

THE METAPHYSICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE UGLY

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The subject of this paper does not call for an exploration of the constituents of any particular beautiful object, whether in any of the fine arts or in nature itself. The topic rather calls for an analysis of the beautiful as to its metaphysical constituents. At the level of being is to be sought the answer to the question: What constitutes a beautiful thing? And at the metaphysical level also we are to deal with the ugly.

The telling of what a thing must be if it be beautiful is not quite the same as saying that every thing is beautiful. To speak of the metaphysical analysis of the beautiful is not by that very expression to call beauty a transcendental. Indeed, to correlate the beautiful and the ugly in the same topic might appear to rule out beauty as a transcendental. If every thing is beautiful, how can anything be ugly? And yet are we to take the position that every judgment as to the presence of ugliness is merely a false judgment? The question of beauty as a transcendental and the analysis of ugliness are, then, quite correlated topics. The resolution of the apparent conflict will be developed after an appraisal of the meaning of the beautiful.

Any explanation of the beautiful can be classified under one of three general headings: 1st, purely relative; 2nd, purely ob-

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jective; 3rd, objective-relative. This latter heading subsumes a variety of approaches.

THE PURELY RELATIVE

The view which makes beauty purely relative is abhorrent to any philosophical system grounded in the stability of being, and the objective character of truth.¹ Even though St. Thomas defines the beautiful as "that the apprehension of which pleases,"² he is not for a moment subscribing to a pure relativism in beauty, any more than his definition of good subscribes to a purely relative system of values. The task of philosophy is to judge what the beautiful is and has, in order to produce the effect of pleasing, rather than succumb to a criterion which permits the nature of the beautiful to be determined by the subjective affection of a viewer.

THE PURELY OBJECTIVE

The purely objective view of beauty, so pronounced in the Gracian tradition,³ appears not to provide for needed flexibility of form. It demands overly rigid and narrow norms. And it does not in its formality involve any intrinsic relational character toward the viewer.

THE OBJECTIVE-RELATIVE

The Thomistic conception of the beautiful attempts to harmonize the extremes of complete subjectivity and absolute objectivity by a moderate position of objective with proper relational emphasis both intrinsic and extrinsic. However, some

¹ For a statement of these positions, cf. Leonard Callahan, *A Theory of Esthetic*, (Washington, D.C.; The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), second printing, Chapter Two.

² *Sum. Theo.* I-II, q. 27, art. 1, ad 3.

³ Cf. L. Callahan, *op. cit.*, Chapter Two.

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expressions of the moderate position miss the note of balance and make use of terminology which would identify the beautiful with the very correspondence itself between object and subject.⁴ This tends to make beauty merely a relation.

Again, some expressions of the objective-relative character of the beautiful either overemphasize the manner in which the relation is realized,⁵ or fail to give proper scope to the faculties involved in the relational character.⁶

The position taken in this paper is that, the beautiful is, and is so according to St. Thomas, a transcendental, convertible with being, objective in its constituents with a relational character based upon and flowing from its objective, intrinsic nature. The relational character consists in the proportion between the objective nature and the faculties of an intelligent being. A further note of the relative is to be found rooted in the analogical character of the beautiful. The norms of the beautiful are analogously realized proportionate to the analogate.

According to St. Thomas' well-known passage, "For beauty three things are required: this first is integrity, or perfection; (second) due proportion, or harmony; and the third is splendor."⁷ Our task is to analyze these requirements and pass judgment on their role as constituents of the beautiful.

INTEGRITY

In listing integrity as a requirement of beauty, St. Thomas adds "those things which are impaired are by that very fact

⁴ M. de Wulf, *Medieval Philosophy*, (Harvard, 1922), c.XVII: "Beauty does not belong exclusively to things, as the Greeks thought; nor to the subject alone who reacts and enjoys, as some contemporary philosophers maintain. But it is as it were midway between the object and the subject, and consists in a correspondence between the two."

⁵ Cf. L. Callahan, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁶ J. Gretd, *Elements Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae* (Barcelona: Herder 1951), vol. 2, pp. 20-31.

⁷ *Sum. Theo.*, I, q. 39, art. 8.

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ugly."⁸ The correlation between integrity and beauty is fundamental in the order of being. Before a thing can be beautiful, it must by a priority of nature simply be. At the outset there is the radical dichotomy of being versus nothing. But since being as it exists in the nature of things is always some definite being, the question of integrity looks to the fullness of all that such a definite kind of being requires. If anything of what is required be lacking, a privation is present. To the degree of privation is a corresponding degree of unintelligibility. And as intelligibility is removed so to that degree is beauty removed. The supreme significance of this statement will be developed further in this paper.

In conjunction with the requirements of integrity and definite kind of being, the question arises: what determines the kind? And the answer, applicable both to nature and art, is that the scope of determination is as all-embracing as the possibles. The Divine Infinite Essence as objective basis for the possibles is the formal-eminent basis for every kind of beauty as for every being. There is at work here a teleology bound up with the order of formal causality.⁹ The ultimate end of all finite beauty is to manifest, even if in fragments, the infinite beauty of God. But the ways to that common goal are manifold. Just as this is not the best possible world, neither has every possible art form of the beautiful been realized.

The variety of beautiful objects and art forms involves finality not only with reference to a supreme ultimate end, but also in relation to the individual object itself. The *finis operis* set by nature or the artist governs the order of parts whose unity is preserved through the form, whether substantial or accidental.

DUE PROPORTION

The proper blend of variety and unity for beauty, a note

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

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affirmed by nearly all otherwise divergent philosophies,¹⁰ is expressed by St. Thomas's second requirement: due proportion. The term 'due' is significant. It again stresses the teleological character within beauty and admits of great flexibility in achieving the beautiful. It is not proportion rigidly narrow, but proper to the goal to be achieved, suited to the facet of reality the artist wishes to express. Nor does this flexibility rule out basic objectivity. The 'due' of the formula stresses the latitude of forms and conceptions. The 'proportion' as co-equal part of the formula requires intrinsic coordination, a demand arising from the more basic requirement of integrity. The interdependence of these two conditions is expressed by Jacques Maritain in *Art and Scholasticism*. He writes:

What the ancients said about the beautiful ought to be taken in the most formal sense so as to avoid materializing their thought into any over-narrow specification. There is not only one way, but a thousand and ten thousand ways in which the notion of integrity, or perfection, or achievement can be realized. The absence of head or arm is a lack of integrity very noticeable in a woman, and slightly noticeable in a statue, no matter how disappointed N. Ravaisson may have been at not being able to complete the Venus de Milo. The least sketch of da Vinci, let alone of Rodin, is more final than the most finished of Bouguereau. And if a Futurist thinks fit to give only one eye, or a quarter of an eye, to the lady whom he is portraying, no one denies his right to do so, one only asks—that is the whole crux—that this quarter-eye be all the eye needed by the said lady 'in the given case.'¹¹

SPLENDOR

The third requirement of beauty is clarity or splendor, which is, as Maritain states, "according to all the ancients the

¹⁰ Cf. L. Callahan, *op. cit.*, Chap. Five, p. 61.

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Scribners, 1947), pp. 39-80.

essential character of beauty."¹² Now, we can find the essence of a thing through its operations; we can find out what it is from what it does. We can also come to know what a thing is from its purpose, its final cause. Both of these approaches applied to any admittedly beautiful thing qua beautiful show a correlation between beauty and a beholder to whom beauty gives joy in the beholding. The joy is from knowledge. The knowledge is of the beautiful thing. Hence there is involved a proportion of knowability to the knower. And dominant in this knowability is clarity, splendor. Knowable to the degree of its act, the beautiful through its form,¹³ organizes its matter and parts with due proportion, and it unifies itself in the fullness of its integrity. From such proportioned integrity shines a light of splendor, of intelligibility in the contemplation of which the mind is delighted.¹⁴

CONTEMPLATION AND DELIGHT

The contemplation and delight effected by the beautiful object are interpreted variously by Thomistic scholars. It is at this point that we find a variety of views under the general heading of objective-relative as to the nature of the beautiful.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 23, footnote 1: "By brilliance of form must be understood an ontological splendor which happens to be revealed to our minds, not a conceptual clarity. There must be no misunderstanding here: the words clarity, intelligibility and light, used to characterize the part played by form in the heart of things, do not necessarily indicate something clear and intelligible to us, but rather something, which although clear and luminous in itself, intelligible in itself, often remains obscure to our eyes either because of the matter in which the form is buried or because of the transcendence of the form itself in the things of the spirit."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20: "If beauty delights the mind, it is because beauty is essentially a certain excellence or perfection in the proportion of things to the mind. Hence the three conditions assigned to it by St. Thomas: integrity, because the mind likes being; proportion, because the mind likes order and likes unity; lastly and above all, brightness and clarity, because the mind likes light and intelligibility."

Moreover, this twofold product of contemplation and delight not only raises the questions of the object's relation to the faculties of intellect and will, but also touches upon the comparison of the beautiful with both the true and the good. On this topic there are some key passages of St. Thomas.

In the *Summa Theologica*, he says:

Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally, for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and this is why goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly related to appetite (goodness being what all things desire), and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to a cognitive power, for those things are said to be beautiful which please when seen. Now, since knowledge is by assimilation, and likeness relates to form, beauty belongs to the nature of a formal cause.¹⁵

And again,

The beautiful adds to the notion of the good a certain relation to a cognitive power, so that while the good is that which simply satisfies (completet) the appetite, the beautiful is that which pleases (placet) by the very contemplation of it.¹⁶

It is St. Thomas' teaching that "beauty relates to a cognitive power."¹⁷ But beauty is not simply the same as the true which also relates to a cognitive power. Nor is beauty the same simply as the good. The good is that which simply satisfies the appetite. The beautiful is that which gives satisfaction through its contemplation. From these factors we can formulate the following distinctions among the true, the good, and the beautiful.

1. Both the true and the beautiful are related to cognitive powers. The good is not.

¹⁵ *Sum. Theo.* I, q. 5, art. 4, ad 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 27, art. 1, ad 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, q. 5, art. 4, ad 1.

2. The beautiful is also related to an appetitive power, as is the good. But the reason of relation differs. The good satisfies by being possessed; the beautiful satisfies or pleases by being contemplated.
3. The true refers only to a cognitive power; the good only to an appetitive power; the beautiful to both powers.
4. The relative aspect of the beautiful involves two factors—cognition and complacency (*apprehensio et placet*), the simultaneous and cooperative action of the cognitive and appetitive faculties.¹⁸

The statement of point four is taken from Father Leonard Callahan's *A Theory of Esthetic*, according to the principles of St. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁹ While agreeing with this position as here expressed, I disagree with Father Callahan's emphasis on the actual psychological experience as though it, and not the object, were constitutive of the beautiful. Permit me to quote from his work as expressive of his view:

It is evident, therefore, that as long as we content ourselves with a survey of the ontological foundation of the good and the beautiful, we shall not arrive at a satisfactory solution of their difference. It is in the subjective and psychological elements of these concepts that we must seek the answer to this difficulty. This may be evidenced in another manner. Eliminate from the notions of beauty and goodness whatever they contain of the subjective. We define the good as being which satisfies the natural inclination of a creature. . . . Do away with this tendency of a subject towards being, and it

¹⁸ Another approach is to consider the cognitive power in its role of natural appetite and its gratification in the contemplation of beauty. Subsequent to this follows the love of will, as elicited appetite. Such a view relies on a theory of intellectual intuition, which in some way is supposed to overcome the limitation of abstraction of individuality, and give to the mind the fullness of the material individual. The key question in this view must be: how can such intuition take place?

¹⁹ L. Callahan, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

remains a simple reality. So also with the beautiful, which is being in the contemplation of which we take delight. . . . Suppress the subjective element and there is left but the concept of a reality.²⁰

Father Callahan compares the good with the beautiful to show the subjective element which must be present for both. But in his view, it seems to me, there is too much emphasis on the "tendency of a subject towards the being." Rather, it ought to be an emphasis on the tendency of the being towards the subject. Only in this way is the objective and teleological character of the beautiful fully safeguarded.

Since goodness is the norm of comparison in this point under discussion, consider this view of St. Thomas. He says:

The judgment of the goodness of anything does not depend upon its reference to any particular thing, but rather upon what it is in itself, and on its reference to the whole universe, wherein every part has its own perfectly ordered place.²¹

I am far from denying that both the good and the beautiful have reference to a subject, but I particularly want to stress the objective character which is expressed in St. Thomas' words, namely, "(it) depends upon . . . what it is in itself." The relational aspect is rooted in the objective and flows from the thing to the subject.

This can be shown by again comparing the good and the beautiful. The reason for a being's goodness is not in a subject's tendency towards the being. Rather, a being is a good because the being has perfection and this perfection is perfective of others. A being is good because out of its own richness of perfection it can complete, can bring to further perfection, other beings. Hence, the relative flows from the absolute. And by reason of such richness, such fullness of being the mind can

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²¹ *Sum. Theo.*, I, q. 47, art. 2, ad 1.

conceptually distinguish the various facets of the one jewel—which is being.

THE BEAUTIFUL AS A TRANSCENDENTAL

It is because of the fundamental identity of the true, the good, and the beautiful with being, as St. Thomas teaches,²² that the beautiful is a transcendental, and hence convertible with being. This view is not accepted by Cardinal Mercier²³ who says that if this were the case, being as such would be beautiful. But the reason which he offers fails to distinguish sufficiently among the transcendentals. It fails to allow for the conceptual differences based upon the rich fullness of being and applicable to beauty. Nor does such a view allow for the diversified character of the beautiful, which, like being, as Maritain notes, is “scattered everywhere and everywhere various. Like being and the other transcendentals, it is essentially analogous, that is to say it is predicated for divers reasons, *sub diversa ratione*, of the divers 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.”²⁴

Moreover, “the property of causing joy, of giving pleasure,” implicit in the idea of beautiful in itself, as Maritain also teaches,²⁵ “transcendental and analogical, and not to be referred, without making great nonsense of it, to pleasure of the senses alone or the ‘enjoyable good’ considered as opposed to the other kinds of good. . . . It is because the pleasure implied by the beautiful is transcendental and analogous, that the diversity of kinds of such pleasure and the forms of beauty in no way prevents the objectivity of such beauty. Such diversity springs from the metaphysical analogy, not from a psychological ‘relativity’ in the modern meaning of the word.”

²² *Ibid.*, q. 5, art. 4, ad 1, *De Veritate*, I, 1.

²³ D. Mercier, *Meta. Gen.*, p. 595; quoted by Callahan, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

²⁴ *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133, footnote 63b.

THE UGLY

In view of beauty's transcendental and analogous character, we may ask: Can any object be ugly? There is a view which seems to hold that because beauty is a transcendental and coterminous with being, every judgment as to ugliness is a false judgment. But we may test this reasoning by asking the question: Is every judgment as to *evil* a false judgment? The good is admittedly a transcendental. *Omne ens est bonum*. And yet we may truly say, ‘this is evil,’ or ‘that is evil.’ The answer to the question of the beautiful versus the ugly is basically the same as the solution of the good versus evil problem. Just as the essence of evil is that it is the privation of good, as St. Thomas teaches,²⁶ so also the essence of the ugly is that it is the privation of the beautiful. “. . . Those things which are impaired are by that very fact ugly,” says St. Thomas.²⁷ Taking our lead from the analysis of evil, we can say that the ugly is not merely of the conceptual order—a product of a false judgment; nor is it a positive reality. But it is a privation of something positive. And for this privation the cause, as with evil, is a deficient cause, i.e., a finite defectible cause. Being as being is beautiful. Kind of being is beautiful to the degree it fulfills the three requirements as *kind*. A privation either of integrity, or due proportion, and hence a consequent lessening of intelligibility or splendor constitutes ugliness. As there are degrees of privation of such perfection, so there are degrees of ugliness.

In the realm of art—that branch which, in Pope Pius XII's words,²⁸ is intended as interpretation of the object, in contradistinction to the expression of the subject—there can be at times what I would call beauty *secundum quid*, rather than beauty *simpliciter*. St. Thomas, referring to St. Augustine's

²⁶ *Sum. Theo.* I, q. 14, art. 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, q. 39, art. 8.

²⁸ Pope Pius XII, *The Function of Art*, An address, given April 8, 1952, (NCC publications, Washington, D.C.)

teaching in the *De Trinitate* (VI, 10), says that "an image is said to be beautiful if it perfectly represents even an ugly thing."²⁹ In such an art form the creative work of representation must be distinguished from the content represented. The creative work as representation may embody the requirements of the beautiful, but the content, to the degree it is faithfully depicted as lacking in integrity, or harmony, will remain ugly. Perhaps many judgments concerning some contemporary art forms fail to distinguish the representation for the thing represented.

AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

However, if there is an objectivity to the ugly—inasmuch as it must be a privation within the order of being—, this does not guarantee that all judgments concerning the ugly will be true. In appraising any object as to its beauty or lack of beauty, a person must contend with several factors. The norm of aesthetic judgment, the criterion to be employed, is not entirely free, nor should it be, from the level of development of a person's culture—culture in its basic meaning of ordered development of the specifically human powers of soul. If the beautiful is related to the intellect and will, the aesthetic experience and the judgment of beauty in a particular case cannot be wholly dissociated from the level of attainment of the individual's intellectual and volitional nature. What Maritain has said of the artist, in *Art and Scholasticism*,³⁰ concerning the virtue of art and the rectitude of the appetitive faculty, applies with suitable adaptation to the beholder of the beautiful.

²⁹ *Sum. Theo.*, I, q. 29, art. 8.

³⁰ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

In conjunction with this topic of personal influences in an aesthetic judgment, I should like to present, with a view to discussion, a few considerations on the required proportion between cause and effect in any aesthetic experience, with which an aesthetic judgment is usually associated. We have all experienced in the fact of objects decidedly lacking in integrity or due proportion and aesthetic joy which seems out of all proportion to the object of our joy. In such instances, is the experience purely subjective? If there be real objectivity to beauty, and a reality to ugliness beyond the control of the viewer, where is the ontological proportion between the less-than-beautiful thing and the aesthetic experience of joy at its beholding? Here we have more than a mere mistake of judgment. Here is present a rich psychological experience of joy, equal to, and at times surpassing, that which is had in the presence of genuinely objective beauty. The answer may well be in distinguishing the order of objectivity, and further distinguishing the active and passive phases of aesthetic experience.

By the objective is meant reality as it is, a thing in its own nature, independent of the knower's appraisal of it. Frequently the question is equated with extra-mental, with the order of things outside the mind. But there is nothing to prevent a proper application of objective to the internal order, the psychological order which although occurring within the subject nevertheless retains its own order of reality as it is, its own nature, and hence its own objectivity.

Within this internal but objective order is to be found the order of creativeness, an order which is proper to the artist who gives his creation externalization in words or sound or stone. But artistry is not exclusively the prerogative of the man or woman who can externalize his or her internal creation. For to all men and women in varying degrees can be applied this observation of G. K. Chesterton: "In man there

is something of the divine; and the things that enter his world pass through a second creation."³¹ Just as the painter often portrays lines of character in a face which in the real seem characterless, or the poet sights the spiritual significance in a world of frustrated physical ugliness, so each man in the measure that he is a man—in the measure of the culture of his humanity—is capable of mending the broken arc of the world about him. In each man is the spark of creativeness."³² And as he gazes upon his world which is often pock-marked with ugliness, incomplete, unharmonious, hardly aglow with even a flicker of splendor—in such a world of mixed good and evil, beauty and ugliness—man tends to reach out and, Cinderella-wise, restore, refashion and complete that which in the extra-mental order is lacking in beauty. But this restoration, this second creation, is within the subject and it may never be externalized. But is it thereby lacking in objectivity? Is there no ontological reality to the psychological order?

What is to be said of the difference between a stranger's view and the home-coming of one who belongs—who, through the alchemy of memory, gives to every broken fence a wholeness, and to every dingy lamp a golden glow? The object viewed by both is the same. Things do not change intrinsically by being known. But there are two decidedly different aesthetic experiences in reference to the same objects.

It seems to me that the elements are: 1st, an object somewhat devoid of beauty; 2nd, a creativeness in the internal but objective order; and 3rd, an aesthetic experience occasioned by the object but caused by the creative activity of the beholder. This aesthetic experience, while possessing its own act, is nevertheless in comparison with the creativeness more of the passive order.

³¹ G. K. Chesterton, *A Handful of Authors*, (Sheed & Ward, New York 1953).

³² J. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, (New York: Meridian Books, p. 8ff., in re: emotion in the experience of the beautiful; p. 20, creative subjectivity of man himself.

The aesthetic experience in such a case is thus not produced by a thing which is ontologically lacking such productivity. Rather, the cause of the experience is within the psychological order. This is not the same as saying that the psychological constitutes the beauty of an extra-mental object. Rather, it is the creative activity which as a reality has an objectivity, an ontological worth. Out of the creativeness is produced something of beauty—however transient and fragile—and it is this thing of beauty which produces the aesthetic experience. The chronology may be lost to consciousness, but the metaphysical requirements seem to demand a priority of nature such as I have described.

Thus, while there is an extra-mental objectivity to the beautiful whose threefold requirements of integrity, due proportion, and splendor are transcendently and analogously realized, there is also to be found an objectivity within the creative order of man. As man's faculties are developed in response to the beautiful in beholding of which he experiences complacency and delight, there is also in man a reaching beyond the limits of the fragment of beauty—a thrust toward infinity. Often without realizing it, man is striving to fill up what is lacking in the world about him. He would endow all things with their fullness of integrity and proper proportion so as to let their original splendor shine forth. Man is reaching for the ideal. But this, in truth, is to reach for the Real, the Uncreated Beauty in whose contemplation man would find a share in infinite joy and peace.