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## A Note on the Transcendental Status of Beauty

The status of beauty as a transcendental in the works of St. Thomas has been a subject of heated controversy among Thomists. Since it is not included in the famous derivation of the five transcendental properties of *ens* in *De veritate* 1, 1, many Thomists have been undecided regarding its status, or simply have not raised the question. Others have vehemently either denied or defended the transcendentality of beauty.

An indication of the complexity of this controversy is the fact that all these different positions can be found in the writings of the members of the so-called School of Louvain. For instance, Ferdinand van Steenberghen explicitly rejected its transcendental status, following the position of his master Maurice de Wulf. At the same time Louis De Raeymaecker, the future president of the Higher Institute for Philosophy, first defended the transcendental status of beauty in his *Metaphysica generalis* but a decade later he appears to have a more moderate position, in the sense that he does not mention beauty among the transcendentals.

One of the most notable defenders of beauty as a transcendental property of being was Jacques Maritain who writes in *Art et Scolastique* that

"the beautiful belongs to the order of the transcendentals, that is to say, objects of thought which transcend every limit of genus or analogy, and which do not allow themselves to be enclosed in any class, because they imbue everything and are to be found everywhere. Like the one, the true, and the good, the beautiful is *being* itself considered from a certain aspect; it is a property of being. It is not an accident superadded to being; it adds to being only a relation of reason: it is being considered as delighting, by the mere intuition of it, an intellectual nature. Thus everything is beautiful, just as everything is good, at least in a certain relation. And as being is everywhere present and everywhere varied the beautiful likewise is diffused everywhere and is everywhere varied. Like being and the other transcendentals, it is essentially *analogous*, that is to say, it is predicated for diverse reasons, *sub diversa ratione*, of the diverse subjects

of which it is predicated: each kind of being is in its own way, is good in its own way, is *beautiful* in its own way."

Maritain regards beauty as "the splendor of all the transcendentals together." Influenced by this praise of beauty, numerous studies appeared which all stressed the transcendental status of beauty.

More recently Mark D. Jordan concluded his study with an "irreducible list of transcendentals" which would consist of the traditional triadic properties of being: *unum*, *bonum* and *verum*. In his opinion, beauty does not go alongside these features of the ontological order, but rather fits on top of them as another way of expressing what these features express. But about a decade later he holds the somewhat confusing thesis: "beauty is a transcendental because it is found wherever the good is found. We might even want to say that beauty is a transcendental of the good." This position is somewhat similar to the one defended by Joseph Greth OSB in his classic manual *Elementa Philosophiae aristotelico-thomisticae*. After discussing the properties of being (*unitas, veritas and bonitas*), a chapter with the title *De speciali bonitatem quae est pulchritudo* (nrs. 642-644) is devoted to beauty, because beauty is "*quasi species boni*".

The most recent contribution came from Jan A. Aertsen. In his influential book, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, Aertsen takes Thomas as a representative of medieval thought and his metaphysics as a prime example of medieval transcendental thought. For Aertsen, the theory of the transcendentals reveals the properly philosophical dimension of medieval thought. It constitutes an innovation in the history of philosophy and a second beginning of metaphysics that transcends the Aristotelian accounts of substance and the categories.

In chapter eight of his book Aertsen deals with the question of the transcendental status of beauty in Thomas. Against influential commentators like Gilson and Maritain he argues that for Thomas beauty is not a transcendental. Ultimately, the reason for the interest in what some authors have called "the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas", in which the transcendental status of the beautiful plays an important role, rests upon a projection of certain elements of modern philosophy backward into the past, Aertsen claims.

In this note we will try to defend the transcendental status of the beautiful in the metaphysics of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In doing so, we intend to corroborate the thesis made by Leo Elders in a recent overview of the transcendental properties of being. There he defends the transcendental status of beauty and states that the reason why beauty is not mentioned by Aquinas as a transcendental by its own, is due to the fact that the beautiful is related to both the true and the good.

Before considering the arguments by Aertsen, we will briefly need to consider the doctrine of the transcendentals and its relation with beauty, in the supposition that beauty is indeed a transcendental.

### The relation between beauty and the transcendentals

In the famous text *De veritate* 1,1, Aquinas describes how the human mind, aware of the reality of things, proceeds in gathering knowledge of that reality and how, in doing so, the mind discovers the common properties of what is real. The mind discovers that everything that exists has a certain content (*res*); that it is not divided in itself (*unum*), but divided from the other (*aliquid*); that things are intelligible (*verum*) and desirable (*bonum*).

What is the relationship between beauty and the *res* that the mind discovers? Beauty has a certain intelligible content or form, from which the other characteristics of beauty (order and clarity) proceed and through which we can compare one beautiful object with another (*aliquid*). There is a close relation between beauty and *unum*. Unity, amid complexity, is a perfection and comes to the aid of the intellect in grasping the underlying meaning of things without distracting its attention and weakening its powers. But more is required than unity to make something beautiful. Beauty implies more than mere unity, for we find unity in a mathematical theorem, an intricate mechanical apparatus, and in the formulation of an atomic bomb, but these are not necessarily beautiful on that account. We may indeed acknowledge their unity but fail to experience any delight in their knowledge. Thus, there must be something more than the unity of a thing in order to make something beautiful. We come now to truth (*verum*).

What is the relationship between beauty and truth? The appeal of beauty regards mainly the perceptive powers, especially the intellect. Every beautiful object possesses an intelligible quality, which transcends the level of sense perception. It is not enough just to 'perceive' beauty; it must also be 'understood' in order for it to be appreciated. This reveals that there is an element of truth in every beautiful object. But the beautiful differs from the true since it adds an aspect of delight in the experience of the object, which the true, as such, does not give. It is undeniable that knowledge as such, even of the most abstract nature, can give a great amount of intellectual satisfaction. But there is a great difference between the satisfaction obtained from the acquisition of scientific knowledge and the compelling, overpowering delight and *gaudium* that a person experiences when contemplating a beautiful object. First and foremost, in order to acquire scientific knowledge one often has to go through a laborious process of discursive reasoning and usually its demonstrations serve but to further one's

inquiry into the nature of things. Beauty, like truth, is apprehended by the intellect and only perfects the intellect, but it also adds a relation to the operative faculty of will which apprehends the knowledge of the beautiful as a good and is delighted in this knowledge. The normal operation of the human intellect, which is used in the acquisition of scientific knowledge, lacks this special reference to the appetitive faculty, essential to the aesthetic experience. Truth as such merely commands our intellectual assent, but this does not automatically mean that it provides us delight or joy, which is what we have in the contemplation of the beautiful.

What is the relationship between beauty and the good (*bonum*)? The element of good is present in the beautiful. Beauty pleases, satisfies, delights us, and pleasure, satisfaction, and delight have a natural reference to an appetency, because an object which has these characteristics is a delectable good. Such emotions like pleasure and satisfaction are naturally a subjective element in the enjoyment of the beautiful, but they are elicited by the object itself when contemplated by the observer. Thus, as was stated, the element of goodness is present in the beautiful. But there is a marked difference between beauty and goodness. While the good satisfies the appetites in a direct manner, as something to be acquired, possessed and retained, not because it is known and perceived, beauty, on the other hand, is the good insofar as it delights the beholder through its perception and contemplation. The good is always something suitable to a striving power, and for that reason it is desired by an appetency. Thus, appetency is something rather self-interested in its striving. In contrast, a beautiful object gives the beholder satisfaction and pleasure through the simple contemplation of it, without the presence of any acquisitive tendency.

All things are in fact beautiful *in themselves*. This is ontological transcendental beauty, convertible with being. In *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, Thomas explains how transcendental beauty and transcendental good are really convertible but differ conceptually:

Beauty and good in a subject are the same, for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently good is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for good properly relates to the appetite (good being what all things desire), and therefore it has the aspect of an end (for the appetite is a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to the knowing power, for beautiful things are those, which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion, for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind – because even sense is a sort of reason, just as is every knowing power. Now since knowledge is by assimilation, and likeness relates to form, beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause.”

Again, in I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3, he explains the conceptual distinction between the two transcendentals, though convertible in reality:

"The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, 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. Consequently, those senses especially have to do with the beautiful which are the best avenues of knowledge, namely, sight and hearing, as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. But in reference to the other objects of the other senses, we do not use the expression beautiful, for we do not speak of beautiful tastes, or of beautiful odors. Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the knowing power, so that good means that which pleases absolutely the appetite, while the beautiful is something pleasant to apprehend."

### Re-considering the arguments of J. Aertsen

If beauty is supposed to be a transcendental mode of being, however, why is it not included by Saint Thomas in his list of transcendentals at the beginning of the *De Veritate*, where he lists only five transcendental notions aside from being (*ens*): *res*, *aliquid*, *unum*, *verum*, and *bonum*? Such a question does not seem to be a serious problem for Maritain, who notes that *De Veritate* 1.1's "classic table does not exhaust all transcendental values." The reason why the beautiful is not included in the list is because "it can be reduced to one of them", namely, to the good (*bonum*). Jan Aertsen remains unimpressed for he holds that if a beauty is to be really a transcendental, it should be determined in relation to the first transcendental 'being' and "it must add a value to being conceptually that cannot be reduced to another transcendental." On the other hand, Francis Kovach believes that the reason why beauty was not listed in the *De Veritate* and yet must still be considered as a transcendental, is because there occurred a development in the thought of Aquinas. The treatment of beauty as a transcendental only occurs in his later commentary on the *De Divinis Nominibus* of Pseudo-Dionysius, written some ten years after *De Veritate*. It is Kovach's thesis that Thomas arrived at the insight into the transcendentality of beauty only after *De Veritate*, in particular, only with *In De Divinis Nominibus*, where he writes of beauty as a transcendental. According to Kovach, Thomas' thought exhibits an "immanent development" regarding this issue.

Aertsen is unconvinced by this thesis. He denies that in *In De Divinis Nominibus* Thomas speaks of beauty as a distinct transcendental. Rather, beauty is a simple extension of the true to the good. Aertsen explains:

"there is a fundamental objection to be raised against the interpretation that Thomas in his commentary (*In De Divinis Nominibus*) views the beautiful as a distinct transcendental. Transcendentals express a general mode of *being*, they add something to it conceptually. Here Thomas does not speak, however, of the relation between

the beautiful and *being*, but of the relation of the beautiful and the *good*. The beautiful is convertible with the good and adds something to the good. It even seems to be a property of the good as good...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 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*. Our conclusion must be that Thomas in his commentary does not come to the insight that the beautiful expresses a general mode of being on the basis of which it would have to be included on the list as a new transcendental...What the beautiful adds is an addition to the good. Thomas follows the Dionysian perspective in seeing the beautiful in connection with the good."

Though I would agree with Aertsen that beauty is a type of good, I would note that beauty is different from the good in concept. Beauty is a special kind of good - that which pleases on being apprehended. It is not the good simply, but rather the good of the intellect. As to Aertsen's denial of beauty as a distinct transcendental, the crucial element lies in the meaning of the expression "*species boni*". It is indeed true that the Angelic Doctor calls the beautiful a species of the good. But this does not mean that beauty is like a species within a genera, as, for example, a horse is a species among that of the animals. Beauty is not a mere specification of the good. If such were the case, then it would consequently not have the same extension of good inasmuch as good is a transcendental notion. Beauty is in fact applicable to all beings; all creatures are ontologically beautiful, according to their particular participation in the intensive act of being. Beauty is a transcendental which is based upon the act of being (*esse*). The more a being has a higher degree of participated act of being, the more beautiful it is. Thus, as in transcendental unity, truth, and goodness, there is a ladder of degrees of transcendental perfection based on the degrees of participated *esse* in finite creatures, perfections which have their source in the Supreme Beauty Who is God Himself. All beings have their beauty, in varying degrees according to their respective essences, from the Divine Beauty. All things are ontologically beautiful in varying degrees.

The expression "beauty is a species of good" should thus be understood in the sense that the beautiful adds something to the good, that is to say, there occurs a particular harmony with the intellect consequent upon the clarity and proportion which pertain to things themselves. The beautiful is linked to the true from the moment that it is under the scrutiny of the cognitive faculties, and is linked to the good inasmuch as it satisfies appetency. Consequently, beauty (*pulchrum*) is that transcendental property of being that is born from the combination of the transcendental true and the transcendental good. This is the reason

why Thomas does not list beauty along with *res*, *aliquid*, *unum*, *verum*, and *bonum* among the transcendental notions other than being at the beginning of *De Veritate*, nor alongside the classical triad of the transcendental properties of one, true, and good in other parts of his work. Transcendental beauty, which is not only a transcendental notion, but also a transcendental property of being, is being (*ens*) in conformity with the spiritual soul through an interaction between knowledge and appetite. Ontological or transcendental beauty is *being* inasmuch as it causes a certain pleasure when apprehended. Transcendental beauty is being in relation to the two faculties of the soul, the cognitive and the appetitive, these faculties taken not separately but jointly. It is through the combined activities of the intellect and the will that the recognition results that every being is cognitively delightful, i.e., beautiful.

Aertsen claims that the establishment of a Thomistic aesthetics rests upon a projection of elements of modern philosophy backward into the past. But as John F. Wippel has convincingly shown in regard to Aquinas' metaphysics, it is legitimate to place the various elements of Aquinas' philosophical thought into an harmonious synthesis as long as one uses a sound argumentation during the "moment of proof", as Wippel calls it. Therefore, a sort of *Summa aesthetica* remains possible. In fact, such an effort, starting from the transcendental status of beauty, has been carried out by A. Maurer. Although I would agree that the "moment of discovery", to use Wippel's expression, for a neothomistic aesthetics was highly influenced by the development of an aesthetic theory which analyzed aesthetic experience from the perspective of human subjectivity and reduced the ontological foundation of beauty to an emotional state (Kant) or quality which we impose upon the real world in an aesthetic experience, it does not follow from this that the same holds for the concrete reasoning within a neothomistic aesthetics.

Beauty as a transcendental property of being signifies a relation of the intellect and the will taken *jointly* with *both* the true and the good, resulting in the recognition that every being is cognitively delightful, i.e., beautiful.