

The Platonic-Aristotelian Hybridity of Aquinas's Aesthetic Theory

by Daniel Gallagher

The philosophical and theological legacy of Thomas Aquinas has suffered somewhat from being presented as an overgeneralized caricature, a sort of “baptized” Aristotelianism. Undoubtedly, Aquinas was heavily influenced by the thought of Aristotle, and found in the works of the Stagirite a philosophical method quite effective for treating theological questions. By no means, however, did Aquinas simply transpose *in toto* Aristotle's system into a Christian context; the enormous opus he completed in his short life reveals a philosophical and theological vision spanning a wide range of ancient, classical, and medieval sources. Nor did Aquinas opt to develop the thought of Aristotle strictly as an antidote to what he considered to be the errors of Platonism. To the contrary, Aquinas demonstrates at times a surprising amount of sympathy for Platonic philosophy.

One of the ways in which Aquinas reflects both Platonic and Aristotelian thought is in his theory of the transcendentals. Plato famously taught that earthly things are traceable to ideas which transcend the sensible realm. The ideas, or “true beings” (*ontos on*), lie behind all sensible things.¹ The ideas in which sensible things participate reveal being to be a unity rather than a plurality, true rather than apparent, and good rather than evil.² All sensible things, because they participate in the being of the ideas, partake of these properties of unity, truth, and goodness, but only in an imperfect way. For Plato, these transcendental properties are found primarily in the ideas and only secondarily in sensible things.

Aristotle considerably alters the Platonic theory and teaches that, rather than transcending the sensible realm, the ideas actually exist in the sensible realm as the forms which make things to be of a certain kind and render them intelligible. He discusses the one and the true in books 6 and 10 of his *Metaphysics*, and the good in book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, the transcendentals are found primarily in things.

Plato and Aristotle agree that the one, the true, and the good are transcendentals. But there is considerable disagreement between them as to how and where these transcendental properties exist. Moreover, there is a difference in the respective ways in which they place beauty into the scheme of transcendental properties. Plato includes beauty among the transcendentals of unity, truth, and goodness in a somewhat indirect way. He argues in the *Lysis* and *Timeaus* that whatever is good (*agathon*) is also beautiful (*kalon*), and in the *Republic* that everything that exists participates in the good.³ Nowhere, however, does Aristotle discuss beauty as a transcendental property.

How does Aquinas draw from the respective Platonic and Aristotelian traditions in respect to the transcendentals? Aquinas bases his general theory of the transcendentals on Aristotle. He clearly holds that the ideas do not exist apart from the material, sensible world, but in the things of the world as their intelligible forms. Transcendentals are those properties of things which are not

really distinct from the being of things. In order for a property to be transcendental, it must be coextensive with being, but it must also add a conceptual aspect to being distinct in its own right. So, rather than adding a specific difference, a transcendental property designates an aspect of being present anywhere and everywhere being is found, but unique in its relation to our cognitive faculty. Umberto Eco explains that transcendental properties “are a bit like differing visual angles from which being can be looked at.”⁴ Jacques Maritain similarly described the transcendentals as “concepts which surpass all limits of kind or category and will not suffer themselves to be confined in any class, because they absorb everything and are to be found everywhere.”⁵

Thomas Aquinas discusses the transcendentals in numerous places throughout his *oeuvre*.⁶ The most explicit list of transcendental properties is found in the opening passages of the *De veritate*. There, Aquinas lists being (*ens*), thing (*res*), unity (*unum*), otherness (*aliquid*), truth (*verum*), and goodness (*bonum*) as transcendental properties.⁷ Beauty, or *pulchrum*, is conspicuously absent. Several Thomistic scholars, however, have argued that Aquinas, following Plato, includes beauty among the transcendentals in an indirect way.⁸ Others argue that Aquinas took the Aristotelian route and excluded beauty from among the transcendentals.⁹

I argue that Aquinas in fact developed a hybridity of Platonic and Aristotelian thought in regard to beauty. With Plato, Aquinas maintained that the primary instance of beauty (i.e., God) transcends the sensible, material world and alone possesses beauty in all its perfection. Sensible things participate in this beauty, but only in an imperfect way. At the same time, following Aristotle, Aquinas maintained that the forms of things, in which beauty exists, are immanent to the sensible world rather than belonging to a separate realm. In what follows, I explore more deeply the way in which Aquinas develops this hybridity by interrelating the sensible, or aesthetic, aspect of beauty to the transcendental aspect. We will see that he does so by means of an intricate and involved line of reasoning that relates created, or finite, beauty, to uncreated, or divine, beauty.

First of all, allow me to clarify what I mean by “hybridity” as it pertains to Aquinas’s philosophy of beauty. If we understand hybridity as the blending of two different philosophical currents, it would be hard to find points in Aquinas’s philosophy that are unequivocally hybrid. Aquinas was less concerned with harmonizing different philosophical views than he was with searching for the truth wherever it might be found. If, on the other hand, we understand hybridity to refer to a progeny of thought displaying characteristics of both parents, we come close to discovering such a hybridity in Aquinas’s philosophy of beauty. He was neither a pure Aristotelian nor a pure Platonist in his aesthetic theory. Nor did he simply select certain attractive elements from Plato and Aristotle and reassemble them to suit his own purposes. Rather, recognizing a need to integrate the Platonic and Aristotelian theories of the beautiful, he produced a kind of hybrid “kalology” embracing both the transcendental and aesthetic, or sensible, aspects of beauty.

In the next section, I set the stage for Aquinas’s hybridity by outlining the debate on beauty’s place among the transcendentals at the time Aquinas’s own aesthetic ideas were coming to

fruition. In Part II, I will examine some of the key ideas found in Aquinas's commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* that provide evidence for his hybrid theory.

I

Strictly speaking, there is no single Thomistic "system" of aesthetics. What Aquinas does have to say about beauty is quite interesting and deliberate. What he says, and where he says it, depends more on immediate and, at least in his eyes, more pressing philosophical or theological issues. A comprehensive survey of the relevant texts reveals that Aquinas was concerned with two overarching themes: the natures of transcendental beauty and sensible beauty, respectively. The development of the former owes much to various forms of Platonism and Neoplatonism, especially as they are further developed by Augustine and Dionysius. Aquinas adopts from Plato the standard transcendental properties of the one, the good, and the true. He relies on Augustine's metaphysical basis for the interchangeability of these three transcendentals. Augustine argued that whatever exists as a unity, that whatever is true is true insofar as it exists, and that insofar as a thing is, it is good.¹⁰ We will look more closely at the Dionysian influence on Aquinas in Part III.

At the same time, Aquinas's teaching on sensible beauty is built upon Aristotle's philosophy of nature and epistemology. Aristotle speaks of the form as the perfecting principle of a thing. The substantial form is what brings matter out of a state of potentiality to actuality. At the same time, the form is the primary cause of knowledge. When we know a thing, we know it in its actuality. We know the thing, so to speak, as existing in some state of perfection; not in the sense that it is without blemish, but rather in the sense that it has been brought out of a potential state so as to exist as "this thing of a certain kind."¹¹ Against this Aristotelian background, Aquinas theorizes that, in order for a thing to be beautiful, it must be fully realized in its particular form, and to know beauty is to have apprehended the form. According to Aquinas, "beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause."¹²

Aquinas, as I have noted, did not compose any single particular treatise on the beautiful. "This is a consequence," writes Jacques Maritain, "of the stern discipline of teaching to which the philosophers of the Middle Ages were subjected. They were absorbed in sifting and exploring in every direction the problems of the School and indifferent about leaving unexploited areas between the deep quarries they excavated."¹³ The lack of a single coherent treatise on beauty by Aquinas forces us to pull together his thoughts and organize them in some systematic fashion. To do so, we must first address a preliminary methodological question: which is primary, transcendental beauty or sensible beauty? Although Aquinas never used the term "transcendental beauty," it is commonly accepted by contemporary Thomistic scholars to designate the beauty possessed by every existing thing insofar as it exists.¹⁴ Unlike aesthetic beauty, it is not necessarily dependent on sensory and intellectual knowledge. Aesthetic beauty, on the other hand, is the perceivable beauty of things in which, once having been apprehended through the senses, the intellect takes delight and finds rest. In light of Aquinas's epistemology—an epistemology heavily influenced by Aristotle and best summed up in the phrase "nothing exists in the intellect without first having been apprehended by the senses" (*in intellectu autem nihil*

est, nisi prius fuerit in sensu)—it would seem that sensible beauty has to be our starting point.¹⁵ If our knowledge of the beautiful is possible only through the empirical experience of beautiful *sensible* things, then it would seem preferable to begin with a treatment of the sensible characteristics of beauty.

A chronological study of Aquinas's works, however, reveals that one of his earliest interests was supersensible beauty. The fact that our knowledge of beauty begins in sense experience does not necessarily mean that sensible beauty must always be the primary analogate in respect to transcendent beauty.¹⁶ God, insofar as He embodies all perfections in an exceedingly transcendent way, is ultimately the primary subject of the predication of any perfection.¹⁷ Beauty is one such perfection. So even though Aquinas does not provide an explicit methodological treatment of the analogous predication of beauty across the transcendent and sensible realms, we must be careful lest we deduce, from a lack of textual evidence, that Aquinas was not interested in the question of how beauty could be predicated analogously to both the supersensible and sensible realms. The issue, in fact, had already been a point of extensive discussion in high scholasticism.¹⁸ As I shall show in Part II, this issue had a direct impact on the debate over beauty as a transcendental property.

Aquinas himself seems to move back and forth between the supersensible and sensible notions of beauty with relative ease. For example, his famous statement of the three essential characteristics of aesthetic beauty—integrity, proportion, and clarity—appears in his reply to an objection that pertains as much to the supersensible order as to the sensible order. The question posed in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* is “whether the sacred doctors have correctly designated essential attributes to the persons of the Trinity.”¹⁹ The context for this question was the common ancient Christian practice of applying certain characteristics specifically to one particular person of the Trinity rather than another. Aquinas argued that those theologians who had assigned beauty primarily to the second person of the Trinity did so with good reason.²⁰ Granted, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, is the only incarnate and visible person of the three. Thus, if Aquinas wanted to emphasize the sensible qualities of beauty, naturally he, and the sacred doctors who preceded him, would assign them to the Son rather than to the Father or to the Holy Spirit. However, as is clear from his emphasis in the article on the complete identification of the Father's perfection with the Son's, the beauty of which he speaks is not simply the *visible* beauty of the Son as seen in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. It also refers to the beauty of the second person of the Trinity as existing from all eternity before having taken flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and as having ascended back to the Father in heaven. Thus, the context in which we find this passage describing the essential aesthetic characteristics of the beautiful applies to both the sensible and the supersensible realms.

In sum, Aquinas does not hesitate to apply aesthetic qualities, whose primary subjects of predication are sensible realities, analogously to the transcendent beauty of the second person of the Trinity. That is to say that the three essential qualities of aesthetic beauty are made to bear upon our understanding of transcendent beauty as it exists in the second person of the Trinity. In conclusion, supersensible beauty is primary in the sense that beauty exists most perfectly and

fully in God, but sensible beauty is primary in the sense that our initial knowledge of the beautiful comes through the perception of the essential aesthetic characteristics of integrity, proportion, and clarity.

II

Aquinas was introduced to the Platonic notion of transcendental beauty early in his philosophical training. Between 1248 and 1252, while under the tutelage of Albert the Great in Cologne, Aquinas had the occasion to attend Albert's lectures on Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *De divinis nominibus*. This work, by an anonymous Syrian monk of the sixth century C.E., was canonical for the education of any medieval cleric.²¹ Clerical veneration of this difficult and highly Platonic work was due first and foremost to the alleged connection between its author and the apostle Paul. The Dionysius who wrote the treatise was thought to be the same Dionysius who had heard Paul preach at the Areopagus in Athens. One of Aquinas's earliest extant monographs is a summary of Albert's lectures on divine names, titled *Quaestiones in librum De divinis nominibus Dionysii*.

Apparently, Aquinas's interest in the thought of Dionysius was not simply a stop on his journey toward a full-blown Aristotelianism. Aquinas himself wrote a commentary on *De divinis nominibus* that dates to no earlier than 1268, twenty years after he had heard Albert lecture on Dionysius's work in Cologne. Several Thomistic scholars have viewed Aquinas's commentary as little more than a collection of cursory remarks on a text every doctor in the church was expected to comment upon during his career.²² Consequently, Aquinas's commentary is often judged to be of little value in the attempt to ascertain his original thoughts on beauty. A closer reading, however, indicates that Aquinas took the Platonic ideas of Dionysius seriously. To take but one example, the procedure of the *Summa Theologiae* displays an enormous amount of respect for the merits of Dionysius's *via negativa* methodology.²³ In the opening questions of the *Summa*, Aquinas first addresses what God "is not" before going on to explain what "is." In his introduction to question 3 of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa*, Aquinas writes: "Now that we have examined whether God exists, it remains for us to examine in what way God exists. But since, in the case of God, we cannot know whether something is, but rather whether it is not, we must first consider in what way God is not before considering in what way God is."²⁴

Aquinas displays an equal amount of respect for Dionysius's teaching on the interconvertibility of the good and the beautiful as he does for Dionysius's teaching on the *via negativa*. In his commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus (In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio)*, Aquinas writes: "Dionysius says that because the beautiful is the cause of things in so many ways, it follows that the good and the beautiful are the same thing, because all things 'desire the beautiful and the good' as 'cause' for all things; and therefore there is nothing which does not participate in the beautiful and the good, since each thing is beautiful and good according to its own form; and furthermore, we can also dare to say that even prime matter participates in the beautiful and the good."²⁵ This passage is one of the strongest pieces of evidence that Thomas included the beautiful among the transcendentals because "the good and the beautiful are the same thing."

By including beauty among the transcendental properties of existence, Aquinas places himself—though not squarely—within the Platonic tradition. Plato’s dialogues had unambiguously manifested an affinity toward beauty as a transcendental.²⁶ Both in the *Lysis* and in the *Timaeus*, Socrates states that whatever is good is beautiful, and whatever beautiful, good. The *Timaeus* further connects this idea with creation; everything that is made is both good and beautiful. Aristotle, in contrast, does not include beauty among the transcendentals. In the *Metaphysics*, he mentions only truth, goodness, and unity.²⁷

In the early years of Christianity, Plato clearly exerted a greater influence than Aristotle. Plotinus,²⁸ Augustine, and Dionysius all add beauty to Aristotle’s list of transcendental properties. Augustine states the case unambiguously in his *City of God*, a work with which Aquinas would have been quite familiar:²⁹ “...the very order, changes, and movements in the universe, the very beauty of form in all that is visible, proclaim, however silently, both that the world was created and also that its Creator could be none other than God whose greatness and beauty are both ineffable and invisible.”³⁰ Goodness is the door, so to speak, through which beauty enters the hall of the transcendentals.

Dionysius, like Augustine, also treats beauty as a transcendental property. His fidelity to the Platonic approach is quite evident throughout *De divinis nominibus*.³¹ The interchangeability of beauty and goodness, perceived in created things, gives all the greater testimony to the presence and indistinguishability of beauty and goodness in the divine. Dionysius writes, “The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good, for everything looks to the Beautiful and the Good as the cause of being, and there is nothing in the world without a share of the Beautiful and the Good... This—the One, the Good, the Beautiful—is in its uniqueness the Cause of the multitudes of the good and the beautiful.”³²

Throughout the Middle Ages, the debate over beauty as a transcendental property continued to gain momentum. On one side, there were those who could not bring themselves to believe that beauty is to be found in every existing thing. For them, the meaning of “goodness” (*kalon*) in the Platonic sense could refer analogously to the beauty of moral action or to the disposition of the soul, but not to all things as they appear to the human senses.³³ To say that good moral action is “beautiful” is quite acceptable, but to say that every existent thing is “beautiful” insofar as it exists is contrary to common experience. Moreover, to say such a thing would offend the beauty of God by drawing parallels between God and even the ugliest of existing things. On the other side of the debate were those who staunchly maintained the transcendental nature of beauty. Bonaventure is most notable in this regard.³⁴ For these thinkers, beauty is present wherever being is present, and things are beautiful insofar as they exist.

By the early thirteenth century, there was a move toward a compromise. This position is best expressed in the *Summa fratris Alexandri* of Alexander of Hales and John of La Rochelle. In this work we find an “official” list of transcendentals that includes only unity, truth, and goodness.³⁵ However, the text goes on to assert that, even though goodness and beauty are identical in reality, they differ from each other conceptually (*secundum rationem*). The latter part of this compromise shows an attempt to perpetuate the Platonic position. The former part of the

compromise, however, constitutes a clear concession to the growing Aristotelianism of the age. The compromise position, stemming from Bonaventure and his fellow Franciscans, asserted both the transcendental aspects of beauty insofar as it held that goodness and beauty are identical in things, but also maintained the aesthetic characteristic of beauty insofar as it held that, since beauty is a “perceived” goodness, there is a conceptual distinction between goodness and beauty. Aquinas adhered to this compromise position.³⁶ He certainly was caught up in the rising tide of Aristotelianism, and in the *De Veritate* he clearly follows the Aristotelian designation of three transcendentals: the one, the true, and the good.³⁷ However, he also argues for a conceptual distinction between goodness and beauty rather than a real distinction. In other words, Aquinas also lets beauty enter the transcendental hall through the back door. In order to understand why he leaves the back door open, it will be necessary to take a closer look at his underlying Platonic views as they emerge in his commentary on Dionysius’s *De divinis nominibus*.

III

As mentioned, most scholars read Aquinas’s *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus* as no more than an extended expository gloss on Dionysius’s original work. Mark D. Jordan, for example, proposes that Aquinas, in commenting on Dionysius’s work, “did not construct a treatment of the beautiful according to his own notions or pedagogy. The existing remarks on beauty ought then to be read as just what they are, namely, asides in discussions directed to other ends.”³⁸ Although it seems that Aquinas did not set out to construct a comprehensive treatment of the beautiful, I argue that his remarks on beauty should be read as more than mere “asides.” Rather, I believe they have some bearing on Aquinas’s broader thought regarding both the transcendental and aesthetic properties of the beautiful.³⁹ In chapter 4 of *De divinis nominibus*, Dionysius notes that theologians have celebrated the good as beautiful.⁴⁰ In later Scholastic philosophy, the concept of beauty would eventually include more sensible, aesthetic dimensions.⁴¹ Dionysius employs the term in ways equally transcendental and aesthetic. The beautiful, insofar as it is a divine name, is as thoroughly transcendental as the good, light, love, and any other predicates that denote, however imperfectly, the perfections of God.⁴² Supersensible beauty, enjoyed by God alone, imparts sensible beauty to all creatures.

In his commentary on chapter 4, however, we see that Aquinas, while privileging the transcendental dimensions, in no way undermines the aesthetic aspects of beauty. He does not hesitate to join Dionysius in moving from the transcendental to the sensible as a direction for his own thinking.⁴³ Aquinas understands Dionysius to be attempting two things in his exposition of the beautiful. First, he establishes beauty as a proper attribute of God.⁴⁴ Second, he demonstrates in what way beauty is attributable to God. Dionysius does not proceed deductively from one to the other, but rather allows his explanations of the possibility of predication and the mode of predication to play off one another reciprocally throughout chapter 4. Aquinas comments that the predication of beauty to God occurs in two possible ways: first, beauty is predicated of God insofar as God is the cause of all beauty; and second, that beauty is had by God without reference to anything else (*gratiose*).⁴⁵ Dionysius teases out the distinction between divine beauty and created beauty through a method of comparison and contrast, which he bases on the more

elementary distinctions between the one and the many and participation and the participants. Aquinas notes that Dionysius makes these distinctions for three reasons: to show that beauty is attributed differently to God and to creatures; to show how beauty is attributed to creatures; and to show how beauty is attributed to God.

Aquinas believes that Dionysius implies a distinction in regard to how beauty is predicated to God, and he himself supports that distinction by employing the notion of causality.⁴⁶ Because God's beauty transcends even being itself, Dionysius calls God the all-beautiful (*pagkalon*) and superbeautiful (*hyperkalon*). Aquinas uses the word *pulcherrimus* to refer to the former, and *superpulcher* to refer to the latter. The notion of causality is the key to understanding the basis for the distinction. According to Aquinas, *pulcherrimus* refers to God's perfect beauty as distinguished from the imperfect beauty of created things. Unlike the beauty of creatures, God's beauty does not fade away, is not subject to variation, is not distinguished by degrees, nor is it dependent on the beholder.⁴⁷ It is neither recognized nor described in terms of a lack or defect. *Superpulcher*, on the other hand, refers to the beauty of God in the order of *causality*. Because God's beauty is above all being, it tends toward diffusing itself outwardly. God "possesses" within Himself the font of all beauty. All beauty (*omnis pulchritude*) and each beautiful thing (*omne pulchrum*) preexist in God, not by way of distinction (*divisim*), but uniformly (*uniformiter*).

God is "beyond beautiful" in the words of Dionysius, or "superbeautiful" in the words of Aquinas, not only in a way that makes it unnecessary for Him to create in order to enhance His beauty, but more importantly because His beauty makes him tend toward the act of creation insofar as the multiplicity of the effects of God's beauty preexist in him "superabundantly" as first cause (*multiplices effectus in causa praeexistunt*).⁴⁸ Aquinas's *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus* pays more than lip service to Dionysius's Platonism. Aquinas has no one to thank more for his doctrine concerning the interconvertibility of goodness and beauty than Dionysius, who had argued that the good and the beautiful are the same in reality, though different in concept.⁴⁹ Although the good and the beautiful, insofar as they constitute transcendental aspects of being, are, according to Aquinas, "the same thing," they are often distinguished from one another on account of the ratio by which they are known.⁵⁰ The good and the beautiful are conceptually distinct, but not distinct in reality.⁵¹ The good, because it is primarily known to the knower as desirable,⁵² and consequently pursued by him as an object to be possessed, belongs primarily to the order of final causality.⁵³ The beautiful, on the other hand, is pleasing simply in having been seen. The knower does not seek to possess it as a further end. Unlike the good, which pertains primarily to the appetitive power, the beautiful pertains primarily to the knowing power (*vis cognoscitiva*).⁵⁴ And since knowledge, insofar as it comes about through an assimilation of like with like, regards the form of a thing, it follows that beauty belongs primarily to the order of formal causality.

A philosophical hybridity emerges from the foregoing analysis of Aquinas's *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus*. In this work, Aquinas manifests sympathy for the Platonically inspired notion of beauty as a transcendental property. Beauty, insofar as it may be predicated of any existing

thing, surpasses the sensible realm and is common to created and divine realities. At the same time, Aquinas adheres to the Aristotelian notion of knowledge through the senses. We find a thing beautiful because, once perceived by the senses and known by the intellect, the thing is not pursued for any ulterior motive or sought for any further possession. We can speak of beauty as a transcendental property common to all existing things, and we can speak of beauty as the presence of proportion, order, and luminosity in things that please us when seen. Because they are analogically related, we may speak of the former (i.e., transcendental beauty) in terms of the latter (i.e., aesthetic beauty), and vice versa. In short, Aquinas's understanding of beauty as he describes it in the *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus* allows him to go back and forth between transcendental and aesthetic beauty as he does in question 39 of the *Prima Pars Summae Theologiae*.

IV

In sum, Aquinas's commentary on Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* shows that he had a strong bent toward Platonic ideas relatively late in his career. He was doing more than fulfilling his obligation to complete his commentary on a canonical work of the High Middle Ages. He was clarifying some the key Neoplatonic ideas as they appeared in Dionysius's thought, while simultaneously looking at the text through an Aristotelian lens. Beauty belongs to a thing primarily in the order of form. It is more than just an excitation of the senses. It is a conformity of the thing to the mind. This proportion of beauty to the mind, effected through the perception of the form, enters into Aquinas's philosophy through the influence of Aristotle. By the time Aquinas comments on Dionysius's work, his thought on the relationship of form to matter, and of form to intellect, has already matured. It is through the abstraction of the form that the mind comes to know things, and abstraction is possible because of the similarity, or proportion, between the mind and the form. So it is in the case of knowledge of the beautiful. The sense faculty, which is a kind of knowledge, finds pleasure in the beautiful because of the similarity, or proportion, between the beautiful and the senses.

Thus, the key to the hybridity of Aquinas's aesthetics is his understanding of form. Rather than a supersensible idea, the form becomes the individuating principle of an existing thing through which the thing has existence, and by means of which that thing is known by the human intellect as beautiful. Even as Aquinas embraces these Aristotelian notions of nature and knowledge, he does not discard the Platonic notion of transcendental beauty. God is "superbeautiful" (*superpulcher*), and things, insofar as their existence participates in the existence of God, are beautiful in a thoroughly transcendental way. Aquinas concurs with the traditional Aristotelian transcendentals of unity, goodness, and truth, while at the same time allowing beauty to join the list, primarily because of its interconvertibility with goodness—a Platonically inspired notion. The end result is a unique aesthetic theory, thoroughly hybrid in its genesis, that clearly reflects both the transcendental as well as the sensible dimensions of beauty.

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Notes

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1. See Plato, *Phaedo* 102b-c 3-5; and idem, *Republic* 596a 6-7. All references to Plato's works correspond to the marginalia indices as found in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Lane Cooper et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
2. Plato, *Phaedo* 131-133, 135-136; and idem, *Republic* 5.479-480, 7.518, 9.582b-c.
3. Plato, *Lysis* 216; idem, *Timaeus* 30-34; and idem, *Republic* 6.507, 7.540.
4. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 21.
5. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Scribner, 1930), p. 30.
6. See Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* c. 1 a. 1, cap 21 a. 1-3; idem, *De natura generis* c. 2; idem, *De potential* q. 9 a. 7; and idem, *In 1 Sententia* c. 8 q. 1 a. 3. All references to Aquinas's works in Latin correspond to the *Biblioteca de Autores Christianos* editions of his work (Salamanca: B. A. C., 1951). All English translations are my own.
7. Aquinas, *De veritate* ques. 1 art. 1.
8. See for example Josef Jungmann, *Aesthetik* (Freiburg: Breisgau, 1884); Francis Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974); Etienne Gilson, "The Forgotten Transcendental: *Pulchrum*," in *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: Greenwood, 1960), pp. 159-63; and Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. Scanlan. Umberto Eco includes beauty among the transcendentals, but only implicitly; see Eco, *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Bredin.
9. See for example Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Brill, 1996); Edgar de Bruyne, *L'esthétique du Moyen Age* (Louvain: Éditions de l'Institut supérieur de philosophie, 1947); and Maurice de Wulf, *Art et Beauté* (Louvain: Institut supérieur, 1943).
10. Augustine of Hippo, *De moribus Manichaeorum* 2.6: "Nihil autem est esse quam unum esse"; idem, *Soliloquia* 2.5: "Verum mihi videtur esse id quod est"; and idem, *De vera religione* 11.21: "In quantum est, quidquid est, bonum est." All references to Augustine's work correspond to the *Patrologia Latina* (PL) series, ed. Jacques Paul Migne, vols. 34-47. All English translations are my own.
11. See Walter Brogan, *Heidegger and Aristotle: The Twofoldness of Being* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 32-36, 41-42.
12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter cited as *ST*) 1 q. 12 a. 1: "Et quia cognitio fit per

assimilationem, similitudo autem respicit formam, pulchrum proprie pertinet ad rationem causae formalis.” [And since knowledge comes about through assimilation, but likeness through form, the beautiful properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause.]

13. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. Scanlan, p. 1.

14. Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 14-19.

15. Iohannes Amos Comenius, *Orbis Pictus*: “Nothing is in the intellect which will not first have been in the sense faculty.” See *ST* 1 q. 55 a. 2 ad 2, 2-2ae q. 173 a. 2.

16. By “primary analogate,” I mean the side of the analogy that is more easily grasped in respect to the other. In the analogy “a point is to a line as a surface is to a solid,” the latter side of the analogy is primary insofar as we have sensible knowledge of solids, whereas points and lines are geometrically abstract concepts.

17. See especially *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 6, in which Aquinas argues that all that can be attributed to God is said about Him *per prius* in respect to creatures. We can turn to Aquinas’s teaching on *beatitudo* as but one example of how God stands as the primary subject of predication for qualities shared by God and human beings; see *ST* 1-2ae q. 3 a. 2 ad 4: “...cum beatitudo dicat quendam ultimam perfectionem, secundum quod diversae res beatitudinis capaces ad diversos gradus perfectionis pertingere possunt. Secundum hoc necesse est quod diversimode beatitudo dicatur. Nam in Deo est beatitudo per essentiam: quia ipsum esse eius est operatio eius, qua non fruitur alio, sed seipso.” Because there is no real distinction between God’s blessedness and existence, the quality of blessedness applies most perfectly to God. Aquinas goes on to explain how other beings capable of blessedness can only achieve it through *operatio*. All of the qualities that apply to God, insofar as they are possessed by God *per essentiam*, are predicated of him in a way similar to *beatitudo*.

18. See Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Brill, 1996), pp. 335-41.

19. *ST* 1 q. 39 a. 8.

20. *ST* 1 q. 39 a. 8: “Species autem, sive pulchritudo, habet similitudinem cum propriis filii. Nam ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur. Primo quidem, integritas sive perfectio, quae enim diminuta sunt, hoc ipso turpia sunt. Et debita proportio sive consonantia. Et iterum claritas, unde quae habent colorem nitidum, pulchra esse dicuntur. Quantum igitur ad primum, similitudinem habet cum proprio filii, in quantum est filius habens in se vere et perfecte naturam patris. Unde, ad hoc innuendum, Augustinus in sua expositione dicit, ubi, scilicet in filio, summa et prima vita est, et cetera. Quantum vero ad secundum, convenit cum proprio filii, in quantum est imago expressa patris. Unde videmus quod aliqua imago dicitur esse pulchra, si perfecte repraesentat rem, quamvis turpem. Et hoc tetigit Augustinus cum dicit, ubi est tanta convenientia, et prima aequalitas, et cetera. Quantum vero ad tertium, convenit cum proprio filii, in quantum est verbum, quod quidem lux est, et splendor intellectus, ut Damascenus dicit.”

21. Gilson, “Forgotten Transcendental,” pp. 159-63.

22. See for example Mark D. Jordan, “The Evidence of the Transcendentals and the Place of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1989), 393-407; Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty*, trans. Bredin, pp. 13-18; and Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. Scanlan, pp. 1-3.

23. See *ST* 1 questions 1-4.

24. *ST* 1 q. 3: Cognito de aliquo an sit, inquirendum restat quomodo sit, ut sciatur de eo quid sit. Sed quia de Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit, non possumus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non sit.

25. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus exposition* 4.8:...et [Dionysius] dicit quod, quia tot modis pulchrum est causa omnium, inde est quod bonum et pulchrum sunt idem, quia omnia *desiderant pulchrum et bonum*, sicut *causam* omnibus modis; et quia nihil est *quod non participet pulchro et bono*, cum unumquodque sit pulchrum et bonum secundum propriam formam; et ulterius, etiam, audaciter *hoc dicere* poterimus *quod non-existens*, id est materia prima, *participat pulchro et bono*. Note that the italicized words in the Latin text are Aquinas's citations from Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*.

26. Plato, *Lysis* 216d; idem, *Timaeus* 87c, 53b.

27. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1003b 22-23; 1054a 13-19. All citations of Aristotle correspond to the marginalia indices in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random, 1941).

28. *Enneads* 5.8.9, 6.6.18, 6.7.31-32. All references to Plotinus's *Enneads* correspond to the marginalia indices of *Plotinos: Complete Works*, ed. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Grantwood, N.J.: Comparative Literature Press, 1918).

29. Aquinas draws heavily upon *The City of God* as a primary source for the composition of his *Summa Theologiae*. See especially Questions 24-29 of the *Prima Secundae* in the *Summa Theologiae*.

30. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* 11.4.2:...mundus ipse ordinatissima sua mutabilitate et mobilitate et uisibilium omnium pulcherrima specie quodam modo tacitus et factum se esse et non nisi a Deo ineffabiliter atque inuisibiliter magno et ineffabiliter atque inuisibiliter pulchro fieri se potuisse proclamat.

31. Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 4.10, 7. All citations of the Pseudo-Dionysius correspond to marginalia indices of *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

32. Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 4.6.

33. In the *Symposium* 212a, as Socrates retells his famous conversation with Diotima, he says that "it is only when he discerns beauty itself through what makes it visible that a man will be quickened with the true, and not the seeming, virtue—for it is virtue's self that quickens him, not virtue's semblance." See *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Hamilton and Cairns, trans. Cooper et al., p. 563. Elsewhere Socrates lays down the premise that not just some, but many things, appear ugly to the senses. Cf. Plato, *Greater Hippias* 286a ff.

34. Cf. Bonaventure, *In sententiis* 2 34.2.6; and idem, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* 2.10.

35. Alexander of Hales and John of La Rochelle, *Summa Fratris Alexandri* 1.1.2.

36. Aquinas, *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus* 4.5; *ST* 1 q. 5 a. 4 ad 1, 1-2ae q. 27 a. 1 ad 3.

37. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 1.1.

38. Jordan, "Evidence of the Transcendentals," p. 395. Cf. Armaund Mauer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983), pp. 8-13.

39. For similar arguments, see Lawrence Dewan, "St. Thomas and the Divine Names," *Science et Esprit* 32 (1980), 19-33; Luis Clavell, "La Belleza en el comentario tomista al *De divinis nominibus*," *Anuario filosófico* 17 (1984), 93-99.

40. Cf. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. Scanlan, pp. 30-32.

41. *ST* 1 q. 5 a. 4 ad 1; 2-2ae q. 27 a. 1 ad 3. See Eco, *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Bredin, pp. 1-19.

42. Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 1.6/596B, 2.1/637B, 2.7/645A.

43. It is more common for authors to move from sensible beauty to supersensible beauty. This is the method adopted by Armand Mauer, for example, in *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983). Raymond Spiazzi, "Toward a Theology of Beauty," *The Thomist* 17 (1954), 351, also represents this approach when he writes of the metaphysician that "from *beings* he ascends to *being*, and returns to the former...He can, then, start from beauty and return to beauty; and return in a circular movement from one form of knowledge and enjoyment to another."

44. In this regard, sacred scripture suffices for Aquinas in establishing the predication of beauty to God. Aquinas, *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus* 4.5, refers to passages from the Canticle of Canticles, Psalm 95, and the First Letter of John.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*: "Deus semper est pulcher secundum idem et eodem modo et sic excluditur alteratio pulchritudinis...non est in eo generatio aut corruptio pulchritudinis, neque iterum augmentum vel diminutio eius, sicut in rebus corporalibus apparet." [God is always beautiful in one and the same way and thus any alteration of beauty is excluded from him...there is in him no generation or corruption of beauty, neither is there any increase or decrease in his beauty, as there appears to be in corporeal things.]

48. *Ibid.*

49. Rosa Padellaro de Angelis, *L'influenza de Dionigi l'Areopagita sul pensiero medioevale* (Rome: ELIA, 1975). For a bibliography of Dionysius's influence on Aquinas and on mediaeval philosophy in general, see Kevin F. Doherty, S.J., "Toward a Bibliography of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: 1900-1955," *The Modern Schoolman* 33 (1956), 257-68; and idem, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: 1955-1960," *The Modern Schoolman* 40 (1962/63), 55-9.

50. Aquinas, *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus* c. 4 lect. 22. Cf. *ST* 1.5.4 ad 1, 1-2ae 27.1 ad 3, 2-2ae 145.2 ad 1.

51. Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), pp. 122-24.

52. *ST* 1 q. 5 a. 1c ad 1, 1 q. 5 art. 3c ad 1, 1 q. 5 a. 5, 1 q. 6 a. 1c, 1 q. 6 a. 2 ad 2, 1 q. 16 a. 3.4c, 1 q. 19 a. 9c, 1 q. 48 a. 1c, 1-2ae q. 22 a. 1c. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.24 n. 6; idem, *De Malo* q. 1 a. 1 sed contra; idem, *Sententia Metaphysicae* 12.1.7 n. 4. See also Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (New York: Brill, 1992), pp. 85-89.

53. *ST* 1 q. 5 a. 4, 1 q. 65 a. 2, 1 q. 82 a. 4, 1-2ae q. 1 a. 4, 2-2ae q. 23 a. 7, 2-2ae q. 141 a. 6; Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis* 2 d. 1 q. 2 a. 2 s.c. 2, 2 d. 15 q. 3 a. 3 s.c. 1, 3 d. 27 q. 2 a. 4 q. 3; idem, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3 c. 20 n. 1, 3 c. 109 n. 6; and idem, *De Veritate* q. 3 a. 3 ad 9, q. 21 a. 6 arg. 1.

54. *ST* 1 q. 5 a. 4 ad 1, 1-2ae q. 27 a. 1 ad 3.