the good, and that beauty is conceptually posterior to the good. Beauty adds to being a notional amplification that is mediated

33. Ibid., 344.
34. “[Aquinas] does distance himself from Dionysius by claiming that the beautiful adds a relation to the cognitive power, a new element that will still have to engage our attention…. But what the beautiful adds is an addition to the good. Thomas follows the Dionysian perspective in seeing the beautiful in connection with the good” (ibid.).
through its posteriority to the good, which is posterior to the true; beauty is not to be conceptually interposed between the true and the good. What beauty adds, then, is something new to cognition and appetition that is not denoted by truth and goodness. Aertsen insists that there is no room for this interpolation because cognition and appetition exhaust the notions that can be added to being. This is where Aertsen is mistaken, and the presentation of aesthetic perception in the second half of this essay will bring this point home. Beauty does add a new notion to being, namely, a perfection of a cognition and appetition nexus that is not signified by cognition as such or appetite as such. Consequently, beauty can be included among Aquinas’s transcendentals of being.

In sum, in order to hold that beauty is a transcendental of being for Aquinas, it is crucial to be clear about one’s understanding of Aquinas’s criteria for transcendentals. I have taken for granted the work of those scholars who have argued that the criteria for being a transcendental requires that a notion is said of all, is analogically convertible with any other primary notion—that is, it shares the same in subject but adds a new notion—and so is ultimately convertible with being. In short, a transcendental is any notion that is convertible with being insofar as it has the same extension as being, but adds a distinct intension to it. If this is a correct interpretation of Aquinas, then beauty belongs among the transcendentals of being because it adds to being—in subordination to the notions added by res, unum, verum, bonum—the notion of quae visa placent.

**Beauty as Quoad Nos and Quoad Se**

At this point we must address whether Aquinas’s description of beauty in terms of that quae visa placent introduces a subjective factor into the idea of being that undermines its status as a transcendental. On this front, we can agree with Aertsen’s interpretation, which is applicable to the transcendentals of truth and goodness as well. The good is that which all things desire, and beauty is that which all things are pleased by when cognized, which I will simplify by the term “admire.” Aertsen shows that this “definition of the good is a definition per posteriora, in which the good is determined through its proper effect. The definition of beauty has a similar structure. The phrase quae visa placent defines the

35. *DV* 21.3.
beautiful not through its essence but through what is posterior to it. Thomas’s definition does not introduce a subjective condition of beauty so much as it determines the beautiful from its proper effect.”\(^{36}\) As Aquinas makes clear, “Something is not beautiful because we love it; rather, it is loved by us because it is beautiful and good.”\(^{37}\) Just as the intelligibility of being as truth grounds knowledge and its desirability as good elicits appetition, so being as beautiful evokes admiration or pleasing cognition. Accordingly, \textit{quae visa placent} does not tell us what beauty is, but what it evokes in relation to us. So what is beauty in itself?

Answering the question of beauty in itself, and appreciating why Aquinas uses the phrase \textit{quae visa placent} to describe beauty, can be clarified by introducing an Aristotelian distinction that Aquinas employs programmatically, namely, the distinction between things considered in relation to us (\textit{quoad nos}) and things considered in relation to themselves (\textit{quoad se}). Human experiences of being as true, good, and beautiful provide the basis for epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. This is to understand true, good, and beautiful \textit{quoad nos}. But in metaphysics we consider them \textit{quoad se}, and our metaphysical enquiries reveal that, just as being does not depend upon humans, so neither do truth, goodness, and beauty. Indeed, metaphysics establishes that the instances of being, truth, goodness, and beauty that we encounter in relation to us are grounded in reality itself, which ultimately depends on the creative power of God. In short, the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty are not confined to beings as related to us (\textit{quoad nos}), but pertain to every being in itself (\textit{quoad se}) in virtue of actually existing. Accordingly, since every enquiry commences with things in relation to us before transitioning to what they are in themselves, it is appropriate for Aquinas to include the phrase \textit{quae visa placent} within his account of beauty as related to our aesthetic experiences of it.\(^{38}\)

The relation to cognition, appetition, and admiration does not disappear when we turn to the transcendental enquiry into truth, goodness, and beauty in themselves. Truth, goodness, and beauty are essentially

\(^{36}\) Aertsen, \textit{Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals}, 337–38. For a more detailed treatment of this point, see ibid., chap. 73.


\(^{38}\) Similar connections are developed at length in Ramos, \textit{Dynamic Transcendentals}, chap. 9.
transcendental of being, but this relationality cannot depend upon the finite capacity of humans to know being as true, desire it as good, and admire it as beautiful. This is because the totality of beings, not just the very limited subset of beings humans actually encounter, are true, good, and beautiful. It is the divine being that creatively endows all of being to be knowable, lovable, and admirable.

As far as we know, we are lone spectators of the cosmic scene. God, of course, always knows his universe and enjoys its beauty; so too do the angels. But until the coming of the human race the universe did not exist as an aesthetic object: there was no aesthetic experience, for there was no intelligence incarnated in a body and administered by bodily senses. Though the universe then possessed its natural or physical existence, it had yet no aesthetic existence. 39

In the absence of humans, being would still exhibit the characteristics of truth, goodness, and beauty, but in the absence of God, being would not be at all. 40

Beauty as Claritas and Proportio

The fundamental characteristics of beauty and beautiful beings as identified by Aquinas enable beauty quoad nos to disclose to us beauty quoad se, which directs us to divine beauty. 41 Most of the literature on beauty in Aquinas has drawn attention to the characteristics of actuality, perfection, form, proportion, integrity, and radiance, all of which Aquinas employs to describe pulchritudo, formositas, decorum, and species. The locus classicus is Summa theologiae I, q. 39, a. 8, wherein Aquinas identifies three features of beauty, all of which are appropriately said of the divine Word. First there is integrity (integritas) and wholeness or perfection (perfectio); second there is due proportion (debita proportio) and harmony (consonantia); third there is claritas, which is often translated as “radiance,” but which I shall leave untranslated. God is beauty, claritas itself, and all of creation imitates that beauty in virtue of its creation

40. Aquinas arrives at precisely the same conclusion in DV 1,2. Eco, Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, 190–92; Maurer, About Beauty, chaps. 3, 6. Francis Kovach overlooks this aspect of the transcendentals of created beings and their dependency on God; see Francis J. Kovach, “The Transcendentality of Beauty Revisited,” New Scholasticism 52, no. 3 (1978): 404–12 (esp. 404–5).
41. Maurer, About Beauty; Ramos, Dynamic Transcendentals; Gilson, Elements of Christian Philosophy, chap. 6.
through the divine Word; consequently, all of creation is beautiful insofar as it exhibits in a created finite fashion these characteristics of divine beauty.\footnote{42}

Aertsen and Jordan have both raised reasonable words of caution about these collations of descriptions of beauty from Aquinas, some of which fail to exhibit exegetical circumspection concerning the context from which they have been taken.\footnote{43} “The variety of locutions does not indicate self-contradiction or radical development in Thomas’ thought. It means only that the definition of beauty in terms of three features ought not to be treated as canonical. Indeed, if we were to proceed by textual frequency alone, then the typical Thomist definition of the beautiful would contain only two terms, ‘\textit{claritas}’ or ‘\textit{splendor}’ and ‘\textit{consonantia}’ or ‘\textit{proportio}.’”\footnote{44} We can focus our attention on these two undisputed features of beauty without taking a stand on whether the other purported features of beauty belong to Aquinas’s general calology.

After a thorough survey of Aquinas’s use of the term \textit{claritas}, Jordan concludes that \textit{claritas} is “the most characteristic feature of beauty” in Aquinas.\footnote{45} But what does \textit{claritas} mean? Jordan distinguishes between Aquinas’s paradigmatic and transferred meanings of the term \textit{claritas}. Primarily, Aquinas uses \textit{claritas} to describe light in its various manifestations and forms of radiation:

Only when we translate \textit{claritas} as brightness, brilliance, or radiance, can we understand its uses in transferred senses or in describing the moral or the miraculous. One metaphorical sense appears in linking \textit{claritas} with glory, reputation, or revelation. “\textit{Claritas},” Thomas argues, implies making something evident, making it conspicuous or manifest, and so “\textit{clarificari}” is used interchangeably in Scripture with “\textit{glorificari}.” \textit{Claritas} is used regularly to describe the radiance of God’s appearing.\footnote{46}

Aquinas transposes metaphors of light as well as the language of \textit{claritas} into his account of the natural light of intelligibility and intellectu-

\footnote{42. Drawing on Aquinas’s claims that “omnis autem forma, per quam res habet esse, est participation quaedam divinae claritas” (\textit{In Div. Nom. IV}, lt. 5, n. 349, p. 114) and “forma autem est quaedam irradiatio proveniens ex prima claritate” (\textit{In Div. Nom. IV}, lt. 5, n. 360, p. 118), Maurer shows how the \textit{claritas} of form is a participation in divine \textit{claritas} (Maurer, \textit{About Beauty}, 9–19 and chap. 6).
44. Ibid., 396.
45. Ibid., 395–99ff.
46. Ibid., 398. Ramos, \textit{Dynamic Transcendentals}, chap. 10.}
al understanding. Jordan shows how Aquinas applies this language both to the participated light of natural forms that ground their intelligibility and beauty and to the participated inner light of the intellectus agens by virtue of which we achieve intellectual understanding and contemplation of these forms.\textsuperscript{47} Claritas signifies the intelligibility and beauty that all forms broadcast into the world; this is an intelligibility and beauty that the human person is naturally oriented toward.

The metaphor of light embodies the proposal that the human intellect is at home in the world, that the world reaches out actively and congruently towards the human mind, just as the mind reaches out to the world. In other words, the doctrine of beauty as claritas is perfectly answered with the doctrine of the agent intellect as participated light. Created things are resplendent with an intelligibility that is answered by the participated intellectual power of the created mind.\textsuperscript{48}

This congruency enables both intellectual understanding of intelligible being as true and aesthetic experience of the claritas of being, which is to admire it as beautiful. What Jordan’s interpretation of Aquinas brings to light is that the pleasure evoked by beauty is the pleasure of contemplation. Aesthetic pleasure is not an experience at odds with or separated from intellectual contemplation of the intelligible world. It is the pleasure enjoyed by an embodied intellectual contemplation of the radiance (claritas) of beautiful things.\textsuperscript{49}

The distinction between the beautiful and the true is maintained, not by positing an “aesthetic realm” apart from the intelligible, but by pointing to the cooperation in relation to the beautiful of appetite and cognition. The beautiful brings appetite to rest. But the kind of appetite brought to rest is cognitive or apprehensive; it is an appetite to know and to gaze upon what mind was made to know.\textsuperscript{50}

The claritas of a thing beheld in aesthetic contemplation is a manifestation of its form; its claritas holds our attention, for beauty is a “light-
ning of mind on a matter intelligently arranged.”

Another term for beauty is *formositas*; it evokes the way beautiful things are well formed (*formosus*). *Forma* grounds beauty with respect to the way things are handsomely shaped or finely fashioned, and so also with their lovely look or fair appearance. The foundation for these resplendent characteristics is found in what Aquinas calls the *proportio* or *consonantia* of beautiful things.

Proportion pertains to the order among parts with respect to each other and to the whole. The variety of forms specify a variety of proportions, each of which consists in a distinctly ordered adaptation, symmetry, or balance of parts in relation to a whole. Beauty is the compatibility of parts in accordance with the nature of a thing. Aquinas also describes this due proportion with the term *consonantia*, which connotes a harmonious “sounding together” of elements.

Eco details the significance of proportion as one of the objective characteristics of being for Aquinas and his predecessors. Eco distinguishes between forms of *ontological proportion* and *psychological proportion* in Aquinas, the latter being but a distinctive instance of the former. Eco’s survey of forms of ontological proportion in Aquinas covers the orders between matter and form, essence and *esse*, potency and act, and the basically quantitative sensible relationships among sounds, colors, shapes, movements, as well as purely rational relations within logic, sequences of thought, and even moral proportion with respect to human action and human, natural, and divine law. Aquinas also addresses the ontological proportions that concern the adequacy of a thing to itself, its nature, and the divine exemplar, as well as the universal proportions of the macro-cosm of the created order and creation’s order to the divine as efficient, exemplar, and final cause, including divine providence. With such a

52. Maurer, *About Beauty*, 9. “Things stand out for us by their forms. They are the aspects under which things appear to us, the ‘looks’ they give us, so to speak, and by which we recognize them. They enlighten us as to what things are; and so it is natural to think of a form as a kind of light to which we must be open if we are to perceive or understand a thing. Each form has its own light or radiance (*claritas*) which it imparts to the being of which it is the form. In this sense the form of a thing gives it its beauty; *A forma rei est decor eius*, St. Thomas remarks” (ibid., 9–10).
53. *ST* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1; *ST* I, q. 39, a. 8; *ST* II-II, q. 145, a. 2; *In I Sent.*, d. 31, q. 2, a. 1; Maurer, *About Beauty*, 2013.
54. *ST* I-II, q. 54, a. 1.
pervasive presence throughout Aquinas’s thought, Eco is certainly justified in claiming that “the rationale of existence is also the rationale of beauty, because it is the rationale of order and proportion.”56 Proportion underlines the dynamic unity and order among parts of a whole that is a constitutive feature of beautiful things.

In addition to being a form of ontological proportion, psychological proportion highlights the coordination that can be achieved between powers of sensation and intellection with respect to their objects. “In general, psychological proportion would seem primarily to allow the aesthetic act, whereas ontological proportion is the ground of the causes of aesthetic pleasure.”57 Eco’s insight here is instructive and we shall return to this point in the next section. Let us first conclude with the third feature of beauty sometimes mentioned by Aquinas in connection with claritas and proportio, namely, integrity (integritas) or wholeness (perfectio).58

Eco argues that integrity adds a special gloss to proportion; it is the perfection of a thing that consists in its not failing to be what it is, of measuring up to its own formal nature. Failures in integrity or wholeness occur through defect or excess, by the lack of a part or an ordering among parts that introduces privation, imperfection, disorder, discord, disharmony, and so disproportion and ugliness into a thing. Integrity draws our attention to the way a natural form or work of art either achieves or fails to achieve the ideal proportions specified by the form of a thing that measure a work as beautiful and manifest its radiance or splendor.

More can be said about each of these and other aspects attributed to beauty by Aquinas, but this sketch will be sufficient for addressing the nature of aesthetic perception of beautiful things. As Maurer and others have emphasized, these characteristics of beauty are analogous, manifested in similarly dissimilar ways in a variety of media from natural beauty to the beauty of artifacts, especially those produced by the fine arts. The diversity of beautiful things is constituted by diverse forms of claritas, proportio, and integritas, which are admired through a coordinated panoply of psychological operations. It is the nature of this aesthetic experience to which we turn our attention at last.

56. Ibid., 93. For a detailed investigation of beauty and order in Aquinas, see Ramos, Dynamic Transcendentals, chap. 4, 71–93ff.
57. Eco, Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, 95.
58. ST I, q. 39, a. 8; ST I, q. 73, a. 1.
Aesthetic Experience

The many disagreements about the definition and the scope of “aesthetics” are beyond the aims of this essay. A number of works on the topic of Thomist aesthetics have dealt with these issues, and I shall take for granted many of their learned conclusions. Briefly, it is worth noting that most theorists confine aesthetics to subjective sensory experiences or feelings that are evoked by the beautiful objects we sense. Aesthetics and aesthetic values are thereby often contrasted with intelligibility and truth. Given the close connection between beauty and truth in Aquinas, no Thomist aesthetics can completely separate the aesthetic experience of beauty from the intelligibility of being. “What modern accounts isolate as ‘aesthetic pleasure’ would seem in Thomas to be described rather as the pleasure of an embodied intellect and its senses active on a suitable object in a suitable way.” Some restrict aesthetics to beautiful works of art and art criticism, while others include within its purview beauty in nature, or the philosophy of beauty, or the philosophy of art. Generally, aesthetics is associated with beauty or its appreciation. I employ the term “aesthetics” in the latter sense as pertaining to the admiration of beauty quoad nos, that is, instances of transcendental beauty as experienced and encountered by human persons. In contrast to the philosophy of art, which is about making or facticity, aesthetics pertains to admiring beauty as experienced by humans. Within the broad scope of aesthetics, as I have just characterized it, we can distinguish aesthetic perception as one dimension within aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is broad enough to encompass a human appreciation of beauty that is purely noetic or imaginative. I will be focusing on the more elementary and primary form of human aesthetic experience of the perceivable beautiful things found in nature and in works of art. This more basic form of aesthetic experience is rightly designated as aesthetic perception.

Before moving on to our Thomist consideration of aesthetic perception, it will be helpful to round up all of the questions we had to leave in abeyance until now, beginning with the parade of questions introduced at the outset. We have seen that Aquinas’s description of beauty’s aes-

59. See note 2 of this essay.
61. Gilson, Arts of the Beautiful, chap. 1.
thetic effect, the *visa placent*, is to be understood analogically and does not exclude the range of sensory powers (although he does, rightly, emphasize vision and audition), imagination, cogitation, memory, and understanding. Aesthetic experience can involve any number of these cognitive powers insofar as their proper objects can be admired as beautiful. What we must now attend to are the diverse ways that beautiful things factor into the proper objects of aesthetic perception, as well as how aesthetic perception can be *pleasing*. How does Aquinas unite cognition with appetition in our aesthetic experience of beauty?

We have already established, following Jordan and others, that aesthetic experience, for Aquinas, is a form of disinterested contemplation that rests in the beauty of its objects. The orientation of aesthetic contemplation is neither at odds with the speculative contemplation of truth, nor should it be identified with theoretical contemplation. Aesthetic contemplation, especially in the form of aesthetic perception, is immersed in the embodied intelligible world of wondrous sights, sounds, and feelings; it attends to beauty, not truth. Consider, then, the following pageant of beautiful things that can be aesthetically experienced and contemplated. A human child, a fine horse, a bouquet of *Lilium “Ambon*,” a sunset, the Milky Way on a clear night, Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, Notre-Dame de Paris, Dvořák’s *New World Symphony*, Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, van Eyck’s Ghent Altarpiece, van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, and the poetry of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Pushkin, and countless others. What psychological operations are required to enjoy an aesthetic experience—what Aquinas calls *visa placent*—in the presence of these diverse forms of *claritas*?

Maritain, Gilson, Eco, Maurer, O’Reilly, and others all recognize the significance and primacy of sensible objects for Aquinas’s understanding of human cognition, and especially for his understanding of the cognition of beautiful things that please us. What these many studies overlook, however, is the complexity of Aquinas’s own account of sensory perception. Each of their analyses of the sensory perception of beauty neglects Aquinas’s taxonomy of the sensible and intelligible objects that specify different cognitive and appetitive psychological operations and powers.  

62. *ST* I, q. 77, a. 3.
nas’s account of sensory perception? At this point it will be instructive to rehearse Aquinas’s division of sensible and intelligible objects developed from his interpretation of Aristotle’s *De anima* II.6 and represented in his division of powers of sensory and intellectual cognition in *Summa theologiae* I, questions 78 and 79.

**Aesthetic Perception**

Aquinas distinguishes *per se*, or essential, sensibles from *per accidens*, or incidental, sensibles. He demarcates the *per se* sensibles into proper and common sensibles. Proper sensibles include color, sound, odor, flavor, and tangibles, each of which differentiates a unique sensory operation and external sense power. The power of vision apprehends color, but not sound; the power of tactility apprehends tangibles, but not color. The common sensibles are those *per se* sensibles apprehended by more than one external sense, for example, motion, rest, number, shape, and magnitude. Vision apprehends colored shaped magnitudes in motion; audition apprehends audible movement, and tactility apprehends tangible shaped magnitudes in motion.

Aquinas provides two conditions for a *per accidens* or incidental sensible. First, it must be incidentally connected to a *per se* sensible. “For example, being a human being applies accidentally (*accidit*) to what is white, as does being sweet. The second thing required is that it be apprehended by the thing that is sensing…. It must then be cognized *per se* by some other cognitive power belonging to the thing sensing; this will, of course, be either another sense, intellect, or the cogitative/estimative power.” Setting aside the way in which *per se* sensibles like color are *per accidens* with respect to other *per se* sensibles like flavors, what distinguishes the *per accidens* sensibles that are apprehended by the intellect from those *per accidens* sensibles that are apprehended by the cogitative power? Drawing upon the insights of Avicenna, Aquinas identifies the *per se* proper objects of the cogitative power and intellect with intentions (*intentiones*), which he distinguishes from the sensible forms that specify the operations of the external senses, common sense (*sensus communis*), and imagination, which retains these *per se* sensible forms. The cogitative power apprehends *particular intentions*; the intellect apprehends

---

63. *In II De anima* l.t. 13; *DV* 1.11; *ST* I, q. 17, a. 2.
64. *In II De anima* l.t. 13 (trans. Pasnau, 207–8.)
The details of Aquinas’s doctrine of the cogitative power, its various operations, and the diverse ways in which its operations can be connected and coordinated with the external senses, other internal senses, the concupiscible and irascible appetites, intellect, and will exceed the limitations of this essay.

Let us stipulate a sharp distinction between sensation and perception. Sensation pertains to the way the external senses and sensus communis function as a sensory unit to apprehend per se sensibles. Perception pertains to the apprehension of incidental sensibles—that is, the particular and universal intentions connected to per se sensibles—by the cogitative power and intellect. The ecological psychologist James Gibson called such perceptible phenomena “affordances”; animals learn to perceive what objects in their environment afford for action and reaction. The incidental sensation of cogitative perception apprehends particular intentions or affordances incidentally conjoined to per se sensibles, like this human or this apple joined to colored, shaped, magnitudes in motion. The incidental sensation of intellective perception apprehends universal intentions incidentally conjoined to per se sensibles, like humanness or appleness bound up with colored, shaped, magnitudes in motion. In most cases, the intellect and cogitative power function as a coordinated unit, which is why in the case of practical reasoning, Aquinas speaks of the intellect as universal reason directing but working in tandem with the cogitative power as particular reason (ratio particularis), which provides the minor of the practical syllogism. The central function of the cogitative power, which enables the human person to perceive the form in the concrete individual, is precisely what Eco overlooks in his otherwise superb account of aesthetic judgment in Aquinas; it is why Aquinas does not need an account of intuition to account for human knowledge


68. In IV Sent., d. 50, q. 1, a. 3; DV 10.5.
of particulars.69 The following passage from Aquinas illustrates the crucial role the cogitative power plays in providing a form of particular reasoning and understanding about particulars that goes beyond the per se sensible. The cogitative power works in concert with universal reasoning and understanding, enabling humans to perceive, know, desire, and even admire individuals.

The cogitative power (potentia cogitativa) is that which is highest in the sensitive part [of humans], and, thus, sense in some way comes in contact with the intellective part so that it participates in something of that which is lowest in the intellective part, namely, discursive reason (rationis discursum). This is in accord with the rule of Dionysius that contact is established where the lower begins and the higher ends. For this reason, also, the cogitative power (vis cogitativa) is called the particular reason (particularis ratio). This exists only in humans; in other animals, its place is taken by the natural estimation [of instinct]. And this is why even universal reason itself, which is in the intellective part, sometimes receives its name from discursive-thought (cognitione) because of the similarity of operation.70

Some conceptual therapy is required to appreciate Aquinas’s psychological taxonomy, but understanding it is crucial for our analysis of how beautiful things are apprehended. Unsurprisingly, the complexity of Aquinas’s doctrine of the interconnection among the external senses, cogitative power, and intellect is frequently overlooked by his many readers. Every study on aesthetic perception in Aquinas that I have examined omits the role of the cogitative power in incidental sensation and its potential connection to aesthetic perception. Why is this omission important? Even a cursory reflection on the aforementioned pageant of beautiful things will reveal how impoverished any purported Thomist account of aesthetic perception must be if it neglects Aquinas’s account of incidental sensation.

Aquinas of course often mentions beautiful colors and sounds, but his many illustrations of claritas and proportio are not exclusively drawn from the per se sensibles. He discusses the claritas and proportio of the human body, music, moral action, grace, and theophanies, none of which are reducible to per se sensibles and so cannot be apprehended by

70. DV 14.1, ad 9. ST II-II, q. 49, a. 2, ad 1 and ad 3; In VI Ethic. 9 (Leon. 367: 178–86, ad 1143a35); In VI Ethic. 9 (Leon. 368: 239–51, ad 1143b11). For a detailed study of these passages, see De Haan, Moral Perception.
external sensation alone; these are *incidental sensibles* that are *perceived* by the cogitative power or intellect. A doctrine of aesthetic perception focused entirely upon *per se* sensibles would be adequate only for the appreciation of a Pollock, Rothko, or Twombly, but not for the appreciation of a van Eyck, Michelangelo, or Rembrandt. The splendid colors of van Eyck’s Ghent Altarpiece and the shaped magnitudes of Rodin’s *Porte de l’Enfer* are beautiful, but these *per se* sensibles hardly constitute the crux of our aesthetic experience of them.

Beauty … consists in a certain clarity and due proportion. Now each of these is found radically in the reason; because both the light that makes beauty seen, and the establishing of due proportion among things belong to reason. Hence since the contemplative life consists in an act of the reason, there is beauty in it by its very nature and essence. … On the other hand, beauty is in the moral virtues by participation, in so far as they participate in the order of reason.71

What we admire in the van Eyck altarpiece is the beautiful depiction of the heavenly host adoring the Lamb of God, the imagery of the Trinity, Adam stepping forth from his tomb, and the Christian symbolism embodied in this work of art. These are *incidental sensibles*, particular and universal intentions or meanings, perceived by cogitation and intellection through our sensation of a scaffolding of wonderful *per se* sensibles. Without cogitative and intellection of incidental sensibles, these beautiful intentions could not be apprehended, and any account of perception in Aquinas, especially of aesthetic perception, that leaves out this dimension of his thought deprives aesthetic experience of its primary object.

This is no less true of our admiration of graceful animals, Blake’s burning bright Tyger, and the beauty of the human person in bodily figure or moral action. We do not *sense* the supererogation and extraordinary love of the saints; we *perceive* it. We do not strictly speaking *see* or *hear* the poetry of Shakespeare; rather, we perceive the meanings through sounds heard and shapes seen. Indeed, all linguistic apprehension, for Aquinas, consists in the perception of incidental sensibles.72 The *Danse des petits cygnes* of Swan Lake can only be *perceived* as a line of four danc-

71. ST II-II, q. 180, a. 2, ad 3 (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province).
ers symbolizing cygnets huddling together; the bodily movements in unison are sensed, but the symbolism and the graceful execution of the ballet are perceived incidental sensibles. In short, aesthetic perception is principally directed towards the diverse ways in which claritas and proportio are manifested as incidental sensibles laced in and through the claritas and proportio of per se sensibles. Beauty and its admiration consist in the harmonious ordering of per se sensibles and incidental sensibles that disclose beauty to the human equipped with integrated powers of sensation and cogitative-intellectual perception.

**The Pleasure of Aesthetic Perception**

This account of aesthetic perception expands our understanding of the cognitive element of Aquinas’s *visa placent*, but it leaves out the pleasing aspect of aesthetic experience. He writes: “Human beings get pleasure from their senses . . . because of a suitability that things have for sensation. . . . Thus, they take pleasure in nicely harmonized sound.”73 Pleasure, for Aquinas, is a passion of the concupiscible appetite, not a feature of a cognitive power.74 So how can the aesthetic perception of beauty be pleasing to a cognitive power?

Here we need to be cautious. Aquinas distinguishes three kinds of pleasure for three different kinds of cognition.75 First, there is the somatic pleasure (*delectatio*) that arises from somatic contact with an object that is especially fitting and proportionate to a sensory *organ*, such as the hand, back, face, lips, and so forth. Second, there is the psychic pleasure (*gaudium*) that results from the cogitative power’s perception or recognition of a good possessed; we might call this passion the emotion of joy. Third, there is the psychic pleasure (*fruitio*) that results from the intellect’s judgment that a good is possessed. The first two kinds of pleasure are passions of the concupiscible appetite; the third is an operation of the intellectual appetite or will.76 These three kinds of pleasure can occur in isolation from each other or in a synchronized integration of somatic affectivity,

---

73. ST II-II, q. 141, a. 4, ad 3 (trans. Eco, *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 85). ST I-II, q. 32, a. 1; ST I-II, q. 31, a. 1; ST II-II, q. 31, a. 3, and ad 3; ST I-II, q. 31, a. 7.
74. ST I-II, q. 31, a. 1; In X Ethic. 8 (Leon. 575: 24–60, ad 1175b28).
76. ST I-II, q. 11, aa. 1–4; ST I-II, q. 31, aa. 1–8; DV 26.4, ad 5.
emotion, and will. Many, but not all, aesthetic experiences are of the latter kind. The contemplative pleasure born in and through aesthetic experience principally involves the psychic pleasures of the concupiscible appetite and the will. Aquinas distinguishes different ways in which these psychic pleasures can be caused. When I perceive that the action I have performed is good, I am perceiving what is a per se good of the concupiscible appetite and will, and the result is pleasure in the concupiscible appetite and will. However, when I admire a beautiful object, its radiance especially satisfies and perfects the natural operations of my apprehensive powers of sensation, perception, and intellection. It is the per se good of the apprehensive power that is met—a per aliud good of the appetites—and this is what causes pleasure in the concupiscible appetite and will. With these caveats, Aquinas thereby amplifies Aristotle’s view that pleasure is a natural concomitant of the most perfect operation of any power.

Among these activities of sense and intellect, that is most pleasant which is most perfect. But the most perfect is that belonging to sense or intellect well-conditioned in relation to the best of the objects that fall under sense or intellect. If then perfect activity is pleasant, and most perfect activity most pleasant, it follows that activity is pleasant to the extent that it is perfect. Therefore pleasure is the perfection of activity.

This is where Eco’s interpretation of psychological proportion in Aquinas becomes especially relevant to understanding the pleasure concomitant to aesthetic perception and so also elucidates why, contrary to Aertsen’s worry, beauty’s cognitive dimension does not conflate it with truth. Beauty concerns the proportionate perfection of the confluence of cognition and appetition, and so beauty is mediated by being as truth and goodness while also adding a notion to being not signified by truth or goodness. Since beautiful things possess an ontological proportion and claritas, they can be potentially aesthetically perceived as beautiful. Because our powers of sensory perception are potentially perfected by apprehending the most perfectly proportionate instances of their proper objects—whether they be finely ordered per se or per accidents sensibiles—they can be actually perfected by beautiful objects. It is beautiful objects that most perfectly satis-

77. ST I-II, q. 35, a. 7; ST I-II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 1; ST I-II, q. 32, a. 8, ad 2; ST I-II, q. 31, aa. 3–7.
79. In X Ethic. 6 (Leon. 568: 56–65, ad 1174b19).
fy these operations of sensory perception. Aesthetic perception therefore consists in a nexus of perfect proportions that involves the proportionate union between the ontological proportions of beautiful things and the psychological proportions of sensory perception and its objects. Aesthetic perception is pleasing because a beautiful object is the most perfect object of perception, which enables the most perfect act of perception.

We have addressed why aesthetic perception and contemplation is pleasing, but why is aesthetic perception not ubiquitous? “However beautiful a created thing may be, it may appear beautiful to some and not to others, because it is beautiful only under certain aspects which some discover and others do not see.” 80 Beauty is already at home in the world; it is our perceptual capacities that need to be domesticated. Once again, psychological proportion with respect to the suitable formation of one’s perceptual capacities is a prerequisite for aesthetically perceiving the objective beauty that is there to be perceived. Just as there is a critical distinction between what appears to be true or good (as well as false or bad) and what really is true or good, so also what seems to be beautiful (as well as banal or ugly) is distinct from what actually is beautiful. Our quoad nos perspective on the transcendentals involves an imperfect human factor that needs to be cultivated, disciplined, and directed aright with respect to truth, goodness, and beauty. No less than intellectual and moral virtues, we need aesthetic virtues to enhance our capacities and direct our attention to perceive the world sub specie pulchri. “This in turn implies a disposing or proportioning of oneself to the object under its formal aspects. This is why psychological proportion both permits the aesthetic act and is also its ground: without the movement to a specific type of cognition, beauty would not be actualized.” 81 The nexus of proportions that informs aesthetic perception with an aptitude to silence other drives and allows us to look, listen, and feel the splendor of nature, music, poetry, paintings, statuary, and architecture in no way diminishes the reality of either ontological or psychological proportions. Because everything is beautiful, all beings are always in potency to be aesthetically contemplated, but they will only be actually perceived as beautiful if we dispose ourselves to admire beauty. 82 How does one do this?

81. Eco, Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, 95, 190–92.
82. “Aquinas uses the dialectic of act and potency to evade both objectivism and subjectivism” (Eco, Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, 192).
CONCLUSION: AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION

The twists and tangles of Aquinas's scattered remarks on beauty and perception can be constructively ordered into a coherent account of aesthetic perception and contemplation. However, such an account is far from complete, and I have made no effort in this essay to address the challenges of rival ontologies of beauty or theories of aesthetic perception. Many of these difficulties have been dealt with in the more extended monographs that develop constructive Thomist interpretations.\(^8^3\) But although there is always more than can be said on any of these issues, two areas merit particular attention. The first is that any Thomist theory of aesthetic perception and contemplation has much to learn from a critical engagement with the great phenomenologists of the last century as well as from ecological psychologists like James Gibson and the more recent radical enactivist approaches to cognition.\(^8^4\) Thomists present perception as if it were static and atemporal. A significant insight shared by these schools concerns the active, sensorimotor, and exploratory nature of perception and the lived embodied experience of negotiating the environment. Aesthetic perception requires a dynamic, attentive engagement and exploration of the aesthetic affordances of beautiful things, from music and paintings to statues and architecture. “Thus, it is rightfully contended that it is impossible to apprehend a building as a whole, that is to say in the totality of its form, without making a tour of it, without perceiving from the outside its principal parts in their reciprocal relations and in the ever changing perspectives which a visitor’s own moving about from place to place offers to his view.”\(^8^5\)

This brings us to a second and final point concerning the practical question from the end of the last section. What are the aesthetic virtues and how do we acquire them in this age of constant distraction? How

---


\(^8^4\) Here I have in mind the works of Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mikel Dufrenne, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Robert Sokolowski, and many others. Gibson and the radical enactive and embodied cognition theorists are less well known among Thomists. See Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*; Daniel Hutto, *Folk Psychological Narratives: The Sociocultural Basis for Understanding Reasons* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

\(^8^5\) Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, 50.
do we cultivate an aesthetics of everyday life? To answer all too briefly: we wonder. We should take leisure and sit for some time before great masterpieces, exploring and enjoying their radiance, discerning what attracts one to them, asking questions and reflecting on the harmony of formal and symbolic dimensions in beautiful things. Listen to music, not as background sounds, but as an object of focused concentration. Pay attention to the architecture of both the magnificent and rebarbative buildings one regularly encounters. Engage good art criticism, but also cultivate everyday conversations that explore, contemplate, and revisit the beauty of nature and works of fine art.86 Leisure spent in wonder about beautiful things can also prompt philosophical questions about the foundations of beauty. These questions lead one from the aesthetic experience of beauty to its transcendental ground. “Once we touch a transcendental, we touch being itself, a likeness of God, an absolute, all that ennobles and makes the joy of life: we enter the realm of the spirit.”87

The majority of scholarly publications that focus on the centrality of the will for John Duns Scotus emphasize the ways in which the Franciscan defends human freedom. This debate has numerous participants, from Allan B. Wolter in his seminal publication on the two affections in the will to Thomas Williams and his argument in favor of the libertarian foundations.1 While the emphasis on the will points clearly toward freedom and its exercise in the moral realm, it also points toward the good and toward beauty as objects of human love. When we turn our attention from freedom to beauty we discover a variety of fruitful elements for a renewed understanding of moral judgment and moral action in Scotist thought.

In what follows, I propose to mine more carefully the focus on beauty as a possible doorway to understanding Scotus’s moral approach more fully. Namely, I suggest that there is ample textual evidence to support the claim that his attention to the will reveals both his own spiritual heritage and his artistic vision for moral judgment and moral action. This would mean that, for Scotus, the moral agent resembles the artist: a person who is sensitive to beauty, capable of recognizing beauty, and able to promote beauty in the world by means of moral action.

The importance of beauty in Scotist thought has received scant scholarly attention over the past fifty years. In “Divine and Human Beauty in the Philosophy and Theology of John Duns Scotus,” Francis Kovach proposed the transcendentality of beauty for Scotus, presenting the Subtle Doctor as an “aesthetic objectivist.” Recent publications have explored the aesthetic dimension of Scotist thought as an expression of his Franciscan identity or as a way of understanding his position on natural law and the relationship of the precepts of the Decalogue. This legal aspect of Scotist thought, while clearly foundational in nature, reflects only one dimension of his depiction of created reality according to the canons of the beautiful. I am interested here in exploring more deeply the dimensions of human moral judgment that might be illuminated by the aesthetic lens. Specifically, this points to the way in which Scotus makes use of an auditory experience, the recognition of harmony or dissonance, to describe the highest level of rational judgment.

Focused attention on Scotus’s use of aesthetic imagery throughout his texts, and particularly on his references to musical harmony, reveals the foundational importance of the rational will as a vis collativa, a power capable of comparative judgment. Such a turn to the will is not only important for his conception of rational freedom but, more importantly, emphasizes the centrality of beauty and the good as key to the fullest understanding of Scotist thought. The grounding of moral goodness in a will that is rational supports my conviction that not only does beauty


function foundationally in Scotus’s Franciscan approach to moral questions, but also that the centrality of beauty, and of the Divine Artist, helps to recontextualize the debate about Scotus’s voluntarism. Beauty, harmony, and the rational will, read as an expression of his Franciscan spiritual inheritance, all point toward an expanded domain of rational creativity as model for moral perfection.

Such an expanded model presents the act of moral judgment as a type of auditory moral recognition or insight, one through which the moral agent recognizes the moral action as locus for harmonic relationships. The insight about such relationships provides an objective assessment of the act’s moral beauty as a whole comprised of several elements. This means that, for Scotus, moral action can be understood as a type of performative act, the rehearsal and perfectibility of which reveal how moral living involves growing excellence of rational judgment in tandem with integrity of character. The moral goal, or *telos*, would be to develop the art of judging and acting harmoniously in each particular setting.

The methodology required to lay out the contours of such an expanded model for moral judgment is complex and, given the diffuse nature of Scotist thought, open to critique. In view of what I hope will be a later, fuller treatment of this model, I proceed here with a more focused intent. By bringing together a number of texts, I hope to show how they can be seen to point to a common insight, namely, that the experience of the good to be done in a concrete moral context can be fruitfully understood not only as the recognition of beauty, but as the perception of harmonic resonance. The argument presented here moves from the affirmation of beauty as objective foundation for moral action (sections 1, 2, and 3) through deeper and deeper levels of the recognition of truth (section 4), concluding with the depiction of the rational will as vis collativa, a power that, like the intellect, is capable of comparing elements to one another (section 5). This act of comparative judgment is where, I suggest, the recognition of harmony can be found. Consideration of these textual references to beauty and harmony support my overall conviction that, for Scotus, moral reasoning has more in common with artistic perception than has been generally recognized.5 And, unlike the more dominant in-

5. I suggested in “Moral Reasoning and the Artistic Paradigm” that, while Aristotle’s *Ethics* presents both medicine and musical dimensions as models for moral reasoning (at 1098a9–10 and 1103a34), Aquinas prefers the medical imagery while Scotus leans toward the musical.
tellect-based approach to rationality, Duns Scotus’s will-based depiction of rationality leaves plenty of room for creativity and freedom in moral living.

**BEAUTY AS OBJECTIVE FOUNDATION**

References to beauty are woven throughout Scotus’s texts, forming an impressive backdrop and context to his approach to metaphysical and moral questions. Read in light of the Franciscan spiritual tradition and sources, Scotist texts illustrate the particular way in which the Franciscan via pulchritudinis, the way of beauty, integrates spiritual insights into moral living in the manner of earlier Franciscan thinkers. Like them, Scotus affirms the extramental, objective reality of beauty and its relationship to order, grounded on divine Beauty. In his analysis of the Trinity in *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, Scotus attributes beauty (*species*) to the Son. In *Ordinatio* II, d. 3 he claims that individuals contribute to the beauty of the universe by virtue of the ordering of species toward the whole. In the *Ordinatio* Prologue he notes that the Scriptures manifest beauty (*decor*) throughout their ordered progress. He sees beauty in natural bodies as


8. “Number and unity be attributed to the Father,” Scotus says, “and beauty (*species*) can be attributed to the Son, since beauty and comeliness (*pulchritudo*) arise from the conjunction of many things (*ex coniunctione multorum convenientium*), as in bodies, and beauty cannot be as fittingly attributed to the Father, since the Son is primarily the beauty (*decor*) of the Father.” (Reportatio I-A, d. 3, q. 3, n. 80 in *John Duns Scotus: The Examined Report*, ed. and trans. Allan B. Wolter, OFM, and Oleg Bychkov [St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2004], 206). Pomplun, “Notes on Scotist Aesthetics,” 255.


10. *Ordinatio* Prologue, pars 2, q. unica, n. 121 (Vatican 1:86).
well as in the resurrected bodies of the saints. He associates adornment (ornatus) with the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and with the universe in its totality and integrity of parts. In short, Scotus views both the created order and salvation history from within the broader and unifying lens of beauty as testimony to divine creativity and freedom.

The lens of beauty provides Scotus with a unified teleological approach that links metaphysical foundations to moral living. God is the divine Artist who creates artfully. The created order is established in light of human destiny, and all attributes of reality are fitted to human nature in its present state (pro statu isto). The law of love grounds divine freedom and expresses the divine will. Human faculties are endowed with native capacity to know and love this world and its creator with a non-possessive love of friendship. Human freedom grounds moral living insofar as our response to beauty in ordered acts of love relies on the particular constitution of our human will as a rational potency.

As he seeks to explain the intricate teleology between human knowing and the extra-mental world, Scotus offers examples taken from experiences of beauty. Vision, he explains, is inclined toward what is visible as extrinsic and perfect, “such as perfect whiteness or beauty.” Beauty perfects the sense power inclined toward it. The more beautiful the object is, the more desirable it is. The more desirable it is, the more it perfects the beholder, and the more it is experienced as delectable. The assertion that beauty delights precisely by being known prompted Kovach to suggest that, for Scotus, beauty and goodness are really identical and only formally distinct. While the assertion that, for the Subtle Doctor, beauty is one of the transcendentals goes a bit further than the textual evidence suggests (since he never explicitly includes it in the listing),

11. *Ordinatio* IV, d. 49, q. 15, n. 1 (Wadding-Vivès vol. 21, 494 [Paris: 1891]).
12. *Ordinatio* IV, d. 6, q. 4, art. 2, q. 2, n. 315 (Vatican 11: 392).
14. *Ordinatio* III, d. 8, q. unica, n. 6 (Vatican 9:295).
16. “In brief, Scotus seems to teach the real identity and the formal or logical distinction between the good and the beautiful. This, in turn, would mean the co-extensiveness of beauty with goodness and, since goodness is one of Scotus’s simple transcendentals, the co-extensiveness of beauty with being” (Kovach, “Divine and Human Beauty,” 449).
17. In his foundational study, *The Transcendentals and their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1946), Allan Wolter notes that Scotus “does not attempt to add the beautiful as a distinct member of the coextensive transcendentals. Neither does he differentiate *aliquid, res and ens*” (ibid., 100).
Gérard Sondag argues that the identification of beauty with moral (as distinct from metaphysical) goodness may indeed be foundational for Scotist thought. Trent Pomplun points to the role of the formal distinction as a key to our understanding of how Scotus understands the relationship of the transcendentals (one, true, good, beauty) to being (ens). The key, it seems to me, lies in whether or not, for Scotus, beauty (which involves the relationship of order among aspects or beings) is coextensive with being in the same way that one, true, and good are.

Whether or not it can be called a transcendental in the way that good and true are convertible with being, for Scotus, beauty is certainly a unifying concept and part of everyday experience. It is a perfection of being that delights the senses and unites knowledge with love. In Ordinatio III, d. 27, when he considers the formal object of charity, Scotus unites knowing and loving in an example of a visual experience of beauty. He considers what would happen if “vision could be said to love” the beautiful object when it is seen.

Suppose, first of all, in the nature of things there is one that is most beautiful to the eye; secondly assume this beautiful object also gave the eye its power to see; thirdly, assume, if vision could be said to love such visual beauty, that in seeing this object the eye’s love of seeing was satisfied to the full. The first of these represents visual beauty, as the adequate object of the power of vision, embodied in an object in all the perfection it is possible to have in beauty of this sort. The second represents an additional reason for loving such, inasmuch as it shares itself with the eye by giving the latter the power to see it. The third is something that accompanies an act in which the desire for visual beauty as a good in itself is perfectly satisfied. Therefore, the primary reason for vision, or love in vision, if vision could love, would be the nature itself of this most beautiful thing; whereas the least and most improper reason would be the fact that it is reached through a visual act.

This reflection on the experience of love involved in acts of knowing offers significant elements that help us understand how foundational and manifold the experience of beauty is for Scotus. He offers a three-fold analysis of the metaphysical and moral aspects of beauty: from object, to activity, to outcome. First, the primary reason for love is the nature of the object. The most perfect object is most perfectly beautiful and worthy of the highest love. It is in this sense of divine beauty as metaphysical foundation for reality that Kovach asserts the identification of beauty with the good as a transcendental.22

The second dimension of the analysis of charity in this passage points to the nature of Good as self-diffusive. This most beautiful object, loved for itself alone, actually shares itself with the power of vision, enabling the eye to see it. This empowering act of aesthetic recognition might be understood as a type of participative engagement, in which the eye’s capacity and ability to see the object is actually made possible by the light coming from the object itself. This echoes Scotus’s discussion in several texts on cognition, where he refers to the intelligible species as “shining forth” within the mind, making cognition actual.23

The third dimension of Scotus’s analysis of charity highlights the satisfaction experienced by the eye in the act of vision. This satisfaction, a type of delight,24 completes the visual act but by no means defines it. All three dimensions are simultaneously experienced, yet the act of love is defined by the intrinsic beauty of the object.

Reflection on this experience of beauty reveals both metaphysical and moral dimensions. While freedom is important to the Subtle Doctor, moral objectivity is more important. Moral living is based upon the right ordering of loves, and this requires attention to the object. In every

22. Since the overall question deals with love for God as the foundation for moral living, it is not surprising that Scotus would affirm beauty as a transcendent attribute of divine being.

23. “Neither does the intellect see the essence in the phantasms as the things that are seen, but rather when it cognizes the essence shining out in the intelligible species precisely as shining out in the intelligible species, it sees it in the singular that is seen in the phantasm by the imaginative power” (Ordinatio I, d. 3 q. 3, n. 392 [Vatican 3:239]). The English translation is from Richard Cross, Duns Scotus’s Theory of Cognition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 96.

act of love, there is first a foundational or intrinsic objectivity, insofar as the object loved is, by its nature, worthy of the highest love. Second, there is the activity of loving itself, which is caught up in and made possible by the brilliance of the object. Finally, there is the experience of delight and satisfaction that results from loving the beautiful object. Of the three dimensions, Scotus asserts, it is the first, that is, the nature of the beautiful object—its intrinsic and per se beauty—that is the foundational and most significant basis for the objectivity of love. The delightful activity of sight and the satisfaction experienced in seeing the object follow from this.

The most beautiful object is intrinsically good and intrinsically beautiful. This goodness and beauty are objective: they inhere in the object itself as most perfect being. It is for this reason that the object is loved. Here is a parallel to the affirmation of Alexander of Hales, founder of the Franciscan School, who, echoing William of Auxerre and Augustine, identifies bonum honestum or “intrinsic goodness” with “intelligible beauty.”

BEAUTY AND MORAL GOODNESS

In addition to his affirmation of foundational beauty in God, Duns Scotus analyzes the morally good act through the lens of beauty in Ordinatio I, d. 17. His discussion brings together three aspects important for the present study: first, that the moral act can be deemed beautiful; second, that its beauty is a function of the rational relationships (ordering) internal to the act; and, finally, that God’s pleasure in this act is best understood as an auditory experience, similar to someone delighting in musical harmony.

Echoing Augustine’s definition of beauty in his treatise De Musica, Scotus identifies moral goodness as beautiful.


26. “Beauty is nothing other than a numbered equality, or a certain situation of parts, accompanied by the suavity of color.” Augustine, De Musica VI, 13, 38, ed. Martin Jacobsson (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2002), 147.
One could say that just as beauty is not some absolute quality in a beautiful body, but a combination of all that is in harmony with such a body (such as size, figure, and color), and a combination of all aspects (that pertain to all that is agreeable to such a body and are in harmony with one another, so the moral goodness of an act is a kind of decoration it has, including a combination of due proportion to all to which it should be proportioned (such as potency, object, end, time, place, and manner), and this especially as right reason dictates.  

This passage highlights how moral judgment involves recognition of a whole whose beauty is greater than the sum of its parts. The rational recognition of the harmony of parts is determinative of the moral action that should follow from the assessment.

In the *Lectura* version of this question, Scotus adds that the beautiful soul, adorned with love (*caritas*) is pleasing to the divine will. Indeed, the soul is loved by God *precisely* because of the beauty that is charity.  

To explain the relationship between divine love and the soul’s beauty, Scotus presents the experience of delight in hearing musical harmony. The strings of a harp are plucked in a certain order, and this order can admit of harmony or dissonance. When such an order is harmonic, either because a certain string is plucked after another or because the two (or more) strings are struck simultaneously, the sound produces pleasure and delight in those present. The delight in the listener is not a function of each individual note as a sound in itself, but rather of their ordered relation and harmony with one another.

The harmonious sound of the harp affects hearing, causing delight; and if the notes are the same yet in a different order—such as when the strings are plucked in a different order—this will not produce the delight nor the delightful sound. What is the principal cause of hearing? Of course it is the sound and not the harmony or proportion in sound, because their relationship is not the cause of the effect. Thus, hearing the sound is caused by the sound—but that it be delightful comes not from the sound as [individual] sound but as harmony and ordered [among the sounds] harmonically.  

The perception and recognition of harmony involves a two-fold experience. First, the sound itself causes perception (hearing). More im-

---

27. *Ordinatio* I, d. 17, n. 6 (Vatican 5:163–64).
29. *Lectura* I, 17, n. 95 (Vatican 17:211).
portantly than the sound or sounds of the notes themselves is the rec-
ognition of harmony among them. This moment of recognition causes
delight. The experience of delight is whole: the result of a manifold ex-
perience of harmony, itself greater than the sum of the individual notes.

Scotus repeats this point in the *Ordinatio*. The ordering of sounds in
music and its resulting harmony are founded upon the mathematical re-
lationships of numerical proportion. Mathematics, a discipline belonging
to the medieval *quadrivium*, possesses the highest level of scientific cer-
tainty, equivalent to that of metaphysics. Hence, when Scotus describes
the delight we experience in musical harmony, he is describing a subjec-
tive and affective experience (delight) grounded in an objective reality
(the ordering of notes and chords according to mathematical proportion).

When Scotus calls moral goodness “accidental” or “decoration,” he
is not reducing it to matters of taste nor to nonessential dimensions of
the action. Rather, he highlights the complex and manifold dimension of
moral goodness derived from the harmonious ordering of internal and
external dimensions. The “harmonic resonance” that is recognized in
moral judgment belongs to the act itself, constituted by the relationship
of the parts to one another. The overall moral goodness of the act tran-
cends individual elements of the act in the same way that harmony is
both constituted by and transcends individual notes. Harmony results
from particular notes ordered in a particular way. Moral goodness is re-
vealed through the rational recognition of the complex and harmonious
configuration of constitutive parts or aspects within the act. Neither the
act alone, nor the intention of the agent, nor the consequences of the act
account for its moral goodness. Moral goodness involves the coherence
and proportion of all aspects under the direction of right reasoning.

The *Reportatio* discussion of this question emphasizes how the soul
is beautified precisely by the presence of two virtues: charity and justice.

Another example is about beauty according to Augustine in Book VIII, chap. 10
of *The Trinity*. For justice is the great beauty of the soul, namely which distin-
guishes the just from the sinner. As in the Old Testament the wise is distin-
guished from the fool, so in the New Testament the just is distinguished from
the sinner by grace. In this way justice is a certain beauty and godlike likeness.

31. The medieval course of studies in the quadrivium involved mathematics, music, geom-
etry, and astronomy.
All likeness and beauty, however, is a reason for loving in anything; therefore, etc. Just as this is evident in the case of beauty in bodily things and likeness in the souls, in the same way the beauty of the soul is a proper reason for further love by which God loves others than himself.32

In each of these texts, Scotus affirms a common point: that the beauty of objects and the harmony of sounds reveal the objective dimension of our moral experience. Creation, in all its beauty, is constituted by divine love and freedom. This love and freedom can be found at every level of the moral order, including how God loves and accepts/rewards the human soul.

HARMONY AND THE MORAL LAW

Scotus defends the objectivity of moral judgment when he argues that the first practical principle, Deus diligendus est (God is to be loved) is per se nota. This means that a principle whose logical necessity cannot be denied stands at the highest level of moral reasoning. In his discussion of natural law, Scotus explains how the commands of the second table of the Decalogue are related to the necessary first commandment. The commands of the second table of the Decalogue are in harmony (consona) with the first principle of all moral living, Deus diligendus est.

The other way in which things belong to the law of nature is because they are exceedingly in harmony (consona) with that law, even though they do not follow necessarily from those first practical principles known from their terms, principles which are necessarily grasped by any intellect understanding those terms. Now, it is certain that all the precepts of the second table also belong to the natural law in this way, since their rightness is very much in harmony (valde consonat) with the first practical principles that are known of necessity.33

The harmonic integrity and coherence of moral principles to self-evident principles for human reasoning appears again in Ordinatio IV, d. 17, where Scotus discusses the relation of positive to natural law.

As for the supporting argument from reason, I grant that we know by the natural light of the mind that a guilty person must be judged, or at least we rec-

ognize that this is highly in accord (valde consona) with a proposition that is known in this way. For no sin should be left unpunished anywhere if there is one ruler of the universe and he is just—something which we know naturally or recognize as exceedingly in harmony (valde consonum) with what we do know in this way. I even concede further what is said about the necessity of another as judge. But just who is this other? From what is known by natural reason, or from what is consonant (consona) with this, such a judge would be God alone, the one who rewards merit and punishes sin.34

I suggest that we understand these passages in the following way. At the highest level of rationality stands the first principle of praxis, Deus diligendus est. This principle, a per se nota and therefore self-evident truth, functions in a manner similar to a tuning fork in music: it gives a pure tone to which all other musical notes are adjusted.

Moral science and positive law also represent tones that harmonize (or ought to harmonize) with this first tone. Particular moral actions offer, at a lower level, harmonic resonance that is meant to be attuned to the first, pure tone. The rational will, as the moral ear in the presence of such harmonic levels, relates them to one another, thereby recognizing harmony or disharmony. This type of reasoning by resonance or coherence is not turned in upon itself, but rather, as part of a larger spiritual vision of reality, is grounded upon the highest certainty of prescriptive necessary truth: Deus diligendus est.

The judgment of harmonic alignment is an act of human reason. Here, Scotus affirms that right reason (recta ratio) determines the manifold goodness of the act in terms of a judgment about the harmony and appropriateness of all its aspects among themselves. In Ordinatio II, d. 7, Scotus enumerates the various degrees of moral goodness in terms of convenientia (fitting or appropriate) to judgment.35

The first [degree of goodness] pertains to volition because the object willed is something appropriate (conveniens) to this act, not merely on natural grounds, as sunlight is suited to an act of vision, but according to the dictates of right reason. This is the first moral goodness, and hence it can be called “generic” because it is as it were the material basis for all further goodness in the category of mores…. The second goodness pertains to volition on this score that the

34. Ordinatio IV, d. 17, n. 30 (Vatican 13:166). The English translation is from Wolter, Will and Morality, 266–68.
35. Ordinatio II, d. 7, nn. 29–30 (Vatican 8:89).
When Scotus refers to all the circumstances (or conditions) which belong to an act, he appeals to Aristotle’s discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The morally good act admits of several converging factors: goal, object, intention, time, place, manner, and consequences. The morally perfect act is done for the right reason, at the right time and place, according to the right manner and taking all significant consequences into account. The circumstances surrounding a given moral act may vary from one situation to another. The appropriate course of action must be determined by the operation of right reasoning. For example, while lying is wrong, telling the truth is not always appropriate. Sometimes even telling the whole truth would do more harm than good. The morally mature person is capable of determining when the truth should be told, and to what degree the truth should be told. In a similar manner, it is possible for an act to be morally appropriate in private and not in public.

Complete moral assessment extends to the performance of the action, and not just to the action as assessed prior to execution. Indeed, the ultimate divine response is not limited to moral intention or motivation. Divine delight responds to the action as performed by the moral agent. In this action one can discern the varying “notes” that make up the harmonic chord: principles, knowledge, intent along with timing, proper execution, and attention.

We have seen thus far how beauty functions foundationally in creation as object of human desire and love. We have traced out how the human perception and recognition of harmony captures something about moral judgment and action. Finally, we have noted how the divine will is disposed to rewarding human behavior in the way that an audience delights in the harmonic performance. Before continuing our discussion, let us contextualize Scotus’s focus on moral beauty within the act in two ways. First, he rejects the Aristotelian natural and determinist mod-

---

36. *Ordinatio* II, d. 7, nn. 29–30 (Vatican 8:89).

37. Scotus lists the varying degrees of goodness as judged by right reasoning in terms of beauty in *Quodlibet Question* 18: “That acts are good or virtuous, therefore, implies one or several relations. But like ‘healthy’ or ‘beautiful,’ ‘good’ and ‘virtuous’ are spoken of, and predicated, as qualities, and this commonly happens with the fourth type of quality.” The English translation is from Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 217.
el for human moral living as the result of the life of virtue. This overly-intellectualist model received increased support during the last decades of the thirteenth century, especially by members of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Paris. In response to such an approach to happiness, and in particular to its insistence upon the necessary connection between intellectual insight and divine reward, Scotus expanded upon the emerging importance of divine freedom and creativity following the Condemnation of 1277.

A second aspect follows from the first. Once the connection to heavenly reward is taken out of philosophical speculation, the focus of human moral assessment shifts to the concrete action in all its particularity. The grounds for moral judgment now rest upon the law of love: the first practical principle and the relationship of all aspects of moral action to this foundational law. Moral living would now depend upon the capacity of human rational judgment to recognize the good as harmonic alignment among the specific, intrinsic aspects of a moral act and concrete moral circumstances. The aesthetic or artistic model is apt for this sort of reflection, especially given the wealth of Patristic and Stoic resources that rely upon an artistic approach in presenting and enriching moral training and assessment.

THE PERCEPTION OF TRUTH AS AN AUDITORY EXPERIENCE

Thus far we have seen how the divine ear plays an important role in showing how moral goodness is experienced, delighted in, and rewarded. This suggests that, for Scotus, the auditory experience of beauty as harmony may belong primarily to the divine and, perhaps, to spiritual and angelic beings. It looks as if the human experience of beauty is lim-


39. Consider, for example, Cicero’s De officiis and his discussion of honestum (kalon or beauty) and its relationship to decorum (prepon or fitness, propriety). In De officiis I, n. 36, Cicero refers to two orders of beauty—loveliness and dignity—which also extend to mental operations that are to exhibit constancy and “harmony with Nature’s laws” (De officiis, trans. Walter Miller [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1913], 133). De officiis was part of the training in the liberal arts (trivium and quadrivium) and belonged to the legacy of the ancient world to medieval intellectual culture.
ited to the realm of visual sensory experience. Is there any evidence that we are capable of the auditory experience as well?

A closer look at Scotus’s discussion of intuitive cognition may offer some hope for this. When he considers human cognitive activity, he expands the domain to include a more perfect act, which he names *intuition*. Intuitive cognition is immediate; it does not require the *phantasm* or mental species, which belongs to abstraction. Intuitive cognition is certain; it is accompanied by an awareness of the presence and existence of the object. The intuitive act lies beyond doubt and is foundational for self-reflection and self-awareness. In short, the intuitive act is the most perfect act of which the human mind is capable and will be the act that defines human fulfillment in eternity.

There are texts in which Scotus speaks of the intuitive act as auditory. The internal act of self-awareness, for example, has a certainty and immediacy which visual perception lacks. In *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, Scotus compares certain knowledge to an auditory experience. “Just as our certitude of being awake is like that of self-evident propositions, the same [certitude] is true of many other acts in our power such as ‘I understand’ or ‘I hear’ and other such acts which are being performed.”

Intuitive cognition can have both external and internal objects, making it essential for moral judgment and conversion. In *Ordinatio* III, d. 14, Scotus presents the intuitive act as a necessary condition for any affirmation of the truth of a contingent, existential statement. Intuitive cognition reveals the present state of affairs (both internally and externally) to the moral subject. Additionally, Scotus affirms in *Ordinatio* IV, d. 45, that without the act of intuition, no certainty of the existence of the object of knowledge could be maintained. Indeed, the very possibility of deliberation about a contingent state of affairs, so essential to moral reasoning, depends upon an intuitive act. Even the activity of reflection upon past

40. “Our intellects have a kind of intellectual cognition whereby we know immediately a singular existent, even though we do not know its singularity (or that by which it is singularized); this mode of cognition is called *visio* or *intuitive cognition*” (Ioannes Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, Book VII, q. 15, n. 25, ed. G. Etzkorn et al. [St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1997], 303).
42. *Ordinatio* III, d. 14, q. 3, n. 113 (Vatican 9:468).
events of a person’s life, necessary for conversion or repentance, requires the sort of access to reality that intuition guarantees.

Scotus presents both visual and auditory examples for intuitive cognition. In his Questions on the Metaphysics Book VII, Scotus identifies intuitive cognition with a visual experience: seeing directly. In the series of questions in Ordinatio I, d. 3, Scotus alludes to music and numerical proportion in discussing concept formation. As he considers the question of the knowability of God, Scotus considers the generation of concepts and acts of understanding. Authorities are presented who defend the passivity of the intellect (Godfrey of Fontaines) against those who defend the intellect’s primacy in acting (Peter John Olivi).

As he moves toward his own solution, Scotus cites arguments that attempt to resolve discrepancies in two different texts of Henry of Ghent on this question. Key to their agreement, apparently, is a reference to Augustine’s De Musica VI. There, the Bishop of Hippo (obviously influenced by Pythagorean sources) appeals to the foundational role of numbers (rhythms) that sustain human understanding. These “numbers” or “rhythms” function musically and provide rational confirmation for intellect by means of a type of auditory experience.

Scotus himself responds to and corrects this use of Augustine’s position later in the argument, where the Franciscan strengthens the power of the intellect in cognitive activity and, in particular, in coming to distinct and perfect acts of cognition. In doing so, he clarifies Augustine’s true intention in De Musica VI. What Augustine meant, explains Scotus, is that the soul, in reacting to the movement of the air in the ear (sound), moves the air more vehemently than could the sound alone and this is

44. See note 40 above.
45. Ordinatio I, d. 3, pars 3, q. 2, n. 530 (Vatican 3:316).
46. Not only does Henry of Ghent make use of this source text, but Roger Marston, a Franciscan contemporary of Henry’s, also refers frequently to Augustine’s De Musica VI in relationship to acts of knowing, particularly prior to the fall. See Marston’s Disputed Questions on De Anima, q. 9, in Rogeri Marston, Quaestiones Disputatae (Quarrachi: Ad Claras Aquas, 1932), 421–26. Scotus refers to Marston in Lectura II, dd. 30–32, qq. 1–4, n. 32 (Vatican 19:299). In Lectura I, d. 3, n. 398 (Vatican 16:380–81), the editors refer to Marston’s De Anima, q. 8, where he refers to Augustine’s De Musica VI, ch. 5, n. 8, in dealing with the superiority of activity over passivity in the soul. See Marston’s discussion of this in Quaestiones Disputatae, 378.
47. Augustine, De Musica VI, ch. 6, n. 16 (Jacobsson, 205). The numbers (rhythms) referred to are the following: advancing (progressores), sounding (sonantes), reacting (occusores), judicial (iudicum sentiendi), and memorial (memoria). Of the five, Augustine affirms that the judicial activity is the most perfect.
what causes audition. The movement, called “meeting,” is better understood as “acting together,” with the intellect moving with the external sensation, rather than being moved by it. Audition is more than sound. By way of analogy, the mind is far superior and more active than the phantasm in the experience of cognition.48

Through these arguments and counter arguments, Scotus explores the highest acts of understanding and judgment by means of an auditory experience. The sensory data coming from extramental sources is not a phantasm but rather the vibration of the air (sound). This sound initiates the activity of hearing. In response to the sensory data, the sound waves in the ear vibrate, moving with the air outside the ear. Likewise, the intellect moves and co-acts with extramental objects, rather than being passively moved by them.

The choice of auditory (rather than visual) perception is an interesting one. It is difficult to imagine an auditory phantasm. Indeed, the auditory example offers a more immediate interaction of the mind with extramental reality. Does this represent, for Scotus, the successive stages involved in abstractive cognition? Is the final innermost act of understanding an intuitive act of immediate recognition? An act of “logical intuition”?49 Does the auditory experience offer greater certainty in judgment than the visual?

A parallel with this presentation can be found in the De Primo Principio, where Scotus describes the highest act of the intellect. In this text, following a long philosophical journey of reflection upon contingent being, causality, and the relationship to a first Principle, Scotus presents the possibility that a proper philosophical concept for this First Being could be identified as “infinite being” or ens infinitum. Scotus claims that such a concept is the goal and utmost limit of that philosophical reflection upon being (ens) proper to metaphysics.

When the mind arrives at the concept of infinite being, Scotus as-

49. See Jeff Steele’s analysis of this point where he notes the connection between hearing of dissonance and the intuitive perception of a logical contradiction. Steele’s point is that Scotus uses the harmonic example to make a point about logical intuition. The perception that ens infinitum is not logically impossible plays not upon the perception itself as an aesthetic one, but that both recognizing dissonance in music and logical contradiction are known in the same way: immediately and intuitively. See Steele, “Irrelevance of Aesthetic Interpretation,” 83.
serts, the natural question is that of its existence, or of the possibility of its existence. After presenting several arguments in favor of the adequacy of the concept of infinite being, Scotus appeals to the auditory experience of harmony and dissonance. He points to the absence of dissonance between the term “ens” and the term “infinitum.” The absence of dissonance, he argues, is a compelling support for the possibility that the highest, most perfect being can indeed be understood as infinite.

The intellect, whose object is being, finds nothing repugnant about the notion of something infinite. Indeed, the infinite seems to be the most perfect thing we can know. Now if tonal discord so easily displeases the ear, it would be strange if some intellect did not clearly perceive the contradiction between infinite and its first object [viz. being] if such existed. For if the disagreeable becomes offensive as soon as it is perceived, why is it that no intellect naturally shrinks from infinite being as it would from something out of harmony with, and even destructive of, its first object?50

The concept is logically possible because there is nothing in the terms themselves which would make them mutually exclusive. Thus, ens infinitum is possible and, in the line of Anselm, if possible, necessarily exists.

What sort of judgment is this? It is clearly a judgment, not of the presence of harmony, but of the absence of discord. It is the immediate recognition of logical possibility. It carries a level of certainty. While these aspects belong to intuitive acts, something is still missing: the existence and affirmative presence of the object is also required. This cannot be a judgment of ens infinitum as present and existing, but rather of the logical possibility of its existence insofar as it is not self-contradictory. Here is the highest act of which natural reason is capable. This is not an experience of the divine essence as present and existing, proper to the beatific vision. Rather, it represents the culmination of successive acts of abstraction, belonging to the philosophical discursive journey of analysis, a journey that opens to the possibility of revelation.

My interest here is not in the power of these arguments, but rather in the presence and recurrence of a methodology that appeals to the auditory confirmation of intellectual insight. Such an act of judgment, Scotus argues, is the highest act of philosophical reasoning as it relates to the

highest being. It is a judgment of truth based not upon an experience of visible beauty (that we saw earlier in section 1), but on the objective canons that underpin harmonic resonance at the heart of reality, and on the identification of concepts of understanding with a music that is heard by the innermost ear.

When we link this auditory and musical treatment of the highest and most perfect act of the intellect (in Ordinatio I, d. 3, and in the De Primo Princípio) to the discussion of moral principle, moral law, and divine acceptance that we saw earlier in sections 2 and 3, we have some grounds to believe that, for Scotus, the identification of moral goodness and beauty may not simply be limited to the visual realm, along with the delight that accompanies this experience. Nor is the auditory experience of harmony limited to the divine ear. Indeed, the auditory experience of harmony also captures an epistemological experience common to human reflection. Not only is harmonic resonance used to explain how active the intellect is in coming to acts of understanding, but it also serves as the highest confirming act in philosophical reasoning.

THE RATIONAL WILL AS A VIS COLLATIVA

These various aspects of harmonic judgment may be seen to converge in the act of the rational will.51 Scotus presents the will as constituted by two key metaphysical affections: the affection for happiness and the affection for justice. In any act of moral reasoning, he argues, these two interact in such a way that they seek expression in the best possible decision. The affection for justice is the free (rather than natural) affection and constitutes human moral rationality as “a bridle” on the affection for happiness. As we saw earlier, significant as well for this constitutive analysis is that Scotus links justice (to which we have an innate metaphysical orientation or affection) to beauty. This constitutive analysis applies both to the equivalency mediated by bonum honestum, or intrinsic goodness (which Alexander of Hales as well as Scotus identifies with God as Perfect Goodness), and to the “beautifying” quality of justice when it adorns the human soul. We also saw this beauty earlier (in section 2) when Sco-

tus claimed that the divine will accepts and rewards human action because of the beauty and harmony (and therefore justice) within the soul as well as within the action performed. God delights when all aspects fit together: in the coherency of behavior with right judgment and motivation.

In considering the test case for rational freedom (i.e., angelic sin), Scotus describes the will as capable of a type of judgment analogous to that of the intellect. In order to demonstrate the will’s free capacity to act independently of the conclusion of the intellect, Scotus explains that the will (like the intellect) is a vis collatativa. Like the intellect, the will is a power which compares and links pieces of information, placing them alongside one another, so as to display their interrelationships. “Nor is it necessary that the intellect [previously] grasp something as attributed to another, or something as not attributed to another, but it is rather sufficient that the will connects this with that, because the will is like the intellect a ‘power that relates things among each other’ (vis collatativa). Consequently, the will can relate whatever simple notions that are shown to it, just like the intellect.”

Thanks to the presence of the two metaphysical affections (for justice and for happiness), the rational will is capable of functioning in a morally independent manner, choosing to love an object (such as God) in an inordinate manner (such as a personal possession). With this argument, Scotus explains how angelic sin is possible and, by extension, how any rational being is capable of choosing wrongly despite correct information. The key lies in how all elements may or may not line up, or “fit” together in an ordering of rational love.

Relating simple notions can be likened to the recognition of musical harmony among various notes. In this way, the judgment of the rational will may be understood to reveal a judgment of harmonic alignment or

52. *Ordinatio* II, d. 6, q. 1, n. 19 (Vatican 8:32–33). Scotus also speaks in these terms in *Reportatio* II-A, d. 6 q. 1 (Ms. Oxford Merton 61), fol. 143v.: “The will is a comparative power just like the intellect, because it can have the act of use.” Other references to the will as vis collatativa can be found in *Ordinatio* I, d. 45, nn. 10–11 (Vatican 6:374–75), and *Ordinatio* IV, d. 16, q. 2, n. 52 (Vatican 13:145). Tobias Hoffmann has done important work in identifying this passage as significant to Scotus’s understanding of the rational will. See his “Duns Scotus’s Action Theory in the Context of his Angelology,” in *Johannes Duns Scotus 1308–2008: Die philosophischen Perspektiven seines Werkes / Investigations into his Philosophy. Proceedings of “The Quadruple Congress” on John Duns Scotus*, Part 3, ed. by Ludger Honnefelder et al., 403–20 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2010).
attunement. The relationship among the elements is recognized by the rational ear. The resulting recognition becomes the basis for moral judgment and moral action.

While outlining the angelic and rational capacity for wrong willing, Scotus's argument also provides the model for right willing. By attributing to the will the “act of use” (as he does in the Reportatio), Scotus places the spectrum of moral choice and action in the will's power. The ability of the will to take what is presented in cognition and to compare it with something else (an action or a particular set of circumstances) explains how the will functions in perceiving practical matters for choice and in acting upon them. I suggest that we might further reflect upon this capacity in the will to make sense of Scotus's depiction of moral action and moral judgment as the recognition of moral resonance. While Scotus does not fully develop this musical insight surrounding ethical judgments as acts of discernment of beauty, an awareness of the Franciscan spiritual tradition and our own experience of listening to music support a reflection that might be fruitful for further study and analysis.

In a concrete case, such an act of moral judgment would involve the assemblage of different simple items, concepts, or moral propositions, along with learned moral experience and habit, all brought together with the first principle of praxis. Together, these elements either fit together in a harmonious relationship (what Scotus would call “consona”) or not. If harmonious, then we have what we are looking for: an act that reflects intelligible beauty, worthy of the affection for justice, assent, and action. If not harmonious, then the will recoils from it (as the ear from discord), either rejecting it outright (the act of nolle) or at the very least refraining from giving assent to it (the act of non velle).

Scotus's discussion of moral recognition by the rational will could then be further likened to a mode of spiritual discernment, where the morally mature person possesses a well-trained “moral ear” capable of picking up dissonance in a given situation. The morally mature agent, like the well-trained musician, is the one who detects harmony or discord within a given situation. Like the musician, she can adjust aspects of the moral situation to conform to the requirements of harmony, just as one would tune the strings of a lyre or, as a member of a choir, would adjust one’s voice for a truer harmonic blend. This suggests a different model for moral analysis: the moral agent would aspire to resemble the piano
tuner rather than the umpire. The vicious person, by contrast, would be like one who is tone deaf.

In the absence of concrete particulars, moral principles alone are imperfect and incomplete. The expert is like the trained artisan: she possesses that art whereby she can identify both principles and specific conditions that are appropriate to the moral act. This is more than mere theory. It is judgment immediate to action in the concrete particular. “Hence, just as an artist with a knowledge of his art in mind is more remotely practical than one who knows how to do or make something simply from experience and not deductively from any art he possesses, so too one who knows the science of morals is more remotely practical than one who possesses prudence.”

The external judgment of what to do, like the artist’s judgment, is primarily based upon experience and training over a lifetime. Yet this experience and training is guided by fundamental moral principles and truth. Likewise, the morally mature possess a capacity for moral judgment and performance that is the result of years of rehearsal.

A final reference to musical performance captures the way in which artistic performance reveals the complex interaction of virtue (acting naturally) in tandem with the will (acting freely and rationally). In Ordinatio III, d. 33, Scotus discusses the relative impact of virtue and habitual behavior on moral freedom, using the following analogy, taken from his own experience:

As for the third [objection], it is conceded that there could be a virtue and habit in a part of the body, as is clear from the hand of a writer or painter. For my hand is not skilled in those abilities needed to play the cither. But by practice it becomes such, and this aptitude inheres in the hand and is presumed and conceded to be a kind of virtue, because it is a certain aptitude for performing a work of moral virtue.

This minor autobiographical admission helps us better understand where Scotus places the virtues in the overall moral framework. We

54. Lectura Prologue, Pars 4, q. 1–2, n. 174 (Vatican 16:58). The English translation is from Wolter, Will and Morality, 141–43. Scotus makes a similar point using the analogy with the arts in Ordinatio Prologue, n. 351 (Vatican 1:228).
55. Ordinatio III, d. 33, n. 60 (Vatican 10:169). The English translation is from Wolter, Will and Morality, 341.
know that, for Scotus, virtue never replaces the free and rational will as central to the moral order. Charity, the virtue that beautifies the soul, does not overpower rational freedom in moral living. Virtue never surpasses freedom because virtue functions in a natural and deterministic manner, while the will is the seat of rational freedom. Nevertheless, it is clear from this passage and its musical analogy that virtues and learned behaviors are part and parcel of a morally good life. Virtues facilitate ease of performance. Without the presence of virtue, the morally good act could still be performed; it would simply be more difficult.

**CONCLUSION**

The auditory and visual motifs surrounding beauty, read in light of the discussion of moral decision-making and action, suggest an expansive moral perspective within which Scotus’s Franciscan sensibilities have a greater play. Once we shift the interpretive lens from models of freedom (or from the way in which freedom and the moral law interact) to a fuller consideration of Scotus’s deeper spiritual inspirations, we discover evidence that points to the centrality of beauty in his texts. Beyond his teaching on the centrality of human freedom, Scotus links the human journey toward the Good with the highest rational insights about beauty, whether divine or human. And this linkage results in an expanded understanding of the power of moral action as a way to enhance beauty in concrete circumstances.

I suggest three areas in which we can identify the implications of Scotus’s treatment of beauty and moral goodness throughout his texts.

1. **The Centrality of the Experience of Beauty for Virtue and Moral Character**

Because of Scotus’s emphasis on the freedom in the will and upon the judgments of right reasoning to ground moral truth, we know that he does not situate virtue at the center of his moral paradigm. For him, virtues function *naturally*, that is, in a determined manner. If they were to be the foundation for moral living, then the key role played by freedom...
would, in his opinion, be diminished. For some, this casts some doubt on whether or not character plays a role at all in Scotist moral teaching.

Based upon the texts presented here, I suggest that we have some grounds for holding that beauty has taken virtue’s place as grounding for Scotus’s discussion of the sorts of things that we include in character. Justice, a central Aristotelian virtue, is identified as beautifying the soul by Scotus. Charity, the highest theological virtue and the soul’s beauty, never diminishes the will’s freedom. However, it is precisely because of the presence of charity in the soul that it is made beautiful and delightful to the divine will. This suggests that where Aristotelians speak of virtue, Scotus speaks of beauty.

Character involves internal integrity and coherence between principles and values. This integrity is a consona or harmony that develops between first practical principles and lesser principles belonging to moral science. The harmony here is expressed as musicality where notes form fuller and fuller chords as they are set in an ordered relation to one another.

The musical analogy may also help to inform a reading of Quodlibet Question 17, in which Scotus describes the four levels of goodness: generic, natural, virtuous, and meritorious. Like a four-note chord, the meritorious act has a fullness of beauty not found in the early chords. Its integrity and harmony delight the divine ear.

In this connection note the order that obtains between the bare act to which blame or praise is imputable, the virtuous act which stems from moral virtue, the charitable act and the meritorious act. The first expresses a relationship to the potency which freely elicits the act; the second adds to this a relationship to the virtue which inclines to such an act, or rather to the rule of virtue, i.e., a dictate of right reason; the third expresses a relationship to charity which inclines the will to such an act; the fourth adds a relationship to the divine will which accepts the act in a special way. The third adds some goodness over and above that conferred by the second and is itself required for the fourth, not indeed by the very nature of things, but rather by a disposition of the accepting will.58

Here Scotus ties the levels of moral motivation and decision to the highest level of moral goodness: the beauty and harmony of justice and

love, so pleasing to the divine ear. What is more, the divine response (at the fourth level) adds to the harmonic richness of the chord of goodness, deepening the tonal harmony and symphonic grandeur. Grace itself is a music.

(2) The Discussion of Musical Harmony Personalizes Moral Judgment in the Agent as One Who Immediately Recognizes Moral Truth

While Duns Scotus does not focus on beauty as intensely as does Bonaventure or Alexander of Hales, he makes use of aesthetic patterns and examples throughout his teaching. From identifying the objectivity of beauty as a characteristic of the created order to recognizing how God can be understood and loved as Beauty beyond compare, Scotus mines the human experience of beauty to unpack the spiritual intuitions within his moral arguments. Again and again, he recurs to the experience of harmonic tones to illustrate the distinct levels of moral reasoning: from the highest and most intimate acts of understanding, to the identification of moral action with performance and, ultimately, to the pleasure experienced by the divine ear in hearing the music of the human heart.

This suggests the following question: does Scotus give moral judgments a high level of certainty, based upon the immediate recognition of moral truth? If so, then moral reasoning in its most perfect form would not need the deliberative syllogism. Rather, it requires that type of moral insight similar to spiritual discernment: a penetrating awareness of all that is present in a situation as morally relevant. The ability for this highest spiritual knowledge belongs to the morally wise, the person of reflective awareness and life experience. If the preceding statement is true, it certainly nuances the portrait of Scotus that is often presented: someone who advocates freedom of indifference, guided only by law and principle, and whose moral theory has no other basis than the (unknowable) divine will. Scotus’s overall approach may personalize moral excellence in contrast with the way that Aristotle’s syllogistic moral reasoning can appear to depersonalize it.

We may recognize in such a model the seeds for a program of moral pedagogy that identifies goodness with beauty. Moral education would center on the development of a taste for the beautiful. This would be

59. Scotus states this textually in the Lectura Prologue (Vatican 16:58). See note 54 above.
not a mere attraction to the agreeable but rather a deep appreciation of beauty in the totality of all aspects of moral experience. It would include the highest awareness of fundamental moral principle, the alignment of moral motivation and action, the balance and harmony of acting in such a way that all elements of an action are taken into account: time, place, manner, and so on.

The complete fulfillment of moral living would not simply involve taking the law or principle into account. Nor would it rely upon the Aristotelian model of sequential deliberation of means in light of ends. Rather, it would be most fully captured in the immediate recognition of the good in particular concrete situations, as a type of moral insight. Such an act of recognition requires a mature and well-formed moral creativity whose goal is to bring forth and enhance the beauty of a particular moral situation.

(3) Scotus Integrates the Nature of the Good with its Rational Perception as Beauty

According to the Subtle Doctor, moral judgment of the good can be examined according to an ancient and more spiritually-informed paradigm as the intuitive experience of beauty understood in terms of a two-fold harmony: within the moral action and, importantly, within the moral agent. Scotus’s depiction of moral judgment against the background of beauty offers a successful integration of epistemological, logical, and moral reflection on the nature of the good and its rational perception as beauty.

Epistemologically, Scotus uses the common human experience of identifying harmony within music to capture the delicate manner according to which moral recognition requires heightened awareness and recognition of key moral elements. The morally mature person has achieved a perfection of judgment, thanks to years of training and experience. Moral acuity or insight possesses the characteristics of perfect pitch: elements are compared to a foundational tone or moral truth, and harmony is recognized in the relationship of all elements and possesses a moral objectivity based upon the nature of moral objects and moral truths.

The textual affirmation of the harmonic relationship of the laws within the Decalogue and the first practical principle in no way limits divine freedom.60 Rather, according to a larger frame of beauty, divine creative

60. Pace Jeff Steele’s argument in “Irrelevance of Aesthetic Explanation.” See note 4 above.
freedom at the outset constitutes an order that is grounded in love and perfectly suited to human nature, desires, and capacities. This order, *de potentia ordinata*, provides the basis for human growth in love, toward the fullness of charity and moral expertise. Scotus’s Franciscan approach may hold the seeds for an expanded and renewed moral model, one that capitalizes on the convergence of spirituality, artistic sensibilities, and moral education.61

Logically, the first practical principle, Deus diligendus est (God is to be loved), stands as an analytic principle. “If God exists, then God is to be loved” as the highest Good and in the highest manner.62 This principle serves as a foundation for moral science and moral law and is the basis upon which moral judgments are to be made. To consider the divine essence as the highest Good is to understand it as *bonum honestum*, intelligible beauty.

Morally, decisions and actions in the concrete are called to share in the beauty of the created order, where timing, placement, manner, intention, and object are all meant to be attuned to the highest moral principle. Such a Franciscan model for moral judgment enables us to look upon the human person as a moral performing artist. She is able to assess the moral situation from the perspective of its potential for rational beauty and to regard moral training as an apprenticeship in beauty—with rehearsal and practice as part of the development of character. Indeed, this aestheticized frame leads us to regard mistakes and errors as part of the life of ongoing conversion and development.

Finally, the moral domain can be seen to be a domain open to transcendence and to an ever-expanding context for moral creativity and possibility: to symphonic grandeur. As Richard Cross suggests in a recent publication, Scotus’s aesthetic frame allows us to consider the human condition not as the arena for sin, punishment, and divine justice but as a context within which beauty is revealed, even in situations of human impairment.63 Just as in heaven (an expanded context) a given physical impairment will, in many cases, no longer be such (as, for ex-


ample, the absence of a limb within a spiritualized context where local motion is no longer needed), so on earth the moral response to cases of physical impairment may lie in the expansion of accommodations and a broadening of “fit.” Such moral and aesthetic sensibilities call for an expanded frame of reference and expanded openness to creativity of response.
In a world of cognitive and moral relativism, where the true and the good have been called into question (if not altogether denied), we might wonder whether beauty has fared any better than truth and goodness. We might also question whether Dostoevsky’s words, “Beauty will save the world,”¹ are in any way relevant for us today, for we see in our culture how beauty may be said to be on the decline in so many areas: in language, manners, dress, and the art world.² If beauty was once considered the province of art, it has also been alleged that after the horrors of Auschwitz, it would no longer be possible to write lyric poetry, and so beauty

I would like to thank Robert Delfino for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay, presented at “The Art of the Beautiful” Lecture Series organized by the Thomistic Institute in New York City. I am also grateful to Roger Pouivet for his remarks on a later version of my work for this book; his extensive comments have opened up avenues for the future development of this topic.


² Roger Scruton considers decorum and propriety as integral to the sense of beauty and important in many practical areas such as that of dress. See Mark Dooley, Roger Scruton: The Philosopher on Dover Beach (New York: Continuum, 2009), 92. On manners, see Peter Johnson, The Philosophy of Manners: A Study of the ‘Little Virtues’ (London: Bloomsbury, 1999). On language, see Bradley J. Birzer, “Foul Language, Decorum, and the Soul,” The Imaginative Conservative, October 27, 2015. Of course, there are those who will argue that there is no such decline since there are no standards of beauty because beauty is no more than a social construct, and so beauty, like truth and goodness, is just subjective, relative to the individual and to the times in which he lives.
could no longer be captured in and through words or music. In recent years, then, we have witnessed examples of art emptied of formal beauty and uplifting moral messages, works of art that are ugly and shocking and that present negative moral content. And yet, the beauty of the arts, like that of nature, is of vital importance to us, as it allows us to make sense of our existence and to transcend our own limitations. Without an appreciation and a cultivation of beauty in our lives, we would be greatly deprived, for beauty contributes to the perfection of human life. It enables us to recognize that we are more than material beings and that human life and reality do have a transcendent dimension—a dimension just as real, if not even more real, than the real perceived by our senses.

I wish therefore in this essay to explore the importance of beauty and its message, for much of contemporary culture has denigrated beauty and simultaneously distorted reality, especially the reality of the human person. We might ask why this has happened in our times, and we are not without a possible answer if we consider briefly here the relationship between culture and religion on the one hand and a defense of the classical tradition on the other hand. In his penetrating essay entitled

3. Even in the terrible conditions of a concentration camp, Victor Frankl shows in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) how the prisoners could still experience the beauty of art and nature and how this experience would fill them with the hope of life and true freedom. Despite the lack of external freedom—the freedom to move as one pleases in the world—the prisoners could still cultivate their interior lives and interior freedom, and their appreciation for the beauty of art and nature is a manifestation of their inner lives, of which no one could deprive them. What I say here is corroborated by Theodore Dalrymple in his book *Our Culture, What’s Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005): "In the face of catastrophe, the lyrical appreciation of the beauty of life becomes even more important" (ibid., 123). Dalrymple cites an example from the life of the art historian, Sir Ernst Gombrich: after the Anschluss, some of his friends in Vienna, who expected to be arrested and possibly face death, spent their last hours of freedom together playing Beethoven quartets.


5. Dalrymple, *Our Culture, What’s Left of It*, 123. While Dalrymple here is speaking of art, he is considering art "in its highest expression," by which I take him to mean artistic works of formal beauty (ibid., 125).

6. The word "culture" comes to us from the Latin verb *colere*, which means to cultivate and to worship. In fact, this Latin verb has a threefold meaning: to cultivate the land, to cultivate oneself in the ethical sense, and to give cult to God (a religious meaning). St. Thomas highlights the first and third meanings in his question on religion in *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 4. See also Jacinto Choza in his “Radicales de la sociabilidad,” in which he speaks of the semantics of the term “culture” (Choza, *La Supresión del pudor, y otros ensayos: Signo de nuestro tiempo* [Pamplona: EUNSA, 1980], 148).
“Notes towards the Definition of Culture,” T. S. Eliot contends that culture is essentially “the incarnation … of the religion of a people.” For Eliot, it is religion that gives meaning to human life, provides “the framework for a culture,” and protects us from boredom and despair. Roger Scruton also sees culture as growing from religion and inheriting from religion that knowledge of the human heart whose essence is sympathy and which is passed on in works of culture—works that attest to what we human beings are and what we are capable of, and that also give witness to “the higher life of mankind.” Scruton defends the “high culture” of Western civilization, by which he means the artistic, literary, and philosophical inheritance that has been taught throughout the world, especially in American and European universities, but which in recent years has been subject to contempt and dismissal. The assault on high culture may well be related to the decline of religious faith—a decline that brings with it acts of sacrilege and iconoclasm, as we shall see later in this essay. According to Scruton, “The emergence of a culture of repudiation might therefore be a normal result of the breakdown of an old religion.”

The relationship between culture and religion far exceeds the scope of this essay, but because religion originates from the natural desire in man for truth and ultimately for God, the God who is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, that natural desire, and especially the desire for beauty that


8. Ibid., 106.


11. According to Scruton in Culture Counts, ”Culture grows from religion, and religion from a species-need” (24). Scruton also points to the Greek tragedians who believed not in gods but rather in God, that is, a God such as is found in Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, that is, “infinite, eternal, inscrutable, standing in judgment over a world that does not really contain Him” (ibid.).
will concern us here, needs to be cultivated so as to reach fulfillment lest that desire be diverted from its proper object. My intention in this essay will be to discuss how the classical theism of Thomas Aquinas and Plato, and others in line with this type of thought, can provide us with the elements for a better understanding of beauty both in nature and in the arts and perhaps also with a sort of antidote to the cultural denigration of beauty so rampant today. To this end, I will begin first with a discussion of beauty and its features in Aquinas and will turn to what may be called an aesthetics of creation in his thought, which sheds light on our understanding of God, the cosmos, and the human person. Following on what Aquinas says, Plato's account of the origin of the human person will be discussed, together with the person's desire for beauty, a desire which will require purification if the person is to ascend to Beauty itself. Secondly, in order to contrast this rich conception of beauty and the experience of beauty in the Platonic-Thomistic tradition with the decline of authentic beauty in our culture, we will make reference to specific examples of the contemporary cult of beauty and of aesthetic iconoclasm, examples that trivialize beauty and objectify the human person, thus alienating us from our true essence and depriving us of the spiritual joy that is proper to our rational nature. Thirdly, we will contrast the wonder that is prompted by the beauty of artistic forms with the hunger for the sensational found in aesthetic iconoclasm. And lastly, I will emphasize that we need to recover or rehabilitate a way of seeing and delighting in things that is in harmony with our human nature. This task is one that artists seem particularly gifted at and called to, creating works of real beauty that provide us with the opportunity to wonder and to marvel at the perfection of forms and that also put us in touch with truth and goodness.\(^{12}\) The production of such works can transform artists and spectators alike. Such a task comes, nevertheless, with a price—the correction of our vision and our loves through virtue, as I shall explain in this essay.\(^{13}\)

\(^{12}\) Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 35. According to Pieper, it is the artist who produces shapes and forms for the eye to see. As Pieper says, “The artist will be able to perceive with new eyes the abundant wealth of all visible reality, and, thus challenged, additionally acquires the inner capacity to absorb into his mind such an exceedingly rich harvest” (ibid.).

\(^{13}\) Seeing things rightly is the first step toward the mental grasp of reality, and for this a certain asceticism is needed—what Pieper calls “simple abstention, a regimen of fasting and abstinence” (*Only the Lover Sings*, 35). This is what may also be called an ethics of cognition.
AQUINAS AND PLATO ON BEAUTY, KNOWLEDGE, AND LOVE

I will begin with Aquinas’s discussion on beauty, which refers the beautiful to the good and correlates these notions to the notions of desire and love. Aquinas says, “The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since the good is what all seek [or desire], that which calms the desire is implied in the notion of the good, while that which calms the desire by being seen or known pertains to the notion of the beautiful.” According to Aquinas the senses that are especially involved in the knowledge of the beautiful are sight and hearing, so that we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds but do not, generally speaking, label tastes and odors as beautiful. For Aquinas it is evident that “beauty adds to goodness a relation to the knowing power, so that good means that which simply pleases the appetite [the good being what all things desire], while the beautiful is something pleasant to apprehend.” Once Aquinas has established that the beautiful is related to the knowing power, he describes the beautiful as follows: “Beautiful things are those which please when seen” (pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent). Sight, above all the other senses, delights in things that are duly proportioned and thus beautiful, as reason too delights in the beautiful.

In the perception of the beautiful, then, we experience pleasure or delight, but this delight belongs more properly to the order of knowing than to action or desire. Because the knowing concerns the individual thing, that is, the seeing of the sunset or the seeing of one of Turner’s seascapes, for example, it occurs in an intuitive or contemplative way rather than by reasoning. By this is meant the following: our senses direct-

14. ST I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.
15. We do, however, sometimes speak of a beautiful perfume or fragrance.
16. Ibid.
17. ST I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1. One might wonder here why Aquinas did not include in his definition the sense of hearing, given that he does say that both sight and hearing have to do with the beautiful. I think an answer to this question can be found in the beginning of Aristotle’s Metaphysics where he speaks of the importance of sight to human beings: “All [human beings] by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things” (Met. I.1.980a21-27).
18. ST I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.
ly intuit their objects, as sight immediately perceives colored things and hearing immediately perceives sounds. The beauty of the forms of these objects is nevertheless only obscurely apprehended by the senses; it is the intellect that more clearly perceives the beautiful forms in and through the intuition of our senses. The senses and the intellect thus function together in the perception of the beautiful, and this perception has as its result pleasure or joy.\textsuperscript{19} Since the beautiful involves both knowing and delight or joy, it has a mode of truth and goodness that are peculiar to it.\textsuperscript{20} We know the true and we delight in the good, and these are both involved in our experience of the beautiful.

Since Aquinas defines the beautiful in terms of pleasure or joy, we might think that the beautiful is purely subjective, dependent on the individual man or woman, on what he or she finds pleasurable. However, this is not true for Aquinas because the pleasure or joy involved in the perception of a beautiful thing is caused by certain features in the object itself. Thus there are certain objective elements which characterize beautiful things. Aquinas discusses three such elements. The first is integritas, or completeness. A thing is less beautiful if it is missing something that it should have, such as a human face that is lacking an eye. The second is consonantia, or proportion. Something is considered less beautiful if it is out of proportion to the whole, such as a human face with an exaggeratedly long nose. The third and final element of beauty is claritas, or radiance of form. The healthy, vibrant human being is more beautiful, on the physical level, than the sickly, pale human being.\textsuperscript{21} Of course, even if a thing does possess an intrinsic beauty, it is also the case that individual reactions to a beautiful thing may not accord with the objective aspects of the thing contemplated since, as we know, not all men and women possess good perception and sound judgment. So, while Aquinas holds

\textsuperscript{19} As Maurer clearly puts it, “The perception of the beautiful is primarily the work of the intelligence, but using the senses as its instruments…. The senses and intellect function together in this perception, which results in pleasure in the sense appetite and joy in the rational appetite or will” (Armand A. Maurer, About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation [Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983], 35).


\textsuperscript{21} Aquinas says: “Beauty includes three conditions: integrity or perfection, since those things which are impaired are by [that] very fact ugly; due proportion or harmony; and lastly, brightness, or color, [such that] things are called beautiful which have a bright color” (\textit{ST} I, q. 39, a. 8, resp.). I would like to thank my colleague Robert Delfino for his suggested examples.
that beauty is intrinsic to things, he would also maintain that beauty is not grasped in the same way by all persons due in part to differences in sensibility.\textsuperscript{22}

Now while it is true that beauty was not as important a theme for Aquinas as it was for other philosophers and theologians of his time, especially those of the Franciscan school, it may nevertheless be said that in his comments on beauty, especially as they were influenced by the Platonic tradition, along with his metaphysics, one can find the necessary elements to develop an aesthetics of creation. Aquinas often uses the metaphor of the divine artist to describe and understand God’s creative activity. Since no one, according to Aquinas, takes pains to make an image or a representation except for the sake of the beautiful,\textsuperscript{23} the divine artist creates things that are beautiful and good and, moreover, expressive or representative of the divine artist himself. The diversity of beings and forms that are all harmoniously arranged and resplendent with varying degrees of radiance and intelligibility constitute one universe of things, a cosmos whose order, according to Aquinas, is their chief beauty.\textsuperscript{24}

In comparing God to an artist, Aquinas tells us that God’s knowledge is related to creatures, as an artist’s knowledge is related to his works of art.\textsuperscript{25} Just as the artist works through the word or idea conceived in his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} See Adler, ed., "Beauty," in The Syntopicon, 90.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Summa contra Gentiles, bk. 3, chap. 71. In asserting that the one world is caused by the one God, Aquinas says, in ST I, q. 32, a. 1, "When Trimegistus says, Monad begot monad, this does not refer to the generation of the Son, or to the procession of the Holy Ghost, but to the production of the world. For one God produced one world by reason of His love for Himself." Aquinas will also make clear that creation belongs to God according to His being, to His essence, which is common to the three Persons, that is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and so the work of creation is common to the whole Trinity and not proper to any one person. See ST I, q. 45, a. 6, resp.
\item \textsuperscript{25} ST I, q. 14, a. 8, resp. In this article Aquinas emphasizes that the cause of the being of spiritual and temporal things is the knowledge of God, as the knowledge of the artist is the cause of those things made by his art. There are of course many ways in which God as creator is different from a human artist, for the latter does not create the totality of an effect and for this reason creation cannot properly be attributed to him; the human artist does not create substantial forms but rather gives an accidental form to an already existing substance, as for example a Michelangelo who educes a form from the matter of marble.
\end{itemize}
intellect and through the love of his will for some object, so also does God work: every creature is thought and willed by God. Now for Aquinas, in order to have a right understanding of creation we need to know that God is triune. While ancient philosophers did not know the Trinity of the divine persons, the Trinity being a truth that exceeds natural reason, they did nevertheless know some of the essential attributes appropriated to the persons, such as power to the Father, wisdom to the Word or the Son, and goodness to the Holy Spirit. According to Aquinas the knowledge of the divine persons is necessary in order to exclude certain errors: the fact that God made all things by His Word refutes those who say that God produced things by necessity; and God brought creatures into existence not because He needed them nor for any other extrinsic reason, but rather because of the love for His own goodness. As the perfect agent that He is, God does not act from need. Aquinas says of God: “He alone is the most perfectly liberal giver, because He does not act for His own profit, but only for His own goodness.” Given, then, that God creates by His Word and for no other reason than to impart His perfection, which is His goodness, it may be said that creatures are words of the Word and gifts of the Giver who is also Gift.

In what we have termed here his aesthetics of creation, Aquinas especially emphasizes the role of the Divine Idea or Word in creation—the Word is the perfect reflection or Image of God and as such this Word is said to be beautiful. In fact, all the three conditions of beauty that

26. ST I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 1. Aquinas holds that the Platonists failed in the knowledge of the third person because they deviated from the goodness appropriated to the Holy Spirit, or because they asserted the existence of one Primal Being who was for them the father of the universe, and they held in addition the existence of another substance beneath him, which they called mind and which contained the idea of all things.

27. Of great interest for our topic is what Aquinas says when he comments on the creation account in Scripture: “So Moses, when he had said, In the beginning God created heaven and earth, subjoined, God said, Let there be light, to manifest the divine Word; and then said, God saw the light that it was good, to show the proof of the divine love. The same is also found in the other works of creation. In another way, and chiefly, that we may think rightly concerning the salvation of the human race, accomplished by the Incarnate Son, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit” (ST I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 3).

28. ST I, q. 44, a. 4, ad 1.

29. John Saward, The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 88. As words, creatures are intelligible, and as gifts they are good and lovable. There are instances in contemporary culture, as we shall see later in this essay, where the intelligibility of those words that are creatures and their goodness as gifts are not attended to because the presence of God in the world is not recognized.

30. ST I, q. 39, a. 8, resp. See ST I, q. 93, a. 1, ad 2.
we spoke of above—integrity or completeness, harmony or due proportion, clarity or radiance—are attributed to the Word.\textsuperscript{31} Since all things have been created through the Word—that is, through the Divine Idea which is also Divine Wisdom or Divine Truth—they participate through their being and their form in the beauty of the perfect Image of God.\textsuperscript{32} All creatures are then either images or traces of God’s wise artistry. The human person is described as being made in the image of God—imago Dei—and as such is intimately related to his or her exemplar or prototype, which is the Divine Word. And, like all other creatures, the human person intends to acquire its own perfection, which is the likeness of the Divine Goodness.\textsuperscript{33}

The human person is, moreover, called to cooperate, through his or her own thoughtful and loving activity, in giving the universe (or the part of the universe that is assigned to him or her) its final form. Because form in Aquinas is a participation in the divine radiance, the human person, and especially the artist, who is a maker of forms and of beauty, is called in a sense to beautify the universe, imitating as it were the divine artist. The aesthetic act, the conceiving and bringing into being of a work of art that otherwise might have never existed, has been termed an imitation, “a replication on its own scale, of the inaccessible first fiat [or act of creation].”\textsuperscript{34} The human artist’s work is thus a participation in God’s creative activity. There would, then, be no artistic production of forms without the creation of forms by God. And like God’s creative activity, which excludes necessity, aesthetic creation or formal construction is a phenomenon of freedom, since the aesthetic object did not have to come into being. With the freedom of donation that characterizes the divine artist and the human artist, there is also, on the part of the human person who beholds the beauty of nature and of the arts, the freedom of reception or of refusal,\textsuperscript{35} that is, the freedom to receive the beauty of the form that is revealed in the work of art or in nature and thus to be transformed, or the freedom to refuse what is revealed and so reject its transformative effect.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] ST I, q. 39, a. 8, resp.
\item[32] ST I, q. 39, a. 8, resp.
\item[33] ST I, q. 44, a. 4, resp.
\item[34] George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 201, quoted in Aidan Nichols, Redeeming Beauty, 145.
\item[35] Steiner, Real Presences, 151–56, especially 155.
\end{footnotes}
After laying out a definition of the beautiful and specifying its objective elements, as well as pointing to what the metaphor of the divine artist might contribute to our understanding of God’s creation, I will turn to Plato’s account of the origin of the human person and how this mythological account relates to the experience of beauty. In the *Symposium* Aristophanes tells us that initially we humans were rounded doubles, but that because of pride and the desire to be gods, we were cut in two and now we are seeking our proper or other half. The inadequacy of this account of the human being can be corrected by making use of Aquinas’s conception of the person that I discussed above. The human person is made in the image of God—an image whose original model is the Divine Word, Absolute Beauty—and therefore the human being acquires perfection by imitating and uniting himself or herself to the Word. Thus the “other half” that the human person is seeking is in fact the Divine Word.

Once the Platonic account of the person’s origin is corrected in this way, we can agree with Plato that our deepest desire is for completion and unification; our desire or *eros*, as it is named, is for what is beautiful. According to Plato, each of us is a morally divided self whose unification will only come about through love. In seeking his or her other half, the human person is also seeking that which is good—the good that interestingly makes its appearance as the beautiful. Beauty is therefore the way in which goodness appears. While Plato is fully aware of the attraction of beautiful human bodies in the search for one’s other half, his account of love is not relegated merely to sensual beauty. The Platonic eros or love has a much wider connotation than physical desire. For, as we are told in the *Symposium*, the desire for the beautiful is actually the desire for the possession of the good and happiness; it is ultimately the desire for the “everlasting possession of the good,” and thus for immortality. For Plato, then, there are higher and lower forms of love. If the human person is only attracted to sensible beauties and goods (for example, to the beauty of physical objects or bodies) and mistakenly takes these as his or her true good, then the person’s love is directed toward inferior goods, inferior beauties, and the person is thus reduced to an earthly, sensual being. But because the person has a higher nature, that is, because the person has a rational soul, he or she is attracted to higher forms.

37. See *Symposium* 206a7–207a4.
of beauty, such as moral virtue, and to the highest form of beauty, the divine, transcendent beauty. There is thus an affinity between the rational soul and the truly beautiful and good. However, in order to see or contemplate what is really beautiful and good, the sensual appetite must be restrained; the lower powers of the person need to be ordered by reason. Furthermore, according to Plato, the divine itself is beauty, goodness, and wisdom, and by these the soul is nourished, whereas when the soul is fed on ugliness and vice the soul wastes away. And so in another one of Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedrus*, we find the following statement: “The intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to it, rejoices at beholding reality.”38 True beauty and goodness then nourish the soul and enable us to see the real; and therefore beauty contributes to the perfection of our lives.

For Plato, knowledge of the real requires effort, both mental and moral discipline; we progress from a less adequate state of knowing and loving to a more adequate one. This progress is depicted in Plato's allegory of the cave in the seventh book of the *Republic*, as well as in the *Symposium*. In the latter dialogue, the person can be brought to see that the beauty of the soul, the soul being higher and better than the body, is more valuable than the beauty of the body. And then the power of love or eros can attract the person toward what Plato calls “the wide ocean of intellectual beauty,” and finally true love will lead him or her toward the contemplation of absolute Beauty itself.39 This ascent, which I have sketched ever so briefly here, is similar to the intellectual ascent that we find in the allegory of the cave, where humans are portrayed as prisoners in a cave seeing only the shadows of reality and hearing only the echoes of truth; their view of reality is inadequate and distorted, just as ours can be. We too can find ourselves imprisoned, alienated in the cave of our passions and prejudices, which do not enable us to see things in their proper light. But when the prisoner emerges from the cave, he begins to see in the light of the sun the realities of which he once only saw the shadows, and lastly he will see the sun itself, which in Plato represents the highest Good, “the universal cause of all things right and beautiful—the source of truth and reason.”40 As we make progress then in our in-

38. *Phaedrus* 247e.
tellectual and affective journey, we reach the Absolute Good and the Absolute Beauty. This Absolute is somehow immanent in reality, for the things that appear before our senses seem to embody it; they “copy” it or partake in it; they are a “shadow” or a trace of its reality and manifest it in varied degrees, but this Absolute is also transcendent, surpassing all that we see and love here on earth.

Because beautiful and good things partake of the Absolute, they seem to have about them a divine quality, as it were; Plato, in fact, speaks of the beautiful face of the beloved as godlike and as “the expression of divine beauty.” The beloved is the mirror in which the lover sees himself, the beloved being his other half, that half that completes him. The beautiful beloved is reverenced by the lover; he would even sacrifice to the beloved as to the image of a god, were not this gesture taken to be madness. Without adequate moral training, we would thus tend to idolize beautiful persons or things. For this reason, Plato tells us that “everyone chooses his love from the ranks of beauty according to his character and this he makes his god, and fashions and adorns as a sort of image which he is to fall down and worship.”

What Plato says here calls to mind the scriptural passage from the Book of Wisdom, which is indeed very philosophical and which is in harmony with Plato’s thought—a passage that speaks precisely about the beautiful and the good and cautions us against the folly of idolatry. According to this passage, from the good things that are seen in the universe, we should be able to recognize their artisan, “for from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.” However, because we take such delight in the beauty of earthly things or of the luminaries of the heavens, we assume these to be gods and thus forfeit knowledge of their creator, the author of beauty. We are so amazed by the power of the things of nature—the power of fire, wind, turbulent water—that we cannot raise our vision to the infinite power of the one who formed them. Rational creatures have the ca-

41. For a clear explanation of this, we would have to refer to Aquinas’s Summa theologiae where he explains how God is present in the universe.
42. Phaedrus 251a.
43. Phaedrus 255d.
44. Phaedrus 251a.
45. Phaedrus 252d.
46. Wis 13:5.
pacity to know so much in their investigation of the world, and yet they may fail to attain knowledge of the Lord of the universe. The Wisdom passage is emphatic about our capacity to know by reason the Creator of Beauty from our knowledge of good and beautiful creatures, just as Plato thought that it was possible to ascend from lower beauties to Absolute Beauty. So emphatic is the Wisdom passage that it calls those people who are ignorant of God “foolish by nature.” The foolish person is unwise, imprisoned like the prisoner of the cave who only sees the shadows of reality, chained by loves that distort his or her vision of the real. Nevertheless, “There is none so worthless,” says Plato, “whom Love cannot impel, as it were by divine inspiration, toward [the beauty of] virtue.” That love of which Plato speaks is described in the Symposium as a mighty and wonderful god who can reorient our affections. Since the beauty we choose to love will depend on our character, on the virtues that order and purify our loves, no ascent to Absolute Beauty is therefore possible without purification and conversion. According to Plato, if we live a virtuous life, especially the life of wisdom, we will be able to attain true universal knowledge and to apprehend the rational character of reality, and with this the source of all beauty and goodness.

THE CULT OF BEAUTY AND AESTHETIC ICONOCLASM IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

What beauty we choose to love, then, is of paramount importance for the human person’s life and happiness. Unlike the exaltation of higher beauties and higher forms of love in Plato, the beauties that we are presented with in contemporary culture, the beauties that we are enticed to love, are often not directed toward the contemplation of Absolute Beauty. Far from awakening in us the nostalgia for the Absolute or the hope of immortality, the beauties of contemporary culture tend rather to promote vainglory, the will for possession, and instant self-gratification. Much of our culture

47. See Wis 13:1–9. According to Aquinas, it is because the human person is capax entis, that is, capable of knowing things, that he is also capax Dei, that is, capable of knowing God. It is precisely this ascent from the knowledge of beautiful and good things in the universe that should lead to the knowledge of God. This way of knowing is made possible by natural reason, unaided by faith.
49. Symposium 179a7–8.
seems to be fixated on appearances and thus on a superficial beauty, on sensible and cosmetic beauty. The emphasis is on the outer man, to the detriment of the inner man. The light of outward forms, which are perceptible to the senses and which are indeed beautiful to our eyes, do not always lead present-day man to the intelligible forms of things, to their inward forms, to that light that enlightens the mind and the inner man.

There has developed a sort of cult of outward appearance and good looks, an idolization of superficial beauty both among the young and the not so young.\(^\text{50}\) This idolization or cult of bodily beauty—a beauty so fleeting and ephemeral—does not provide for true happiness, nor does it guarantee that everlasting union with the good of which Plato speaks in the *Symposium*. Our penchant toward this type of beauty is perhaps an indication of the nihilism and materialism so rampant in our culture today.\(^\text{51}\) While a pleasant outward appearance may be an external good, it nonetheless passes all too quickly, and so we would be wise to cultivate another sort of beauty, the beauty of that inward form that is our soul.

The cult of beauty to which I am referring here tends to produce self-absorbed individuals, who see nothing but reflections of themselves in the waters of reality\(^\text{52}\) and who anxiously care for their outward appearance and for the approval of others, not knowing their true worth and dignity. At the basis of such an attitude may well be a disordered self-love, which makes the person incapable of self-giving and of accepting things as they are,\(^\text{53}\) as words and gifts that beckon to him and make a claim on him. There may even exist in such a person an inability to love and to rejoice in the goodness of reality. This incapacity to love accounts for the contemporary “devastation of the soul” and for the despair that is present among so many people today who only recognize the external goods of success, possessions, and good looks.\(^\text{54}\)

Another example of this cult of beauty may be found in contemporary attempts to refashion or recreate the human being by means of new

---

50. One has only to think here of the “extreme makeover” television shows in the United States and the recourse to cosmetic surgery among men and women of all ages.
51. According to Saward, positivism, materialism, and atheism “blind a man to the wealth and wonder of being” (*The Beauty of Holiness*, 79).
52. Ibid., 82.
53. Ibid.
genetic-altering technologies. What is technically possible now often takes precedence over moral standards. Couples can decide what type of child they want, and through genetic manipulation the “perfect” child, the extraordinarily intelligent or handsome child, may be produced. Science and technology thus place at our disposal a power over the world and the human person that knows practically no limitations. Art, too, becomes simply a matter of competence; the artist will do what he can do; he will consider himself bound by no limitations, and so there is no such thing as good or bad art because only what one can do counts.

What underlies the attempt to create the “perfect” human being, to make him a product of technology or of chemical arts, and to dismiss the limitations of human existence is a nonacceptance of reality as created by God, with the standards and limitations implicit in it. This fundamental dissatisfaction with the human condition as originally given stifles the ability to see and to love, to marvel and to wonder, at the ontological goodness and beauty of the human person and of the universe. And so, rather than behold and contemplate the marvelous richness of reality, we tend to dominate reality according to our whims, even fabricating the human being, making him in the image of man—imago hominis, no longer imago Dei—or sculpting through a variety of technologies the beautiful or perfect face, the beautiful or perfect body.

Contemporary culture’s emphasis on the external image or appearance, on what is at times referred to as “the look” in our civilization of

55. The root of this thinking can be found in the Enlightenment’s notion of secular, scientific progress. It should be noted, however, that the ecological threats confronting man today have led us to question our technological capacities lest they bring about destruction. This concern borders at times on the rejection of science and on a certain irrationalism. I owe this note to written correspondence with French philosopher Roger Pouivet.

56. Jean-Louis Chrétien, “From God the Artist to Man the Creator,” in Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 94–129. According to Chrétien, because the artist has the power to produce new forms and thus reflects the power of God, the human artist is falsely divinized.


58. There is a whole movement called transhumanism that embodies this attitude. See the philosopher Nick Bostrom’s article “A History of Transhumanist Thought,” Journal of Evolution and Technology 14, no. 1 (2005): 1–25.
the image, and our culture’s misunderstanding of who and what the human person really is often impedes the person from experiencing other dimensions of beauty, such as the beauty of self-sacrifice and self-giving, the beauty that radiates from virtuous living and from dedication to an ideal greater than themselves. Examples of such beauty abound in history, but the recent figures of Mother Teresa and John Paul II certainly exhibit magnanimity as well as enlarged capacities for understanding, loving, and generously giving of themselves. Figures such as these and many others throughout history, who recognize the differences between true beauty and false beauty and who contemplate and are in union with Absolute Beauty, are capable of bringing forth not shadows or even images of reality, as Plato puts it, but realities themselves.59

If the cult of beauty blinds us to the true nature of the human person and to the reality of higher forms of beauty by objectifying the person and trivializing beauty, it is also the case that we are presently faced with instances of aesthetic iconoclasm in our culture. Just as throughout history the veneration of religious images has been called into question and at times has even led to their destruction, now we witness in the arts acts of aesthetic iconoclasm that seek not only to flee from beauty but also to spoil it.60 A number of examples can be cited here, such as Luc Bondy’s production of Tosca in the New York Metropolitan Opera’s 2009–10 season, with its blatant disrespect for Puccini’s music as well as for his Roman Catholicism: in the closing scene of the first act, the villain Scarpia is seen lustfully embracing a statue of the Virgin Mary.61 This rendition of the opera reveals the ignorance of both the director and the general public regarding the beauty of the spirit of Catholicism.62 Another example of aesthetic iconoclasm can be found in the 2004 production of Mozart’s Abduction from the Seraglio at the Comic Opera in Berlin. While the story of the opera and its music originally expressed the moral beauty of charity and compassion, the new production showed no respect for Mozart’s conviction that charity is indeed a universal virtue. The message of the opera was drowned out by scenes of murder, violence, and narcissistic sex. This transgressive production has, therefore, no re-

59. Symposium 212. These realities would be beautiful thoughts, beautiful laws, and beautiful institutions.
62. Ibid.
According to Roger Scruton, “Wherever beauty lies in wait for us, the desire to pre-empt its appeal can intervene, ensuring that its small voice will not be heard behind the scenes of desecration. For beauty makes a claim on us: it is a call to renounce our narcissism and look with reverence on the world.” There are many examples in literature that attest to beauty’s claim on us, as in Iago’s famous line referring to Cassio: “He hath a daily beauty in his life / Which makes me ugly.” Iago’s cynicism loathes beauty and refuses to allow its existence. Scruton’s remarks on beauty as a “call” to our freedom that can either accept or refuse the demands of beauty are important. Perhaps what Scruton says here provides us with an answer to why, on the one hand, there is presently an idolization or cult of beauty, and why, on the other hand, the arts are in flight from beauty. There is almost no possibility of renouncing narcissism if the only beauty that concerns us is the man-made beauty of the “look,” or the genetically manipulated “perfect” human being. Such beauty does not enable us to transcend our bodily existence to higher forms of beauty. In addition, to truly hear the voice of beauty in the arts would lead us to see ourselves and the world in a different light; it would call us to redirect both our vision and our loves and thus to experience more than carnal delights. But for this to be achieved, the arts and indeed our culture must affirm and make us more aware of these higher forms of beauty. For, as Plato warned in the Symposium, “The ignorant are satisfied with what they are, and do not long for the virtues they have never missed.”

**Beauty and Wonder versus Aesthetic Iconoclasm and the Hunger for the Sensational**

The examples given above of aesthetic iconoclasm alienate man from his true essence and thus deprive him of the spiritual joy that is proper to


67. Symposium 204a.
his nature, the joy of seeing reality and of knowing truth. Since human beings cannot live without joy, they will turn to lower types of pleasure, bodily pleasures that often arise from concupiscence of the eyes, from a way of seeing that is not prompted by true love. The recent versions of Mozart’s and Puccini’s operas not only spoil the beauty of the music, but also desecrate the living human body and the religious image, for the gaze that is projected onto these is one of appropriation and selfish enjoyment. There is no respect for the beauty of the human body or reverence for the mystery of the person that lies beyond the outward appearance or beyond the physical image. A love that is pure and disinterested is thus not possible.

Unlike works of art that flee from beauty, great art can lead to the correction of our vision and to the purification of our loves. Just as the great artist needs to silence and expel the self, or check his selfishness, in the interest of contemplating reality as it truly is and depicting it as such in and through the artistic forms that he produces, so the beholder of art will have an analogous task. When the form produced by the artist displays what is real and true, then the spectator is not only moved but also enlightened by seeing what is excellent. As Plato says in the Republic, the arts have the “power to lead the best part of the soul up to the contemplation of what is best among realities.” The role of great art can thus be called educational and revelatory; for Plato, then, the beautiful is the harbinger of the good.

Because artistic forms in their perfection are imitations or renderings of the forms of nature, which forms Aquinas calls “a divine likeness participated by things” or “something divine in things,” they give us a glimmer of the sun that in Plato is the highest Good or of the primordial archetypes found in the Divine Word, the Word that is beautiful, according to Aquinas. Through great art we are taken beyond the mean-

68. ST II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 2. Aquinas is here quoting from Aristotle in Ethics X, 6 (1176b19).
70. Ibid., 65.
73. In both the making and the experiencing of art there is a kind of encounter with transcendence: a glimmer of the Platonic other half that we are seeking or a foretaste of the happiness that we will know seeing God face to face. Just as we experience joy before the beautiful, we will experience fullness of joy in seeing God who is Absolute Beauty. For the encounter with transcendence, see Nichols, Redeeming Beauty, 145.
ing of particular words, sounds, and colors to an awareness, even if not fully developed, of the meaning of the whole of existence: “In one way or another, the arts confront us with the affirmation that there is a wondrous or terrible meaning to existence, a meaning that is not arbitrarily thought up or subjectively foisted on the face of things but really there…. In a huge, hardly chartable, variety of ways, the arts all say to us, This is how the world is and it is wonderful, and they may add, terribly so.”74

It is then not surprising that the perfection of artistic forms should fill us with wonder and admiration. For Aquinas, wonder is defined as the desire for knowledge, the desire that human beings have when they see an effect of which the cause is unknown to them or surpasses their knowledge or faculty of understanding.75 Wonder is, moreover, a cause of joy, because it includes the hope of attaining the knowledge desired.76 Among those things that are wonderful and pleasing to us, Aquinas cites the representations of things and says that even those that are not pleasant in themselves give us pleasure, “for the soul rejoices in comparing one thing to another, because comparison of one thing with another is the proper and connatural act of the reason.”77 Representations of things in art thus engage the life of the mind, and there is joy in seeing, in knowing, and in learning—a delight that can be experienced not only by the philosopher but by the whole of mankind.78 For Robert Spaemann, what we seek in the contemplation of art is joy—the joy experienced when we encounter in and through the artwork the universal that has been made visible, as it were, as the essential thing.79

If the arts point us to a wondrous meaning for the world and for existence as a whole, might this not be an indication of a world that was originally created with meaning through the Divine Word or Logos, as St. John’s gospel tells us, and a world in which the Creator rejoiced because He saw it to be very good, that is, beautiful? If this is in fact the case, then the arts,

74. Ibid., 146.
75. ST I-II, q. 32, a. 8, resp.
76. ST I-II, q. 32, a. 8, resp.
77. ST I-II, q. 32, a. 8, resp.
78. See Aristotle, Poetics 4.
like philosophy and theology, call us to an understanding of the ground on which this world’s reality is based, and also to a rejoicing in its wondrous and admirable character. Great art thus points us to transcendence, to going beyond our limited vision of things and our egotistical loves. Beauty thus makes a claim on us, as Scruton says, because it calls us to a greater understanding of ourselves and of the world and to a conversion from the love of false beauties. The arts, then, can bring us not only to a knowledge of truth but also to an awareness of the good—that we are in fact made for the Good. The arts have been compared to “an Annunciation, [as] of ‘a terrible beauty’ or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before.”

And so the arts can exercise considerable moral power on us.

It is not surprising then that Plato, who recognized the impact of the arts on a person’s moral character, would ban from his ideal state those arts that were not imitations of the true and the good, of “the best and noblest life.” He would have considered the acts of aesthetic iconoclasm cited above as offensive both to sensibility and to reason. There is, however, a modern sensibility that seems to be shocked by nothing because there are no aesthetic and moral standards to be violated. This is the case in the 1997 exhibition Sensation, which was originally on display at the Royal Academy of Art in London and subsequently traveled to the Brooklyn Museum of New York in 1999. In England the exhibition was described as “gory images of dismembered limbs and explicit pornography,” while in New York the museum provided a yellow stamp saying that the artworks might cause panic, anxiety, confusion, shock. Such an exhibition replaces the wonder and joy that we experience before the beauty of great art with the anesthetizing of sensitivity. In contrasting wonder and the loss of sensitivity, the twentieth-century Thom-

80. Nichols, Redeeming Beauty, 146.
81. Steiner, Real Presences, 143, quoted in Nichols, Redeeming Beauty, 146.
84. Hugh Davies and Ben Fenton, “Whiff of Sensation Hits New York,” The Daily Telegraph, October 2, 1999. And shock they did, as in the case of Chris Ofili’s painting of the Virgin Mary, a black Madonna stained with elephant dung and surrounded by small collaged images from pornographic magazines.
ist philosopher Josef Pieper says, “The ‘numbing of the senses’ would be a mere substitute for genuine wonder. If someone needs the ‘unusual’ to be moved to astonishment, that person has lost the ability to respond rightly to the wondrous, the mirandum, [the remarkableness] of being. The hunger for the sensational . . . is an unmistakable sign of the loss of the true power of wonder. . . .”86 The attentive gaze of those who wonder and who hope to obtain what they love is replaced by the desire for the sensational and thus by what might be called a curious and slothful gaze or by a disordered desire to know. Such a desire cannot but alienate human beings from their proper nature and fulfillment. When both the moral sense and the aesthetic sense or taste have been abandoned, as in the exhibition Sensation, then ugliness, vulgarity, and perhaps evil itself become dominant. Contemporary culture’s flight from beauty is thus at odds with the Platonic-Thomistic ideal in which the beautiful and the good are related, and in which the beautiful also involves the true. The arts that desecrate the human body and religious images ensure that the voice of beauty as harbinger of the good and ultimately of God be silenced because it makes demands on us, calling us to purify our gaze so that we may love rightly. If the experience of beauty and wonder includes the hope of immortality where we will gaze on Absolute Beauty, then the experience of the sensational with the numbing of the senses can only lead to despair in the meaninglessness of existence.87

CONCLUSION: THE RECOVERY OF TRUTH AND GOODNESS IN THE ARTS

The attempts in contemporary culture to trivialize beauty or to flee from it in the arts attest to the need for the recovery of an attentive and loving gaze directed toward reality, a gaze unlike the distorted vision of existence that engenders acts of aesthetic iconoclasm. Philosophers as well as artists recognize the need for discipline not only in morals but also in

87. Only in beholding and contemplating the ultimate ground of human existence and of the world can human persons be fulfilled. As Plato says in the Symposium: “Here, if anywhere at all—so spoke the foreign maiden from Mantinea (Diotima)—here man’s life becomes fully worth living; for here he beholds the divine revealed in the purity of beauty itself: through this he becomes immortal” (Sym. 211, quoted in Pieper, Only the Lover Sings, 22).
art. For an artist to see and present the real rather than to falsify it, discipline is required, just as Plato would advise moral restraint in order to see authentic beauty. According to the Platonist philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, great art is not the result of personal fantasy, which impedes the artist from seeing what is really there and only gives rise to egotistical aims and images. Instead, great or excellent art requires of its maker an unselfish and objective attention, a capacity to see and to love that directs itself outward, toward the marvelous richness of the world and away from the self and its personal obsessions. This kind of attention or loving vision frees the artist from a blinding fantasy; in order to see the real, selfishness must be checked. When the self asserts itself with its fantasy and sentimentalism, then the objective attention to the existence of the real is not possible; mediocre art, which does not reflect the real world or the meaning of human life, is then created.

In order for one to see or contemplate nature with clear vision and depict it as it really is, moral discipline is undoubtedly needed. For the sake of excellence in his work, the great artist will make every effort to free himself from seeking consolation in fantasy and will face reality as it truly is. The consumer of art, too, must exercise discipline so as to see as much reality in the work of art as the artist has succeeded in revealing. Great art, or simply good art, then, is not the result of selfish obsessions; it is rather, as Murdoch says, that which “affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent.” Only such art can enlarge the mind and sensibility of its spectator. But for excellence in art to be achieved, the artist must both possess talent and practice virtues. According to Murdoch, “the good artist, in relation to his art, is brave, truthful, patient, humble.” Thus, when works of art present us with a

90. Ibid., 64.
91. Ibid., 65.
92. Ibid. (emphasis added).
93. Ibid., 85.
94. Ibid., 87.
95. Ibid., 86. By “good artist,” I take Murdoch to mean the artist who functions well, that
distorted vision of the world and of the human person, this may well be the result of little or no moral discipline, little or no ordering of the artist’s capacity to see and to love, little or no virtue.96

Good or excellent art, on the contrary, presents us with a truthful image of the world and of the human condition in a form that is given to our careful and sustained contemplation.97 We have only to think of the tragic drama of Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex—an example to which Aristotle returns in his writings—where the true representation of reality and of human existence is offered to us and where the spectator learns and is moved to recognize a metaphysical order of being that is true for all human beings. The spectator sees that “this is how it is,” and he emerges with a kind of self-knowledge or with new insight from the illusion in which he habitually lives.98 Or let us consider the impact of beautiful music, for example Bach’s Cantatas or Mozart’s Requiem. The following description has been given of Bach’s work: “The music had such an extraordinary force of reality that we realized, no longer by deduction, but by the impact on our hearts, that it could not have originated from nothingness, but could only have come to be through the power of the [Absolute] Truth that became real in the composer’s inspiration.”99 Art so conceived then is not a mere diversion but one of the most educational of all human activities, a place in which the beauty of the art forms makes us aware of a truth and a goodness that are not relative.100 And so it turns out that good art, excellent art, enables us to see and to delight in things in a way that is proper to the rational beings that we are, beings that are naturally fitted for the true and the good. As such, good art affords us an opportunity for self-knowledge so as to see our lives in a truer light and to live more rightly, that is, in accordance with our rational nature.

100. Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 87–88. According to Murdoch, art is “a place in which the nature of morality can be seen” (ibid., 88).
It is in this sense that beauty may be said to save the world, but such beauty comes with the price of moral discipline both for the artist and for the spectator—a price that we should be only too willing to pay in our intellectual and affective journey toward the contemplation of Absolute Beauty.
Bibliography


371


Brennan, Tad. “Stoic Moral Psychology.” In The Cambridge Companion to the...
Bibliography


Bibliography


Fudge, Robert, ed. The Beautiful and the Good. In Essays in Philosophy 17, no. 1 (January 2016), published online by Pacific University, Oregon.


Bibliography


Madea, Goulven. “Le De Civitate Dei comme De Vera Religione.” In Interiorità e Intenzionalità Nel De Civitate Dei di Sant’Agostino. Atti del 3ième Seminario Internazionale del Centro di Studi Agostiniani di Perugia. Edited by R. Pic-
Nails, Debra. “Tragedy Off-Stage.” In Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation


——. The Platonic Myths. Translated by Dan Farrelly. South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011.
——. Cratylus; Parmenides; Greater Hippias; Lesser Hippias. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Loeb Classical Library 167. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925.
——. Euthyphro; Apology; Crito; Phaedo; Phaedrus. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Loeb Classical Library 36. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914.
——. Timaeus; Critias; Cleitophon; Menexenus; Epistles. Translated by R. G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library 234. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929.
Bibliography


Reeve, C. D. C. “A Study in Violets: Alcibiades in the Symposium.” In *Plato’s
Saffrey, H. D. “Neoplatonist Spirituality II. From Iamblichus to Proclus and
Bibliography


Contributors


Christopher M. Cullen, SJ, is associate professor of philosophy at Fordham University. Cullen has written a systematic study of the Seraphic Doctor’s philosophy and theology entitled Bonaventure. He has written on Bonaventure’s principal mentor, Alexander of Hales, and on his important disciple, John Peckham. He has published various articles on Bonaventure, including “Bonaventure’s Philosophical Method” for A Companion to Bonaventure. Cullen has also co-edited a collection of essays on the French philosopher and neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain: Maritain and America (American Maritain Association distributed by the Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

Daniel D. De Haan is a research fellow at the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion at the University of Oxford and principal investigator for the Conceptual Clarity concerning Human Nature project. In 2015–2018, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Cambridge, working on the neuroscience strand of the Templeton World Charity Foundation’s Theology, Philosophy of Religion, and the Sciences project. His contemporary philosophical enquiries address the intersections of philosophical anthropology, philosophy of neuroscience and psychology, and philosophy of religion. De Haan’s work has appeared in The Journal of the History of Philosophy, The Thomist, Arabic Sciences and Philosophy,

Paige E. Hochschild is associate professor of theology and chair of the department of theology at Mount St. Mary’s University, Md. Recent publications include Memory in the Theological Anthropology of Augustine and several essays, such as “Wisdom as True Worship” in A Transforming Vision: Knowing and Loving the Triune God, ed. George Westhaver and Rowan Williams; “St. Augustine on the Church as Sacrifice, Then and Now” in The Emerging Christian Minority, ed. Victor Lee Austin and Joel C. Daniels; and “Gravissimum Educationis” in The Reception of Vatican II, ed. Matthew Levering and Matthew Lamb.

Mary Beth Ingham is professor of philosophical theology at the Franciscan School of Theology and distinguished scholar in philosophy at Loyola Marymount University. Her monographs include The Harmony of Goodness: Mutuality and Moral Living According to John Duns Scotus; Rejoicing in the Works of the Lord: Beauty in the Franciscan Tradition; The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus, An Introduction (The Catholic University of America Press, 2004); Understanding John Duns Scotus: Of Realty the Rarest-Veined Unraveller; Scotus for Dunces: An Introduction to the Subtle Doctor; and La Vie de la Sagesse: Le Stoïcisme au Moyen Âge.

Mark McInroy is associate professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas, Minn. He has published academic examinations of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, John Henry Newman, Martin Luther, and Origen of Alexandria. He is the author of Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour for which he received the Manfred Lautenschlaeger Award for Theological Promise (formerly the John Templeton Award for Theological Promise). His current projects include The Oxford Handbook of Hans Urs von Balthasar, of which he is co-editor.

Michael Pakaluk is professor of ethics at the Busch School of Business and Economics at the Catholic University of America. His books include the Clarendon Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics VIII and IX and an anthology of essays in Aristotelian moral psychology and philos-
ophy of action (with Giles Pearson). His most recent book is *The Memoirs of St. Peter: A New Translation of the Gospel of Mark*. He was formerly director of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy in a long and distinguished tenure. He is an ordinarius in the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas.

**Eric D. Perl** is professor of philosophy at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. He is the author of *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite; Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition*; and *Plotinus, Ennead V.1: On the Three Primary Levels of Reality: Translation, Introduction, and Commentary* as well as numerous articles on Plato, Plotinus, and other figures in the Platonic philosophical tradition.

**Alice M. Ramos** is professor of philosophy at St. John’s University, New York. Her publications include *Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2012); two edited books for the American Maritain Association—*Beauty, Art, and the Polis* (2000) and *Faith, Scholarship, and Culture in the 21st Century* (co-edited with Marie I. George, 2002)—a book written in Spanish titled *Signum: De la semiótica universal a la metafísica del signo*; and more than sixty articles in areas such as Thomistic metaphysics and ethics, aesthetics, and Christian anthropology. She is a past president of the American Maritain Association (2002–2004) and has served several terms on the executive council of the American Catholic Philosophical Association as well as on the executive committee of the Metaphysical Society of America.

**Brendan Thomas Sammon** is associate professor of systematic and historical theology at St. Joseph’s University. He has taught at Georgetown University and the Catholic University of America. He is the author of *The God Who Is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Areopagite* and *Called to Attraction: An Introduction to the Theology of Beauty*. He is co-editor of *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*. His scholarly work involves bringing a theology of beauty into conversation with a theology of disability.
Contributors

Jonathan J. Sanford is provost and professor of philosophy at the University of Dallas. He has published on particular figures in the history of philosophy, including Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Newman, and Scheler, as well as on topics in both metaphysics and ethics. Sanford’s most recent book is Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics (The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

D. C. Schindler is associate professor of metaphysics and philosophical anthropology at the John Paul II Institute at the Catholic University of America. His principal areas of interest are the transcendentals, beauty, truth, and goodness, and their anthropological correlates, love, reason, and freedom. Among his many articles and books is Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Truth and Goodness in the Republic (The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

Mark K. Spencer is associate professor of philosophy at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul. His work has centered on the nature of the human person, and his work has appeared in the International Philosophical Quarterly, Nova et Vetera, Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, and The Thomist.

Martin J. Tracey is professor of philosophy at Benedictine University, Lisle, Ill. His publications include a critical edition of an anonymous thirteenth-century Latin commentary on the Ethica nova in Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medieval, vol. 17 (2006) and an article on Albert’s moral thought in Companion to Albert the Great: Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences.
Index of Names

Achilles, 23
Adams, Marilyn McCord, 319n1
Adler, Mortimer J., 352n20
Aertsen, Jan, 1, 15, 50n5, 52–53, 58n44, 271n5, 289n2, 293n11, 294, 295n18, 296–301, 304, 305, 315
Aeschylus, 23, 107n82
Agathon, 23–24, 26, 28–32, 42n96, 43, 46–48
Albert the Great, 13, 23–50, 272n6, 293n11, 294
Alcibiades, 23–24, 26, 30, 32–34, 47–48
Alexander of Hales, 16, 206, 271, 272n6, 322n7, 326, 337, 343
Ambrose, 95
Anatolios, Khaled, 231n126
Anselm of Canterbury, 206–7, 208n9, 209, 316
Anzulewicz, Henryk, 236n1
Apollodorus, 22n10, 24
Aquinas, Thomas. See Thomas Aquinas
Aristodemus, 22–24, 26, 30, 32–34, 47–48
Aristophanes, 23–25, 26–28, 30–32, 35, 43n98, 47, 356
Arnou, René, 184n6
Athanasius, 231n126
Aurelius, Marcus. See Marcus Aurelius
Avicenna, 294, 310
Ayres, Lewis, 165n21
Bach, Johann Sebastian, 369
Barber, Charles, 24n120
Barker, Mark, 311n65
Barnes, Corey L., 175n59
Barnes, Michel, 163n12
Bauerschmidt, Fritz, 175n59–61
Begbie, Jeremy S., 345n62
Benson, Joshua, 262n45
Berg, Robert Maarten van den, 184n6
Bernard of Busse, 255n13
Bernard of Chartres, 2
Bernard of Clairvaux, 207, 349n7
Birzer, Bradley J., 347n2
Bissen, J. M., 253n5
Bochet, Isabelle, 169n16
Boehner, Philotheus, 256, 260
Boethius, 191–92, 294
Bonaventure, 12–15, 17, 206–9, 215, 224, 251–69, 271, 272n6, 273–78, 322n7, 325n24, 343
Bondy, Luc, 362
Bostock, David, 238n6
Bostrom, Nick, 361n58
Bougerol, Jacques-Guy, 256n17
Bradshaw, David, 105n73
Brennan, Tad, 141n13, 142n15
Brown, Rachel Fulton, 218
Bruyne, Edgar de, 2, 207, 252n3, 262, 272
Bury, R. G., 191n1, 253n31, 26–27, 43n102
Buttiglione, Rocco, 109n87
Bychkov, Oleg V., 206–9, 215n35, 279n29, 286, 320n4
Callicles, 78
Calvin, John, 349n7
Carruthers, Mary, 217
Celano, Anthony, 239n8, 250n33
Chenu, Marie-Dominique, 216n44, 260n37
Choz, Jacinto, 348n6
Index of Names

Chretien, Jean-Louis, 361n56
Chrysippus, 21n9
Cicero, Marcus Tullius, 9–10, 21n9, 95, 125, 136–43, 146n22, 332n39
Cimakasky, Joseph, 110n93
Cook, William R., 253n4
Coolman, Boyd Taylor, 12, 206
Cooper, Donal, 254, 255n13
Cooper, John, 122
Copp, David, 151n2
Corrigan, Kevin, 25n33
Corsini, Eugenio, 184n7, 185n10
Crito, 88
Croce, Benedetto, 318n86
Cross, Richard, 320n4, 331n43, 345
Crosson, Frederick, 162n7
Cullen, Christopher, 14
Cunningham, Stanley B., 236n2
Czapiowski, Winfried, 50n8

Daley, Brian, 273n9
Dalrymple, Theodore, 348n3
Danielou, Jean, 174n55
Dante Alighieri, 309
Davies, Hugh, 366n84
Day, Sebastian, 333n43
De Haan, Daniel, 15–16, 311n65, 312n70, 313n72, 314
Desjardins, Rosemary, 55n20, 56n32
Dillon, John, 182n4
Diogenes, 138
Dionysius the Areopagite. See Pseudo-Dionysius
Diotima, 20, 21n7, 23–25, 30, 35, 39, 43n100, 102n60, 127, 367n87
Donahue, Brian, 97
Dooley, Mark, 347n2
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 347
Dufrenne, Mikel, 317n84
Dunham, Jean, 238n7
Duns Scotus, John, 16–17, 319–45

Eliot, T. S., 349, 368n88
Empiricus, Sextus, 152
Epictetus, 9–10, 137, 144n18, 147–53
Eriugena, John Scotus, 212

Eryximachus, 23–24, 27–28, 31–32, 38, 43n98, 46
Euripides, 107n82
Euistratius, 244–45
Eyck, Hubert van, 16, 309, 313
Eyck, Jan van, 16, 309, 313

Fassler, Margot, 207, 228
Fenton, Ben, 366n84
Floyd, Edwin D., 61n52
Foley, Richard, 21n8, 26n35
Francis of Assisi, 208n10, 251, 254, 261, 272n6
Frankl, Victor, 348n3
Freeland, Cynthia, 348n4

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 3n12, 56n29, 58n44, 317n84, 369n98
Gallagher, Daniel, 362n61
Garver, Eugene, 123n24
Gersh, Stephen, 184n7, 185n10
Gerson, Lloyd, 56n32, 56n36, 101n50, 112n107
Gibson, James J., 311, 317
Gill, Christopher, 137n3, 144n18
Gilson, Etienne, 289n2, 295, 296n21, 303n39, 303n41, 308n61, 309, 317n83, 317n85
Glazov-Corrigan, Elena, 25n33
Godfrey of Fontaines, 334
Gombrich, Ernst, 348n3
Gracia, Jorge, 111
Gregory of Nyssa, 2, 229n121
Gregory the Great (pope), 207, 226n95, 227n100
Groesestete, Robert, 13, 238, 242, 249
Guthrie, W. K. C., 25n34

Halcour, Dieter, 273n10
Hammond, Jay M., 251n1
Hampton, Cynthia, 56n36
Hart, David Bentley, 230n122
Hayes, Zachary, 174n56
Heidegger, Martin, 110n93, 269, 274, 278–80, 282, 285–86, 317n84
Henry of Ghent, 334
Heraclitus, 29, 46, 80
Herzman, Ronald, 253n4
Hilary of Poitiers, 165n17
Hildebrand, Dietrich von, 94, 104–5, 109n87
Hochschild, Paige, 10
Hoffman, Tobias, 338n52
Homer, 22, 309
Horace, 265
Howsare, Rodney, 278n28
Husserl, Edmund, 317n84
Hutto, Daniel, 317n84
Ignatius of Loyola, 204n53
Ingarden, Roman, 317n84
Ingham, Mary Beth, 9, 16–17, 320n3, 332n38, 337n51, 341n57
Inwood, Brad, 138n5, 145n20, 146
Irenaeus, 174
Irwin, Terence H., 89n47, 95, 96n11, 99n35, 100n41, 122n21, 237n13
Jaeger, C. Stephen, 227
Jenkins, David, 244n20
Jerome of Ascoli. See Nicholas IV
John the Evangelist. See
Nicholas IV
John Paul II (pope), 113n111, 362
Johnson, Peter, 347n2
Johnson, Timothy J., 254n10
Jollès, Bernadette, 228
Jones, John D., 186n16
Jordan, Mark D., 289n2, 290, 295, 296n21, 299n31, 304–5, 308n60, 309, 315n78
Kant, Immanuel, 3, 98n33, 104, 122n21
Karfíková, Lenka, 207
Kerr, Fergus, 278n28, 281
Kierkegaard, Søren, 110n88
Kimball, Roger, 3–4
Kloos, Kari, 174n54
Köhler, Theodor W., 242n16
Konstan, David, 109n91
Korsgaard, Christine, 98n33
Kosman, Aryeh, 95n10, 98
Koutras, Dimitrios N., 190n24
Kovach, Francis J., 50n7, 303n40, 320, 323, 325
Künzle, Magnus, 252n3
Lännström, Anna, 96n16, 98n33
Lloyd, David, 21n9
Lombard, Peter, 260, 273
Long, A. A., 151n37
Lu, Matthew T., 99n38, 102n55, 115n2
Luthra, Yannig, 122n21
Lutz, Eduard, 252n3
Lysias, 38
MacIntyre, Alasdair, 310, 116n5, 369n98
Madec, Goulven, 172, 173n50
Madigan, Patrick, 183n5
Maimonides, Moses, 242
Manoussakis, John Panteleimon, 102n54
Marcus Aurelius, 9–10, 137, 153–57
Marinangeli, Bonaventura, 253n7
Marion, Jean-Luc, 286n61
Maritain, Jacques, 307n, 291, 293, 295, 299, 306n51, 309, 316n80, 317n83, 318n87, 368n88
Marston, Roger, 322n7, 334n46
McInroy, Mark, 21n4, 14–15, 277n26, 283n51
McNeill, William, 110n93
Mechthild of Magdeburg, 272n6
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 317n84
Michelangelo, 309, 313, 353n25
Milliken, John, 101n53, 122n21
Mirus, Christopher V., 59nn46–47, 63n66, 105
Monan, J. Donald, 98, 109n88
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 362–64, 369
Muhammad, 244–45
Müller, Jörn, 249n32
Murdoch, Iris, 364n69, 368, 369n97, 369n100
Nails, Debra, 30n47
Narcisse, Gilbert, 174, 175nn59–60
Nebridius, 160–61
Nehemas, Alexander, 39n83
Nicholas IV (pope), 255
Nichols, Aidan, 18nn27, 278n28, 282, 349n7, 364n73, 366n81
Novitz, David, 366n85
Nussbaum, Martha, 25n31
Ofili, Chris, 366n84
Olivi, Peter John, 334
O’Mahoney, Paul, 243n30, 42n95
O’Meara, Dominic, 67n81
O’Reilly, Kevin E., 289n2, 296n20, 309
Origen of Alexandria, 277, 278n27
O’Rourke, Fran, 186n16
Index of Names

Orpheus, 23
Osborn, Eric, 174n55
Owens, Joseph, 96, 109n87, 122n21, 237n4

Pakaluk, Michael, 7–8, 86n41, 238n6
Palamas, Gregory, 113n111
Panaetius, 137
Panofsky, Erwin, 252n3
Patoclus, 23
Pausanias, 27–28, 31–32, 43
Pearson, Giles, 118n11
Pecham, John, 322n7
Perl, Eric D., 4, 6–7, 15, 66n73, 186n16
Peter, Karl, 252n3, 272n6, 273–74, 277
Phaedrus, 20, 23–24, 26–28, 30n47, 32–33, 43n98
Philip the Chancellor, 271, 272n6, 294
Pieper, Josef, 28n41, 350n12–13, 367
Pinckaers, Servais, 2
Plotinus, 6–7, 10, 21n9, 45, 52–53, 66–70, 182, 185, 188
Poirel, Dominique, 207
Pomplun, Trent, 174n56, 322n6, 324
Porphyry, 184n6
Porter, Jean, 151n1, 130n41
Pouillon, Henri, 252n3, 271n4, 272, 326n25
Pouivet, Roger, 361n55
Proclus, 182, 200
Protarchus, 56
Przywara, Erich, 107n82
Pseudo-Dionysius, 2, 11–13, 42n97, 70, 124, 181–205, 207–9, 238–40, 246, 263, 290, 294, 298, 300n34, 312
Puccini, Giacomo, 362, 364
Putnam, Caroline Canfield, 190n24
Ramos, Alice, 111, 189n32, 328n12, 296n21, 302n38, 303n41, 307, 317n83, 363n63, 369n96
Rauro, Enrica, 204n54
Ratzinger, Joseph, 347n1, 360n54, 361n57, 369n99
Rawls, John, 115
Reeve, C. D. C., 39n84, 48n122, 109n91
Resch, Dustin G., 174n55
Reynolds, Joshua, 368n88
Richard of St. Victor, 207
Richardson Lear, Gabriel, 33n61, 37n76, 40n87, 41, 47, 94n8, 97–98, 109n88, 111n100, 237n5
Rist, John, 356n36
Robson, Janet, 254, 255n13
Rogers, Kelly, 95n10, 97, 122n21, 237n3
Rorem, Paul, 228
Ross, W. D., 111n98
Rousset, Pierre, 41n5, 70
Rudolph, Conrad, 207
Sachs, Joe, 109n91
Sammon, Brendan, 11–12, 181n2
Sanford, Jonathan J., 8–9, 110n96
Saul (king), 242
Saward, John, 354n29, 360n51
Scarry, Elaine, 127
Schenk, Ronald, 44n107
Schiiller, Friedrich, 40n90
Schindler, D. C., 5–6, 315n1, 39n83, 47n118, 106n74, 276, 278n28, 282
Schlosser, Marianne, 254n8
Scuton, Roger, 111, 318n86, 347n2, 349, 362n60, 363, 366
Sedlmayr, Hans, 349n10
Sellars, John, 153
Seneca, 9–10, 137, 143–47, 155n51
Sevier, Christopher Scott, 111, 289n2, 296n20, 317n83
Shakespeare, William, 309, 313, 363n65
Shaw, Gregory, 204
Siewerth, Gustav, 278, 280
Smart, Alastair, 253, 254n12
Sobel, David, 115n2
Sokolowski, Robert, 317n84
Sondan, Gérard, 324
Sophocles, 369
Spaemann, Robert, 315n2, 365
Spargo, Emma Jane Marie, 252n3, 262, 272n6, 273
Speer, Andreas, 264n46
Spencer, Mark K., 8, 107n76, 113n109, 113n111
Speusippus, 65n71, 247, 249
Spohn, William, 340n53
Steele, Jeff, 320n4, 335n49, 344n61
Steiner, George, 355nn34–35, 366n81
Stern-Gillet, Suzanne, 67n81
Striker, Gisela, 144n17

Taylor, A. E., 42n95
Teresa of Calcutta, 362
Theaetetus, 74
Thomas of St. Victor, 206
Torrell, Jean-Pierre, 174
Torriti, Jacopo, 255n13
Tracey, Martin J., 13, 236n2, 245n23, 246n27
Tuozzo, Thomas M., 101n53, 109, 122n21

Ulrich of Strasbourg, 272n6
Van Erp, Stephan, 269n2

Velkley, Richard L., 3nn12–13
Viladesau, Richard, 234
Virgil, 309
Viviano, Benedict Thomas, 175n58
Vlastos, Gregory, 39n83

Weil, Simone, 353n23
Wesselow, Thomas de, 254n10
Westphal, Merold, 286n61
Whitney, Elizabeth, 265n47, 266n55
Whittaker, John, 192n28
Wiitala, Michael, 109
Wilhelmsen, Frederick, 299n31
William of Auxerre, 326
Williams, Meg Harris, 363n66
Williams, Thomas, 319
Wolter, Allan B., 319, 323n17
Wood, James L., 112

Yu, Jiyuan, 101n50
Zinn, Grover, 207, 223
abstraction, 123, 248, 333, 335–36
accidents, 100, 102, 192; participation and, 192; sensible, 100, 102
aischuron (ugly), 74, 76, 79, 84, 96
Albert the Great: bodily beauty as actively impeding contemplation in, 236, 243–44; intellectualism of, 236n1; low view of bodily beauty/pleasure in, 236, 240–41, 243–46

calocri (ugly), 74, 76, 79, 84, 96
Aitia (Plato), 123–26
Aischylos: oral recital in, 341
analysis, 33
analogies, 33
aesthetic, 22–23
achievement, 22–23
achieved and, 22
Alcibiades I (Plato), 76–77
Alcibiades II (Plato), 76–77
Subject Index

arts (cont.)
medieval, 2n8; naturalistic turn in, 14, 251–55, 261, 263, 267–68; potential to lead to God, 251, 264, 364–66; unity of, 13–14, 263–66
asceticism, 40
atheism, 360n51
attributes, divine. See divine names
Augustine: aesthetics of, 208n8; beauty of moral pedagogy in, 10, 163, 169–73, 176–78, 180; conversion to Christianity, 10; dualism and aesthetics of, 161; extrinsic/systemic beauty in, 10, 164, 167–68, 170–72, 177; grief over death of Nebridius, 160–61, 179; on happiness, 52; intrinsic beauty in, 10, 163–64, 166–69, 171–72; on numbers, 259–60; perfection of goods and mode, species, order, 239–40; relation between beauty and form in, 164–68, 170, 180; role of rhetoric in revelation, 163; the Son and form in, 165, 173; term species in, 165–66; theological anthropology of, 232; unity and logic of history in, 163, 172–80; unity and the Father in, 165
Balthasar, Hans Urs von: on beauty and Gestalt (form), 104–5, 275–77, 282–83; on conceptual note beauty adds to being, 14, 104–5, 269–78, 284–87; fourfold distinction in metaphysics in, 278–84; on transcendental sense perception, 15, 270, 277–78, 281, 283, 287; use of “glory” in, 281n42, 283n49, 285
baptism, sacrament of, 323
Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, 14, 251–55, 261, 267–68; Giotto and, 253n7; naturalism of frescos in Upper Church of, 14, 251–55, 261, 267–68
beatific vision, 38n82, 52, 128, 135, 165, 220, 234, 291n6, 336, 364n73
beatitude, 12, 135, 228. See also happiness

becoming, 247


Bonaventure: composition of new life of St. Francis, 254; exemplarism in metaphysics of, 14, 253, 257–61; on intrinsic beauty in images/art objects, 253, 263; on link between beauty and delight, 256, 273; pilgrimage to La Verna, 262; relation of his thought to naturalistic turn in the arts, 14, 251–55, 261, 263, 267–68; theory of hylomorphism, 14, 253, 260–61; transcendental in, 262–63; Trinitarian theology of, 259; on unity of the arts, 13–14, 251, 264–66; vestige/image/likeness distinction in, 260; Word of God as “eternal art” in, 258

bonum honestum. See beauty; good

boulêsis (wish), 119–20

Callicles: on unlimited libido as principle of good life, 78

cardinal virtues. See virtue

cathedrals, 226


chastity, 227

Christ. See Jesus Christ

Church, 162–63, 178–79, 228, 233; spiritual beautification of, 163, 228; visible membership in, 162

Cicero, 9
cognitive power, 16, 311–14

coincidentia oppositorum. See beauty

community. See good

common sense (sensus communis), 310–11

communion of saints, 113n11

concupiscence, 170, 222, 244–45, 364

Condemnation of 1277, 332

Confessions (Augustine), 160–63, 179, 257n23

confirmation, sacrament of, 323

conscience, 228

consubstantiality. See Trinity

contemplation (theoria), 8–9, 13, 51, 57, 59–61, 63–65, 103–4, 106, 109, 111–13, 122n21, 132–33, 171, 207, 232, 236, 239, 243, 247, 249–50, 305, 309, 313, 317, 357, 369; earthly body as limiting, 236, 243; of God, 8–9, 61, 104, 133, 230n122, 357; happiness of not fully attainable in this life, 13, 236, 249–50; as highest act of nous, 103–4, 112, 132; and union with separated intelligences, 249n32

continence, 149, 245
conversion, 334

courage, virtue of, 7–8, 73, 76–77, 81–87, 91, 110, 118, 124, 129, 132; acts of as displaying useless goodness, 84; on the battlefield, 73, 76–77, 91; beauty and, 7–8, 73, 76–77, 82–84; expectations for different kinds of persons and, 87; false forms of, 84

Cratylus (Plato), 78–79, 184n6


Crito (Plato), 87

cross. See Jesus Christ

culture, 17, 27–28, 348–49; etymology of, 348n6

curiosity, vice of, 171

custom, 31–32, 34–35, 48, 85. See also law (nomos)

De civitate Dei (Augustine), 163, 173–76, 180, 265

decorum: as moral propriety in behavior, 9, 138, 141–42, 145–46, 332n39, 347n2
deficitation. See divinization
delight. See beauty

delos inscription, 81, 238

De Musica (Augustine), 256, 260, 326, 334

De reductione artium ad theologiam (Bonaventure), 13, 263–66
desire, 8–9, 17, 18n26, 28, 35–38, 46, 49, 52, 59, 61, 63–65, 89, 98, 100, 105, 110, 112, 18n11, 125, 132, 142, 150, 170, 172–73, 176–80, 191, 195–96, 199, 201, 220–21, 241, 243, 261, 271, 291, 297, 301–3, 331, 351, 356; as based on lack, 36n71; as completely satisfied by happiness, 241; to know, 65, 351n17; natural desire for God, 17, 349; natural desire for truth, 17, 18n26, 349; unmoved mover and, 63–64. See also appetite; eros

De Trinitate (Augustine), 165, 328

De vera religione (Augustine), 163–74, 176–80
devil, 263
dialectic: role of contradiction in, 37
divine ideas. See ideas
divine name, 11–12, 181, 183–205; beauty as, 11–12, 185, 189–93, 196–205; definition of, 186; unity-in-plurality of, 192
divinization, 95, 106, 109n87, 113n111, 114, 202
dualism: between soul and body, 29; sensible and intelligible, 29

duty. See afficium

education, 35n68

eotions, 2, 7, 16, 86, 88, 153, 315

energeia (activity/activity), 94–95, 101–6, 111–13, 247–49

Enlightenment, the, 361n55

entelechy, 61

epistemology, 302

eros, 31, 35, 37, 39n83, 43n98, 64, 98n33, 105, 356–57. See also desire

Eros (god of Love), 36n69

ethics, 2, 7, 60, 72–73, 76–79, 81–92, 94, 96, 123, 190, 236n1, 264, 302; as discipline of practical philosophy, 88

eudaimonia, 7, 72–73, 76, 86–87, 91–92, 108–9, 113–14; as activity of soul in keeping with logos, 86, 92. See also happiness

Eudemian Ethics (Aristotle), 72, 122

evil, 154, 223, 262, 361, 367; as a privation, 262

exegesis, biblical, 174

faith, theological virtue of, 162, 165, 176–77, 208, 226, 359n47

fall, the, 212, 220–25, 228, 258, 334n46; as aesthetic failure, 220–23

fame, 10, 144

Father, God the, 165, 169n37, 193n30, 229–31, 259, 322n8, 353n24, 354; eternity as appro-
pried to, 259; power as appropriated to, 354

fear, 88, 145


fortitude, 154

Franciscan tradition: via pulchritudinis, 322

Francis of Assisi: devotion to Christ’s nativity, 261; experience at La Verna, 262; stigmata of, 262; vocation of, 262. See also Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi


friendship, 83n33, 85, 111, 113, 120n18, 131, 162; contemplative, 162; equality and, 113; friend as another self, 85, 111

generation: intra-divine, 258, 353n24

De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber (Augustine), 161, 174, 176n63

Ghent Altarpiece, 16, 309, 313


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>good</strong> (cont.)</td>
<td>Stoic understanding of, 137–38; universal desire of all things for, 37, 199, 301, 351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorgias (Plato), 471n17, 76</td>
<td>grace, 169, 224, 240, 260, 312, 328, 343; as cause of human happiness, 240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Hippias (Plato). See Hippias Major</td>
<td>habits, 8, 87, 94, 104, 113, 118, 125, 227, 340; intellectual, 104, 113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hades, 28</td>
<td>happiness, 9–10, 13, 18, 52, 72, 76, 86–87, 91–92, 97, 111n100, 125, 128, 132–35, 148, 176, 179, 236, 238–43, 249–50, 332, 337, 356, 360, 364n73; as caused good, 240; Christ as completion desire for, 176, 179; civic, 239; as consisting in contemplation, 236, 239, 243, 249, 364n73; as consisting in something noncomposite, 239; as the full actualization of intellect, 239; as ultimate end of human life, 91–92, 132, 238–39, 241, 243. See also eudaimonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hierarchy, 42n97, 201–5</td>
<td>happiness, 9–10, 13, 18, 52, 72, 76, 86–87, 91–92, 97, 111n100, 125, 128, 132–35, 148, 176, 179, 236, 238–43, 249–50, 332, 337, 356, 360, 364n73; as caused good, 240; Christ as completion of desire for, 176, 179; civic, 239; as consisting in contemplation, 236, 239, 243, 249, 364n73; as consisting in something noncomposite, 239; as the full actualization of intellect, 239; as ultimate end of human life, 91–92, 132, 238–39, 241, 243. See also eudaimonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hippias Major (Plato), 19, 45n112</td>
<td>Hades, 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>history: theology of, 173, 175n58, 176–79</td>
<td>Holy Spirit, 165, 226, 259, 353n24, 354; appropriation of goodness to, 354; as gift, 259; procession of, 259, 353n24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honesty, 9, 125–26; as spiritual beauty, 125–26</td>
<td>hope, theological virtue of, 226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh of St. Victor: book of life motif in, 224–25, 229; Mary as paradigm of moral beauty in, 228; meaning of “sacrament” in, 219–20; pulchrum esse in, 210–12, 217–20, 225, 228–29</td>
<td>humanities, 14, 253, 260–61; universal, 261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideas: divine, 219n62, 257, 355, 364; innate, 143</td>
<td>idolatry, 358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>image: ways of making, 81. See also human person; Son of God</td>
<td>immortality: desire for, 43n98, 356, 359, 367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indiffERENCE (apatheia). See Stoicism</td>
<td>injustice, vice of, 115n2, 128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integrity. See beauty</td>
<td>intellect, 4, 8, 16, 51–52, 54–55, 56n36, 64–65, 67, 70–71, 94, 100–1, 119, 168–69, 183, 186, 192, 232, 239, 248, 277, 305, 310–13, 315, 333–38, 352; activity of as requiring abstraction from phantasms, 248, 335; as faculty of being, 4, 71, 336; intellectus agens, 305; nature of, 64. See also reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intellectual virtues, 8, 93–95, 101, 104, 106–14, 238, 244, 316; craft (techne), 8, 94, 107–9; knowledge (episteme), 8, 94, 108, 111–12; practical wisdom (phronesis), 8, 94, 109–10, 112–14; theoretical wisdom (sophia), 8, 94, 109, 111–14; understanding (nous), 8, 94, 108, 110, 112–14</td>
<td>intelligible species, 248, 325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itinerarium Menti in Deum (Bonaventure), 262, 266–67, 273, 325n24</td>
<td>intuition, 311, 333–34, 336, 344, 352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ, 10–11, 163, 165, 169–73, 175n59, 176–79, 182, 184, 193n30, 194, 202, 209, 224, 229, 231, 246, 254, 261, 289; cross of, 224, 261, 289; as moral exemplar, 169–72, 177–78; nativity of, 261; Passion of, 171, 261, 289; patience of, 171; temptations in wilderness, 169–70, 172; Transfiguration of, 229; as wisdom, 169–70; worship of, 182; wounds of, 261. See also Son of God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subject Index 411

distributive, 117n7; equality and, 129, 131; eschatological dimension of, 172; institutional justice vs. virtue of, 9, 115–17; legal, 117n7, 129–30; nature of, 116, 129; as perfecting other virtues, 121, 128–31; relation to common good, 9, 116, 126–28, 130–31, 134; religio and, 134; as residing in rational appetite, 119; social justice, 115–17

kalogathia, 3, 98; as integrating beauty and goodness, 3

kalon. See beauty; good

Kant, Immanuel: on beauty, 3

knowledge: as transforming knower into known, 65

koinōnia, 38, 47n117


Laws (Plato), 204, 366n82

lectio divina, 349n7

liberality, virtue of, 85

liturgy, 193

logos, 9, 68, 86–89, 92, 101, 106, 109, 110n93. See also reason


marriage, 161–62

Mary, 228, 362, 366n84; desecration in art, 362, 366n84; as Mother of God, 228

materialism, 32, 360

matter, 12, 61–63, 67–68, 98n33, 101, 210, 215–18, 261, 306, 353n25; changeable things as composites of form and, 61; and creation narrative, 216–18; as desiring form, 61, 261

memory, 8, 232, 260, 309

metaphysics, 3, 14–15, 18n26, 75, 94, 187, 264, 278–84, 286, 302, 328, 335; critiques of, 3; quoad se perspective of, 302; von Balthasar’s fourfold distinction in, 278–84

Metaphysics (Aristotle), 59–60, 62–63, 65, 351n17

microcosm, 252

moderation, virtue of, 57–58, 78, 85, 139–42; similarity with courage, 85

monarchy, 89; absolute, 89

multiplicity, 5, 44–45, 55, 57, 161, 164, 167, 202, 205, 258. See also unity

murder, 130n41

mysticism, 58n44, 277; Christian, 58n44

natural philosophy, 94, 264

natural theology, 188

nature (physi), 10, 14, 16, 28, 31–32, 34, 38, 48, 64, 81, 105, 171, 217, 245, 247–48, 251–52

Neoplatonism, 2, 11, 58n44, 94, 105n73, 173, 182–85, 188, 194, 200, 202–5, 234, 281; loss of particularity in return to the whole, 203–4; the One/Good in, 185, 188; principle of good as self-diffusive, 194–95, 325; theurgy and, 203–4

Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle), 8, 13, 64, 72, 76, 81, 117, 122, 133, 148, 236, 237n5, 238, 249, 331

nihilism, 360

nous, 10, 64, 94, 99, 101–4, 108–14, 155, 184n7, 185, 188; ability to grasp universals and individuals, 101n50; application to biblical God, 184n7; as apprehending beauty, 101–2; as universal intelligence, 10, 155, 185, 188. See also intellectual virtues

officium: as appropriate moral judgment, 9, 138, 141–43; as fully attainable only by the Stoic Sage, 142; as pertaining to indifferent things, 142–43
Subject Index

oikeosis, 143–44, 146–47, 159; difficulty of translating, 144note17

one. See unity
ontotheology, 286

On the Celestial Hierarchy (Pseudo-Dionysius), 202


opposition: definition of, 45–46


original sin, 221

ouisia, 53–54, 57, 61–65, 69–70; meaning of, 54, 62–63, 65

pain, 13, 145, 242–43, 249, 261

Parmenides (Plato), 74–75


Parts of Animals (Aristotle), 61, 79–80

Paschal Mystery, 224

Passion of Christ. See Jesus Christ

passions, 13, 118, 125–27, 150, 170, 245–46, 249, 289, 314, 357

perception, spiritual. See spiritual senses

Phaedo (Plato), 32note60, 36, 56, 74; Cyclical Argument of, 74; Recollection Argument of, 74; Ultimate Argument of, 74

Phaedrus (Plato), 36–39, 41note93, 43note99, 45, 56–57, 357

phantasms, 248, 325note23, 333

phenomenology, 8, 95, 317

Philebus (Plato), 56–57

phronesis. See intellectual virtues

Physics (Aristotle), 61, 63

physi. See nature (physi)

Plato: analogy of sun to the good, 54–56, 357, 364; cave allegory, 55, 62–63, 357, 359; on justice, 117; notion of beauty of, 5, 7, 19–20, 53, 64, 70, 73–79, 81, 84–85, 89, 356–57; origin of human person in, 350, 356; particular loves vs. abstract enjoyment of beauty, 39; range of meaning of kalon in, 74–79, 81, 85, 89; on recollec-
tion, 37; shadow vs. reality in, 38, 55, 62–63, 357–58, 362; on significance of naming a thing, 78–79


Plotinus: intellect in cosmology of, 67–70; notion of beauty of, 6–7, 10, 219, 66–70; One/Good as beyond beauty, 69; soul in cosmology of, 68

polis, 88, 111note101, 117; authority of, 88

Politics (Aristotle), 88, 264; as discipline of practical philosophy, 88

positivism, 360note51

Posterior Analytics (Aristotle), 175

potency, 16, 199, 306, 316, 323, 327, 342

practical philosophy, 88; as encompassing three disciplines, 88

practical reason, 92, 311

prayer, 200–201

pride, vice of, 170–71, 356

Proclus: chain of being of, 200

procreation, 245

proportion: meaning of, 306. See also beauty pros hen equivocity, 97, 103

providence, 12, 148, 158, 161–64, 168, 172–74, 176–79, 195, 213

prudence, virtue of, 119, 129, 146, 340

Pseudo-Dionysius: as applying nous to Trinitarian God, 185; hierarchy in, 201–5; perfection of goods and beauty, 181, 183–85, 189, 191–94, 197–204; role of liturgy in, 193; role of Sacred Scripture in, 186, 188; on transcendent predication of God, 187

Pythagoreans, 19note2, 44note107, 65note71, 334
quadrivium, 328, 332n39
quality, 220, 294, 327, 331n37
quantity, 294
reason, human: discursive, 312; highest act of, 336; as measure of reality, 4; as needed beyond senses to perceive beauty, 45; power to remake world, 3; practical, 305n49; theoretical, 305n49. See also intellect
recollection. See Plato
redemption, 120
Reducentes ad sedulae (Nicholas IV), 255
religion, 17, 18n26, 134, 348–49; origin of, 17, 18n26; virtue of, 134, 348n6
Republic (Plato), 54–58, 78n17, 98n33, 112n107, 357
resurrection, 171–72, 175, 214, 323; of Christ, 175
rhetoric, 29, 163, 264
Rhetoric (Aristotle), 83n33, 90, 123
sacrament, 219–20; six days of creation as, 219
sacrifice, 28, 33, 99, 130, 261, 358, 362
sacrilege, 17, 349
sanctification, 12, 211
Scholasticism, 58n44, 252n3
Second Person of the Trinity. See Son of God
secularism, 116n6
sensibles: essential, 310–15; incidental, 16, 310–15
separated intelligences, 249n32
simplicity, divine. See God
sin, 120, 179, 220–23, 345; as a refusal of creaturely boundaries, 221. See also original sin
social justice. See justice
Socrates: execution of, 88, 151n37; as philosophical ideal, 146–47, 149, 151–52
soul, 4–5, 13, 29, 31–32, 35–37, 38n82, 39, 43, 45n112, 50, 52, 54, 57–58, 66, 68, 86, 89, 95, 102, 107, 109, 117n8, 204, 226, 228, 232–33, 245, 248, 261, 328–29, 337–38, 341–42, 356–57, 360; beautification by virtue, 328, 337, 341–42; as excessively mired in senses, 54; as form of the body, 261; harmony theory of, 31n60; as having higher and lower parts, 245; as image of the Trinity, 232; as temple of God, 226
species, intelligible. See intelligible species
spiritual senses, 2, 270, 277–78, 281, 283, 287
stigmata, 262
Stoicism, 5, 9–10, 16, 21n9, 136–59, 332, 363; Early, 137; experience of the deity within, 155, 159; Imperial Roman, 137, 144n18, 158; indifference (apatheia) in, 156–57; Middle, 137; mischaracterizations of, 158; notion of moral beauty, 21n9, 136–41; practical living vs. theoretical speculation in, 137; spiritual exercises of, 147, 149–50, 153–54, 156–57; Stoic Sage, 9–10, 136–37, 142–43, 146–47, 151–52; tranquility of mind and heart and, 10, 137, 153, 156–57; vita beata as moral goal, 137, 140, 146, 153, 156
Symposium (Plato), 5, 19–48, 75, 102n60, 356–57, 359–60, 362n59, 364, 367n87; difficulties with seating arrangement in, 25; hiccupping episode in, 23–25, 47; number of speeches in, 24–25, 46n116; “Order Question” of, 20–34
technology, 3, 361
temperance, virtue of, 8, 118, 126, 129, 132, 140, 154, 170, 172; decorum as subset of, 140–41
theophany, 165, 312
theurgy, 203–4
Subject Index


Timaeus (Plato), 43, 77, 216, 353n23

tradition, 28n41; as mediation of divine, 28n41


Transfiguration of Christ. See Jesus Christ

transhumanism, 361n58

Trinity, 10, 12, 14, 164, 167, 169n37, 182–83, 189, 208–9, 211, 220, 229–32, 252, 259, 263, 313, 322, 353n24, 354; appropriations and, 259, 263; consubstantiality of persons in, 183, 229–30; human analogue for, 232; personal distinctions in, 229; processions in, 259; Trinitarian form of beauty, 12, 211, 220; truth of as exceeding natural reason, 354; and unity of divine action ad extra, 353n24

trology, 227

ture, 3–4, 6, 15–18, 45n12, 50, 52n13, 53–59, 65, 94–95, 104, 107, 121, 154, 163, 165, 190, 262–63, 271, 273–74, 290, 293–302, 305, 308–9, 315–16, 324, 332, 347, 366, 369; convertibility of with being, 6, 54, 57, 59, 271, 274, 293–96, 299–300, 324, 349–50; definition of, 107, 293; modern shift of to subject, 4. See also Son of God

typology, 175


unmoved mover, 6, 61, 63–65, 70; as apprehending himself, 64; as causing motion in others through its beauty, 63–64; as most beautiful, 6, 63, 65; as pure form, 6, 63, 65

Utilitarianism, 122n21

utility, 7, 13, 19n2, 60, 76, 82, 124, 140, 214–15, 238–39, 241–42, 265–66

vestiges of God, 260

vice, 13, 115n2, 221, 245, 357

virginity, 228

virtue, 7–9, 13, 18, 50, 57–58, 65, 72–73, 77–78, 82–87, 90, 93–94, 97–98, 102, 107–37, 140, 143, 145–46, 148–50, 154, 159, 169, 172, 226–27, 237–38, 243–46, 313, 316–17, 328, 332, 340–42, 350, 357, 359, 362–63, 368–69; aesthetic, 316–17; beauty and, 7–9, 13, 18, 58, 106–14, 122–34, 137, 169, 237, 243–44, 350, 357, 359, 362; cardinal, 78, 120, 125, 140, 172; definition of, 82, 118; development of as goal of philosophy, 148; goal as that which is most beautiful, 237; imitation and, 9, 126–27, 135; as intelligible measure, 58; moral, 8, 18, 112–13, 133–34, 154, 244, 313, 316, 342, 357; power to attract, 83, 121, 127; principle for establishing as choiceworthy, 78n17, 90, 98, 121, 122n21, 123, 127, 131–33; role in overcoming passions, 13, 118; theological, 125, 342. See also intellectual virtues; and individual virtues by name

vision of God. See beatific vision

voluntarism, 4, 17, 70

Vulgate Bible: rendering of kalon in, 95

wisdom, 2, 10–12, 35n68, 37n75, 47, 58, 133, 140, 147, 149, 151–52, 159, 162, 165, 169–70, 175n59, 177, 210, 214–15, 217, 219–20, 222–25, 229–30, 247, 267, 354–55, 357, 359; beauty of, 10, 219–20, 223–24, 230; path to as akin to artisanal or musical training, 147, 151; Platonic-Christian, 2; uncreated, 219. See also intellectual virtues; Jesus Christ; Son of God; wonder, 15–16, 77, 103, 105, 212, 215, 270, 278–80, 282, 287, 318, 350, 361, 363, 365–67; definition of, 365; as giving rise to philosophical inquiry, 15, 279, 287; Word of God. See Son of God
Recent titles in Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy

General Editor, John C. McCarthy

*The Voiding of Being*
*The Doing and Undoing of Metaphysics in Modernity*
William Desmond

*The Modern Turn*
Edited by Michael Rohlf

*Heidegger’s Question of Being*
*Dasein, Truth, and History*
Holger Zaborowski, editor

*The Beautiful, the True, and the Good*
*Studies in the History of Thought*
Robert E. Wood

*Early Greek Philosophy*
*The Presocratic and the Emergence of Reason*
Joe McCoy, editor

*The Intimate Strangeness of Being*
*Metaphysics after Dialectic*
William Desmond

*The Science of Being as Being*
*Metaphysical Investigations*
Gregory T. Doolan, editor

*The Ultimate Why Question*
*Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever?*
John F. Wippel, editor

*Natural Moral Law in Contemporary Society*
Holger Zaborowski, editor

*The Nature of Natural Philosophy in the Late Middle Ages*
Edward Grant

*Truth*
*Studies of a Robust Presence*
Kurt Pritzl, OP, editor