

Article

On Surprising Beauty. Aquinas's Gift to Aesthetics

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Abstract: The article addresses the basic elements of Thomas Aquinas's thought on beauty by analyzing some selected texts and points out some of the debates that still exist regarding the interpretation of Thomas Aquinas's position on various issues, such as the question of the transcendental of the beautiful. The fundamental aim is to recover some of Aquinas's basic intuitions for contemporary aesthetics, which no longer makes use of many of the intellectual categories that were in common use in medieval philosophy, and to show how some of Thomas Aquinas's fundamental ideas are closer to the aesthetic thought of some fundamental contemporary authors than the modern categories with which aesthetics was forged. This article is also intended to show how the modern conception of the beautiful has meant an ontological impoverishment with respect to the medieval thought.

Keywords: Aquinas; beauty; transcendentals

1. Introduction

In Thomas Aquinas's thought there are many aesthetic topics developed within the framework of a general theological interest (Castro 2005, 2006, 2010). Among them there is the question of beauty, which had not yet taken on the form and characteristics that it would acquire within the aesthetic framework defined in the 18th century. Beauty, for Aquinas, is basically a metaphysical and/or theological concept arising from the thesis that there are characteristics of the *res* that are conditions which are, if not sufficient, at least necessary in order to legitimately determine that an entity is beautiful. We can speak of beauty because there is beauty in reality, outside our understanding (García de Paredes 1911a). At the time Aquinas was writing, Western thought had not yet hit on the idea of our being almost certainly trapped in a kind of metaphysical deception, one that would cause us to suspect that certain properties of the real, like beauty, are not really real. As a result, medieval thinkers still clung to the notion that when we speak of the reality of beauty, it is necessary to *see* what we are talking about, to *understand* how it is explained and what constitutes it. In no case does the denial of the existence of the evident enter as an argument of discourse; or, to paraphrase Aquinas's fourth way (Fernández de Viana 1962), it is evident that there are entities and that in all of them there is a certain degree of beauty. It makes no sense then to pose the question of beauty (*utrum pulchrum sit*) in the terms in which the 18th century theorists of taste would later do. These latter will answer *videtur quod non* by reducing beauty to something that is only real in the eye of the beholder. This implies a "demetaphysification" of the concept of beauty, a process that goes hand in hand with the general critique of metaphysics as a science and a general change, not only in our way of accessing the real, but also in our way of being in the world.

The medieval tradition of the beautiful, however, is free of this implication as it is a synthesis of two main trends: the Pythagorean–Platonic, mediated by Augustine and Boethius, in which mathematical proportion or harmony is a necessary condition of beauty, and the Neoplatonic tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius, in which the characteristic of beauty is above all *claritas*. This synthesis is enormously fruitful, because it solves a problem that we find in previous traditions marked exclusively by the reduction of the beautiful to the mathematical: any data of mathematical proportions or harmonies might be taken as a necessary condition of the beautiful, but never as a sufficient one. It is necessary



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to introduce the other element, the *claritas*, which provides the distinctive element and expands the symbolic potential of the beauty. Thomas Aquinas elaborates this idea as he explores what today we would call necessary and sufficient conditions of the beautiful, which have to do with the presence of “the form on the proportioned and determined parts of the matter” (García de Paredes 1911b, p. 8).

2. The Reality of Beauty

In his commentary on *De divinis nominibus* (*In De div. nom.*, c. IV, lect. 5) and in various passages in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas points out that *claritas et consonantia* (*debita proportio*) are the characteristics of beauty; elsewhere in the *Summa* he adds *integritas sive perfectio* (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 39, a. 8)¹. The former are the ones referred to by the Pseudo-Dionysius, but the addition of *integritas* to the list, related to *perfectio*, which, in turn, is related to the good, emphasizes the connection between beauty and the good. These are the elements that allow us to elaborate what some authors (Kovach, Aumann, Maritain, Maurer, etc.) have called the “objective definition” of beauty (Jaroszynski 1988), which involves integrating in one way or another the references of these terms: integrity or perfection, consonance, appropriateness, proportion, symmetry, harmony, rhythm, clarity of form, etc. All these expressions refer to certain conformations, relations or properties of the real—real themselves as well as and independently of particular preferences—which would constitute what contemporary philosophers might call the “subvenient basis” of beauty; that is, elements which are necessary to speak of beauty, although they cannot be considered sufficient. Later philosophers, like Hume, will consider that all these concepts related to “order” are not “objective” data but something that our understanding impresses on reality, manifestations of certain purely mental patterns, some cognitive preferences that give rise to constellations created ad hoc that do not correspond to anything real outside the mind. However, for Aquinas, this is not an argument against the reality of beauty. In the Thomistic universe, this way of reasoning errs by confusing the artifices we use to understand reality with reality itself. Instead, reality, as Aquinas demonstrates via multiple metaphysical, theological and other arguments, is essentially ordered.

Each of the three elements that Aquinas integrates into his definition has a fundamental metaphysical importance. *Integritas* supposes that nothing must be missing in a being, that the individual must realize all the possibilities of the species. This implies the need to introduce the metaphysical consideration of the realized ideal as an indispensable “aesthetic” element. Contrary to what Kant will later conclude, this “aesthetic” element carries with it a cognitive element, which contains the notion of what something has to be (an idea that Kant will later be led to develop with his concept of “*pulchritudo adhaerens*”) and, therefore, it must also carry an element of valuation, as *pulchritudo* is not given without *integritas*. To judge something beautiful is to value it as whole and complete, as perfect, as a model of what should be realized in what it actually is. It is thus related to the *perfectio prima*—which, again, consists in the form of every single thing (and arises from the integrity of the parts), by which it has its being—and, at the same time, to the *perfectio secunda*, which has to do with the end or the operation of the entity by which it tends to its end (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 73, a. 1; *Summa Theol.* III, q. 29, a. 2, *De Pot.* q. 1, a. 10, ad 9). This relationship established between *integritas* and *perfectio* underlines the eschatological character of beauty.² *Claritas* will also do this in its own way.

Together with this postulation of what it is for something to be, *pulchritudo* incorporates the entity into the relational space. *Proportio debita* has to do with the ancient Greek *symmetria*, which determines the relation between the parts and the whole and which, in a certain way, presupposes the *perfectio* of *integritas*, as the qualifier *debita* highlights. By itself, *proportio*, as defined by Plotinus and stressed by proto-aesthetes like Burke, cannot be related to beauty. There is also *proportio* in ugliness. The differentiating element is *debita*. *Proportio*, then, is irreducible to the *proportio mathematica*, a notion that has dominated so many theories of beauty past and present (Renz 2012), wherein beauty is identified with a certain geometry, but is better understood as a *proportio metaphysica* marked by a deontic

element: things are beautiful if they are what they ought to be. We do not move from being to ought, but from ought to being in all areas of reality. In a certain way, this element contributes to the deepening of the relationship between the beautiful and the good. This is something we will return to later.

Both characteristics, *proportio* and *perfectio*, are related to form, as also is *claritas*³. Aquinas shows the link between *proportio* and form when he attributes to ugliness the character of *deformity* due to the lack of *debita proportio* (*Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 44, q. 3, a. 1). Likewise, ugliness (*turpido*) is defined as “*malum corporalis formae*” and is opposed to beauty, which occurs when members are well-proportioned (*Super Ethic.* II, 1.7, n. 2). *Perfectio* consists also in the attribution of due form (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 39, a. 8). Finally, the relationship between *claritas* and form is present throughout the *Commentary on De Divinis nominibus*. This is why Kovach can maintain that “the aesthetic role of form [...] is twofold: firstly, form itself is beautiful, and secondly, beauty derives from it” (1961, p. 167).

For the present, I would like to take up the final element which is seemingly both necessary and sufficient in order to speak of beauty: *claritas*. Again, this refers to form as Albertus Magnus proposes; to wit, the essence of the thing shown in its external aspect. Neither Aquinas’s nor Albert’s formalisms are related to what that term will later come to signify; that is, exclusive attention paid to formal elements without reference to any other dimension (content, origin, function, etc.). On the contrary, Aquinas’s formalism is one in which form is understood as a manifestation of essence, not separate from it, which makes Aquinas a phenomenologist *avant la lettre*. Form is the condition of possibility of the beauty of the entity, since “each thing is beautiful according to its own reason, that is, according to its own form” (*singula sunt pulchra secundum propriam rationem, idest secundum propriam formam*) and “each thing is beautiful and good according to its own form” (*unum-quodque sit pulchrum et bonum secundum propriam formam*) (*In De div. nom.*, c. IV, lect. 5). For this reason, form is the way of intelligible and cognitive access to the entity (Forment 1992, p. 69).⁴ in Aquinas’s hylomorphic thought the form makes the matter acquire a new disposition or state, in a way analogous to light making the diaphanous body that receives it acquire the luminous state (*Ipsa igitur participatio vel affectus lucis in diaphano vocatur lumen. Sententia De anima*, lib. 2 l. 14 n. 23)⁵. The linking of *claritas*, *lumen* and *forma* brings out the fact that, in the Thomistic space, what will later be called “the aesthetic” cannot be separated from the ontological or the epistemic. To see the beauty of something and to take pleasure in that very fact does not imply the Kantian retreat to an *hortus conclusus*, a non cognitive realm disinterested from the very conditions surrounding the existence of the entity, but rather the attendance to the manifestation of the entity in its being: *omne quod manifestum est, clarum dicitur* (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 13 q. 1 a. 2 co). The clear is that which manifests itself, that which makes the being and the truth of the being patent.

It does not seem difficult to establish a relationship between that which allows an entity to be cognizable and the idea by which Heidegger recovers the element of truth in the work of art. In the afterword to his *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger links his reflections on truth and being to beauty: “Truth is the unconcealment of beings as beings. Truth is the truth of beings. Beauty does not occur alongside this truth. It appears when truth sets itself into the work. This appearing (as this being of truth in the work and as the work) is beauty. Thus, beauty belongs to the advent of truth. It does not exist merely relative to pleasure, and purely as its object” (Heidegger 2002, p. 52). Here we are not dealing with beauty understood as an aesthetic concept in the Kantian sense, but as *alétheia*, or unconcealment, a term that harkens back to Heraclitus and, according to some authors, also to Thomas Aquinas (Harries 2009, pp. 129–32). For the latter, things are in truth such as they are known by God, for whom all things are transparent: an entity is true because it is opened up and unconcealed to the divine mind. Heidegger cannot appeal to God, so he will resort to the *Lichtung* instead, which in its common sense is the pathway established by foresters to allow their cut trees to be transported out of the forest and, in Heidegger’s technical language, is the clearing that allows the entity to come into presence. Heidegger insists that etymologically this term does not refer to *Licht*, but to

leicht (light, not heavy) and *lichten*, which means to lighten, to open something up, as in the case of clearing a forest of trees for a path. Interestingly, the dictionary of the Brothers Grimm uses Heidegger's etymology but also describes *Licht* as an "opening or cutout in a door to let in daylight" (*öffnung oder ausschnitt in einer thür zum einlassen des tageslichtes*). Although Heidegger strives to limit the etymology to *leicht* in an attempt to obscure the connection between light and the term—hence some authors have translated *Lichtung* as "lightening" (lightness, légèreté)—he also recognizes the relationship between them: "light can stream into the clearing [*Lichtung*], into openness, and allow the brightness play with darkness in it. But light never first creates openness [*Lichtung*]. Rather, light presupposes openness" (Heidegger 1972, p. 65). So, it is not the light that dominates, but the clearing that creates the conditions for the light to be reflected and thus play with the darkness of the hidden. However, there must be a clearing for the light to enter in (such a clearing also exists at night, even if there is no light), making the "presencing of presence itself" possible (Heidegger 1972, p. 68). So, "we must think *aletheia*, unconcealment, as the opening which first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other" (Heidegger 1972, p. 68). Nevertheless, there is no *Lichtung* except to let the light in. This is the unavoidable dialectic.

Thus, according to Heidegger, entities become manifest in the *Lichtung*, and according to Aquinas, by *claritas*, which is evidenced by form shaping matter according to the principles of *integritas* and *consonantia*. This *claritas* opens up the entity to another space which is the source of that light. Pöltner (2002, pp. 64–65) argues that "the radiating splendor in which beauty dwells is the presence of the whole in one. To the extent that the fullness of being is mysteriously present in one and is given in this one, beauty occurs; on the part of the entity, as a super-exceeding gift; on the part of the *anima* as an unforeseen fullness and an assent to all in one". The irruption of the beautiful inchoates a perfection realized, but still to be realized. Furthermore, in this case, we can use the famous eschatological motto of "already but not yet." Plato, like Plotinus, held that the presence of the beautiful in the world is an invasion of the transmundane in the space of everyday life (Verdú 2019). The same is true for Aquinas. In order for this *pulchrum* to remain and actualize every potential entity according to its *claritas*, it is also necessary to make for it a "clearing" in the entities in which it can shine. The beautiful, then, becomes a task that is prolonged after its original appearance.

Lichtung and *claritas* are, each in its own way, the condition of possibility of the manifestation of the entity, of *aletheia*. In the Heideggerian case we experience something as beautiful when we experience it as illuminated by the "light of its being-work"; that is, when we experience it as something made, created. The artist is the one who works to make possible that clearing in which the entity can shine; hence, "the distance between Thomas Aquinas is not as great as might at first appear" (Harries 2009, p. 189), even though the God of Aquinas, beautiful insofar as He is the Cause of the consonance and clarity of all things (*Summa Theol.* II-II, q. 145, a. 2)—in God, unlike in creatures, the terms beautiful and beauty coincide (*In De div. Nom.*, c. IV, lect. 5)—will be replaced by Heidegger with the poetic mystery of Hölderlin.

3. Beauty Is Seen

Aquinas famously asserted that beauty is grasped through *visio*, for the beautiful is what pleases us when we contemplate it (*pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*) (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 5, a. 4 ad 1). For Aquinas *visio* is a term that applies *ad omnem cognitionem aliorum sensuum . . . et ulterius ad cognitionem intellectus* (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 67, a. 1). The term *visio* is not limited to sight, though this is its primary meaning, but also refers to intellectual, spiritual, supernatural⁶, etc., vision or apprehension. *Visio* shares with hearing this association with beauty, insofar as both senses have a cognitive element, and so we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds, but not of beautiful tastes and smells. The other three senses do not seem to be related to beauty in Aquinas's thought (*Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3). In a passage of the *Summa*, Aquinas orders the senses according to

their cognitive complexity in this way: sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 78, a. 3)⁷. Of these, sight is the most spiritual, the most perfect and the most universal.

It follows that the pleasure associated with the beautiful has a spiritual nature, not accompanied by bodily alteration (*Summa Theol.* I–II, q. 31, a. 5) (Castro 2005), and can be said to be rational, for when one derives pleasure from contemplation or reasoning, this “does not hinder the act of reason, but helps it, because we are more attentive in doing that which gives us pleasure, and attention fosters activity” (*Summa Theol.* I–II, q. 33, a. 3). Thus, by elevating what will later be called “aesthetic pleasure” to the order of knowledge, Aquinas confronts the materialists who confuse the pleasure of the beautiful with the sensation of a sweet on the palate, a common distinction made by the proto-aesthetes of the 18th century in what has been called “the century of taste.” The Thomistic emphasis on the relation of the beautiful to knowledge is related to his development of the Aristotelian idea that sensibility is already in itself certain knowledge. He also furthers the thesis that sensibility is pleased with well-proportioned forms, since they are adequate to its own structure (*in debita proportione*). Beauty, then, presupposes a certain resemblance between sense and form. This association, obviously without reference to this Aristotelian–Thomistic framework, will be a key element in the 18th century project of establishing a novel relationship between two concepts that traditionally had been treated independently: the beautiful and the sublime. This pairing will limit the proper space of each of the concepts according to the agreement or disagreement between the faculties and that which the faculties perceive. This will give rise to that moderate pleasure typical of the beautiful, in which the faculties seem to be adequate to their object (Kant 1987, § 23), as opposed to the overwhelming overexposure of these to what will be considered the sublime. With this change, any revelatory capacity of the suprasensible is taken away from the beautiful and is completely entrusted to the sublime. The beautiful is reduced to what Heidegger will qualify as “the relaxing, what is restful and thus intended for enjoyment.” In doing so a centuries-old tradition dating back to Plato is abandoned, and the art governed by this imperative will be relegated to “the domain of the pastry chef” (Heidegger 2000, p. 140).

As a result, a sort of anti-skeptical argument, based not on what can be known or not but on the adaptation of our faculties to what they taste, is unexpectedly introduced in modern philosophy. The scandal of Kantian skepticism—the impossibility of proving the existence of the external world—is somehow resolved from the aesthetic perspective. Notably, Kant does not go down this road, precisely because he does not assign any cognitive value to the aesthetic realm. However, the argument that seeks to establish the derivation of aesthetic pleasure from the adaptation of the faculties to that which they taste (which seems to imply existence of what is tasted) involves a space in which one cannot err; that is, if one is to accept that the judgment of taste is produced in the way that Kant supposes. The claim to universality of this judgment is based on the agreement of the faculties supposed in all human beings. This implies leaving the solipsistic space because the state of the spirit refers somehow to that which causes it.

In this, Thomistic thought is clearer and more direct. Beauty has a cognitive character because of its relation to form and because it is connected to sight. Umberto Eco notes that for Aquinas the *visio aesthetica* is a complex act of judgment that involves composition and division, the affirmation of a relationship between parts and whole, the relationship between matter and form, the awareness of ends and so on. Thus, the pleasure derived from the contemplation of beautiful things does not come from a purely intuitive process characterized by a lack of effort, but from a judgment that is settled (Eco 2002, p. 82): we feel the joy of the cognitive power that is exercised without obstacles and the joy of desire that is stilled in the act of that cognitive power. What Kantian aesthetics postulates (the existence of the external world) is a datum of Thomistic thought, precisely because in his theory of knowledge the adequacy between the knowing and the known is total (*Summa Theol.* I, qq. 84–88). This is because the sensible and intelligible species are the representational substitute of the object that bridges the local distance between the knower and the external object, as well as the ontological distance between the immaterial

understanding and the material object. There is no room to question either our faculties as such or the intentional content of those faculties, since the cognitive act implies that the forms of things are intentionally present in the mind of the one who knows and, therefore, of the one who likes. In Thomistic thought, the space of beauty belongs to this same cognitive process and not exclusively to a space of fruition. The *placet* perfects the *visa* but is not independent from it. Thus, in the *gustatio pulchritudinis*—which is not an aesthetic experience in the modern sense—one is certain that, just as one knows what is known, one likes what is liked. It is the same world that is intentionally present in the mind of the one who knows or likes and that which is being known or liked. This places the human being within the world of which the person is a part, as contemporary hermeneutics—especially the Heideggerian idea of being-in-the-world—has emphasized so much.

It is also Thomistic doctrine that, unlike animals, humans can enjoy the beauty of pure forms for their own sake (*solus homo delectatur in ipsa pulchritudine sensibilibus secundum seipsam*) (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 91, a. 3 ad 3) without paying attention to the biological consequences (provision, survival) that may derive from such contemplation. All that is related to beauty, then, is related to pure contemplation: *pulchrum autem dicitur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet* (*Summa Theol.* I–II, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3). In the Aristotelian tradition contemplation refers to a purely receptive approach to reality, disinterested and independent of all the practical aims of active life (*Summa Theol.* II–II, q. 182, a. 1). It is pursued for its own sake, without any other goal; it is opposed to instrumentalization and consists in a certain freedom of the mind, in rest and in pleasure. Moreover, contemplation redeems the practical life, which is fulfilled in the contemplative life. Clearly, the Kantian conception of free play and disinterestedness that is at the basis of the judgment of taste is analogous to this conception⁸. However, Thomistic contemplation (*apprehensio*) is not simply equivalent to the distanced gaze that modern aesthetics will impose on objects. Although both seem to share the element of disinterest in the relationship with beauty, the difference lies again in the cognitive element, which makes Aquinas a thinker more along the lines of post-Kantians such as Hegel and Heidegger. The disinterest derived from the Thomistic proposal has to do fundamentally with the idea that there is something in knowledge that transcends it once it ceases to have any utility and turns it into contemplation. Contemplation, therefore, becomes something very similar to what the theorists of aesthetic experience have in mind when they elaborate this concept, which, in spite of Kantian reservations, usually takes a similar form to what could be called intuitive or perfect knowledge. This is what George Santayana seems to have in mind when he says: “Even the knowledge of truth, which the most sober theologians made the essence of the beatific vision, is an aesthetic delight; for when knowledge of the truth has no further practical utility, the truth becomes a landscape. The delight in it is imaginative and the value of it, aesthetic” (Santayana 1896). In this perspective, knowledge becomes disinterested precisely because it exists, but it is no longer contemplated *sub specie utilitatis*, since utility relates to the affective order and beauty to the cognitive. In this sense, the disinterested character of this aesthetic apprehension is comparable to that of play, which is not directed to anything outside itself and is exhausted in the pleasure of its praxis (*Summa Theol.* II–II, q. 168, a. 2 ad 3), as, e.g., Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and Gadamer in *Truth and Method* will later show.

Despite what has been argued so far in defense of the real character of beauty, Umberto Eco has defended the idea that the reference to the *visio* introduces a “subjectivist” element into Aquinas’s intellectualist discourse on beauty. Somewhat strangely, Eco argues that the allusion to the *visa placent* seems to propose a subject-dependent element (that things be seen) as a necessary condition of beauty, which, in Eco’s view, might imply a denial of the transcendental status of beauty (Eco 1988, p. 37⁹). This, however, does not seem to be a strong argument. In expounding what Aristotle proposes in *Nicomachean Ethics*—namely, that the good is what all things desire (“*et ideo dicit, quod philosophi bene enunciauerunt, bonum esse id quod omnia appetunt*”)—Aquinas points out that this definition does not indicate the essence of the good but is rather a *per posteriora* definition: the good is determined by its effect (*Super Ethic.* I. 1.1, n. 9), which could be called, in contemporary terms, a pragmatist

approach. The definition does not say that something is good because it is desired but just the opposite: that it is desired because it is good. The same happens with the idea of the beautiful in Aquinas: “*Non enim ideo aliquid est pulchrum quia nos illud amamus, sed quia est pulchrum et bonum ideo amatur a nobis*” (In *De div. nomin.* c. IV, lect. 10). Something does not become beautiful because we love it (since we can love an infinity of non-beautiful things), but we love it because it is beautiful. Hence, the phrase “*quae visa placent*” is an a posteriori definition based on the effects. In other words, it is not that we are pleased with something and then conclude that it is beautiful. On the contrary, since we cannot equate everything that pleases us with beauty, it must be that something is beautiful and therefore it pleases. This highlights a phenomenological characteristic of the appreciation of beauty: that it is loved. However, the reverse does not follow. Not everything that is loved is beautiful.

In any case, Eco’s suggestion brings to the fore one of the most debated questions in Aquinas’s thought, namely, whether or not beauty is a transcendental.

4. The Transcendentality of Beauty. Is It Still Relevant Today?

The medieval doctrine of transcendentals, in which the *ratio entis* is unfolded, is well-known. Kovach summarizes this doctrine in three characteristics: the transcendentals are convertible with being, they are convertible among themselves and among them there is real identity and mere logical distinction (Kovach 1974, pp. 237–39). Aquinas never refers to the beautiful as a transcendental but neither does he affirm the contrary. As a result, as is so often the case, there are varied and sundry interpretations of his doctrine on this score. The question remains in the air though, for if the good, which is clearly a transcendental, expresses a mode of being and the beautiful has an intimate relationship with it, does not the beautiful also express, transitively, a mode of being? Is it not a transcendental, even if we have to add this transitive consideration to it (a transcendental *sub specie rationis*)?

Forment argues that beauty is “a transcendental, but not immediate, property of the entity. Similarly to *aliquid*, beauty is a transcendental of another transcendental or a mediate transcendental” (Forment 1992, p. 182). Many other modern scholars, such as Pouillon (1946, pp. 305–11), maintain without further ado that the beautiful does have a transcendental status in Aquinas. Kerr (2002, p. 58) also hints at this. The same doctrine is defended by Maritain, who argues that the beautiful “is in fact the splendour of all the transcendentals together” (Maritain 1939, p. 172, n. 63b). Melendo considers that “the set of transcendentals represents the increasingly ordered series of reduplications of the entity, in such a way that it (...) is perfectly intensified in those that follow it ‘transforming’ from mere *ens* into (*ens*) *unum*, then diversifying into (*ens*) *verum* and (*ens*) *bonum*, to finally conclude in the fullness of the *ens pulchrum*” (Melendo 1986, p. 123). The beautiful thus constitutes “the sublimation or fulfillment of the entity in the transcendentals and the splendor or effulgence of being; *splendor essendi*: being brought to fullness and *made presence*” (Melendo 1986, p. 128). Eco also defends this idea, although he admits that the Thomistic text is full of uncertainties and hesitations (Eco 1988, pp. 46–47). Finally, Francis J. Kovach affirms that the beautiful “is the richest, noblest and most comprehensive of the transcendentals”; it is “the only transcendental that includes all the other transcendentals” (Kovach 1961, p. 214; 2011, p. 392). Kovach is interested in maintaining the transcendental character of beauty in order to argue that every being is essentially beautiful¹⁰ (hence he has to distinguish between a metaphysical sense of beauty—the one alluded to—and an aesthetic sense—that which characterizes each entity as more or less beautiful).

Sed contra. As has been pointed out, Aquinas mentions beauty marginally and never explicitly refers to it as a transcendental, which is why Gilson (1960) has come to regard it as “the forgotten transcendental” or even the “neglected” one. In recent times, however, a great deal of attention has been paid to this possible transcendental¹¹.

Among the authors who have opposed the transcendental character of beauty is Jan A. Aertsen (1991), who does so on the basis of the texts in which Aquinas presents a systematic exposition of the transcendentals: in *De veritate*, q. 1 (with respect to truth) and q. 21 (with respect to goodness). In neither of the two lists (*ens, res, unum, aliquid, verum, bonum* in the

former and the same except *res* and *aliquid* in the latter) does *pulchrum* appear. Moreover, the only place in *De veritate* where the beautiful is discussed is q. 22, a. 1 ad 12, where it is clearly subsumed under the notion of good¹².

Though it is true that there is no mention of *pulchrum* in *De veritate*, in the *Commentary on De divinis nominibus*, which Aquinas penned ten years later, could Thomas have realized the transcendental nature of beauty? This is precisely what Kovach defends (Kovach 1981; 1974, pp. 241–42). However, Aertsen cannot find traces of this, especially since chapter IV, which is dedicated to the beautiful, is dominated by the Greek equivalence between beauty and the good (designated by the term *kalokagathía*). Aquinas himself remarks on this relationship in the Greek names for the good (*kalós*) and the beautiful (*kállos*) in his *Commentary on the Sentences*¹³. Aertsen argues that, in the *Commentary*, Aquinas stresses that the beautiful does not add anything to being nor does it express a general mode of being (which would confirm its transcendental character), but rather it expresses a mode of the good; that is, it adds to it an order to knowledge. Although the beautiful and the good are the same in reality (*idem subiecto*), since both *claritas* and *consonantia* are contained in the notion of the good, they differ in concept. This is because the beautiful, as has been repeatedly pointed out, adds to the good the power of knowing that a thing is of such a kind¹⁴. Thus, the beautiful, according to Aertsen, is a property of the good as good.

It is true that in this respect there is no break from the *Summa*. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas deals with the good, (I, qq. 5–6), the one (I, q. 11) and the true (I, q. 16), but there is no separate question for the beautiful. The *Summa's* statements on the beautiful are basically two texts that appear in the objections and not in the body of the article, and the context of what is being discussed is always the good.

The first relevant text is *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 5, a. 4, which deals with whether the good has the character of a final cause. Aquinas begins by stressing the identity of the good and the beautiful, which are the same in terms of their subject, because both are based on form, but differ conceptually (*ratione*). The good refers to the appetite because the good is what all things desire; but the beautiful is related to the cognitive power (*respicit vim cognoscitivam*). Since, as we have pointed out, knowledge is realized by assimilation and similarity (*similitudo*) has to do with form, the beautiful belongs to the notion of formal cause, unlike the good, which has the property of being a final cause. This character of being a final cause causes the good to attract from afar: the presence of the *bonum* is always in the distance. Contrary to this, the *pulchrum* is given instantaneously, because this is the essence of the form: when the matter is ready to receive it, the form comes instantaneously¹⁵. Thus, the beautiful perfects in the instant without it being necessary to prescribe any *motus* (Pöltner 2002, pp. 63–64) and causes the essence of what it is to be revealed in that instant.

The second text is *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 27 a. 1¹⁶, where Aquinas discusses whether the good is the only cause of love. Also, in the third objection he cites Dionysius' statement from chapter VI of *De divinis nominibus* that the beautiful, in addition to the good, is what all things love (so that the good would not be the only cause of love). To answer this objection, Aquinas insists that the beautiful is the same as the good (*pulchrum est idem bono*) and they differ only from the point of view of reason (*ratione*): the good is what all things desire and in which the appetite is stilled, but what is proper to the beautiful is that the appetite be stilled in its appearance or knowledge; that is, it adds to the good an order to the cognitive faculty. Thus, the good refers to that which simply pleases the appetite (*simpliciter complacet appetitui*) and the beautiful refers to that of which the apprehension pleases (*id cuius cuius ipsa apprehensio placet*). With these premises, Aertsen insists that the transcendental character of the beautiful cannot be affirmed because, according to what has been said, the beautiful is but a specification of the good (Aertsen 1991, p. 86). As an argument in favor of his thesis, Aertsen cites Cajetan's commentary on *Summa theol.* I–II, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3, where he concludes that the beautiful is "*quaedam boni species*."

It seems then that the knowledge that adds the beautiful to the good must be of a special kind, because the understanding apprehends things "*sub ratione entis et veri*"

(*Summa theol.* I. q. 82, a. 4 ad 1). However, Aquinas never argues that the beautiful is the object of a specific capacity in addition to the cognitive and appetitive faculties. Aertsen (1991, pp. 94–95) recalls the *Commentary on the Sentences*, in which Aquinas establishes a connection between knowledge and the good, where he distinguishes two degrees of knowledge: intellectual knowledge, which goes towards the truth, and knowledge that takes the true as *conveniens* and *bonum*. From such knowledge follows love and pleasure (*amor et delectatio*), because pleasure, as Aristotle holds, follows from the perfect operation that is not impeded¹⁷. The apprehension of the beautiful is described by Aquinas in the same terms as those which he applies to this second degree of knowledge, so that this extension of the true to the good must occur in the beautiful. Thus, Aertsen (1991) concludes that “the beautiful is the true taken as good. It pleases through its clarity and proportion” (p. 95)¹⁸. Therefore, the beautiful does not seem to be a forgotten transcendental that is a synthesis of the true and the good but proceeds from the inclusion of the true in the good. The non-existence in medieval times of the space of aesthetic judgment as an autonomous domain separated from pure and practical reason does not force us to think of a distinct transcendental, but rather the beautiful seems to be implicit in the transcendental order of truth and goodness (Aertsen 1991, p. 97).

It is conceivable that the ultimate reason why Aquinas does not consider the *pulchrum* a transcendental is because he relates the true and the good to the formal objects of the spiritual faculties of human beings. The object of the understanding is under the ratio of cognizability; its object is the true. The object of the will is under the ratio of desirability; its object is the good. The triad “being–true–good” corresponds to the triad “soul–intellect–will” as its formal object. The doctrine of transcendentals provides a metaphysical basis for a theory of knowledge and for a theory of human action. Further, in that triad, there seems to be no room “in the first line” for the *pulchrum*. What happens then, once the beautiful is constituted as an independent region, “a new region of synthetic a priori judgments,” in Kantian terminology? Does the transcendental consideration of the beautiful add something to the beautiful as such? Regardless of what Aquinas thought, the consideration of beauty in modernity has passed from the metaphysical to the aesthetic space. In that space it makes no sense to ask whether the beautiful is a transcendental or not, but it does make sense to recover the overcoming of the categorical in order to make it possible to reimagine the beautiful in its symbolic relationship with the good (Kant 1987, § 59) by way of aiding it in its task of suturing the theoretical and practical dimensions of the human being, severed from each other in the modern era. It would also make sense if we were to recognize that aspect of its character that is its being the intellectual culmination of the good, which is an idea developed by, e.g., Von Hildebrand in his *Aesthetics*.

In any case, the element that seems to be the most relevant in the consideration of whether the beautiful is a transcendental or not in Thomistic thought is its cognitive character. If it is a transcendental, it is interchangeable with truth; if it is not, it adds that cognitive element to goodness. In any case, the beautiful is constituted as an “aesthetic criterion” in the epistemic space, which rejects the subjectivization of beauty and emphasizes the aesthetic quality of cognitive experiences, an idea that will be developed from a pragmatist perspective by John Dewey in the 20th century. Nevertheless, as an epistemic criterion it also acts as a verifying element of mathematical and scientific theories in cases where demonstration or empirical proof is not possible. This idea is so prevalent as to spur some authors to argue that the development of Western science is marked by an “aesthetic prejudice”¹⁹.

If we eventually accept that the beautiful is a transcendental, we can take its supracategorical character, and the fact that it crosses the whole space of being, in order to consider the symbolic character of every entity. Thus, the beautiful refers beyond itself and, finally, to the origin of every entity²⁰. Consequently, the beautiful leaves the space of feeling behind in order to refer to the space of truth and goodness, reconstructing in some way a reality fragmented into incommunicable hermetic compartments. It recalls the symbolic role that Plato assigns in the *Symposium* to *eros* and, with it, to beauty in the reconstruction

of the lost original unity. Beauty has, in this sense, a messianic character: it provides us with the certainty that the beautiful is not exhausted in its presentation, but points beyond itself and therefore has a revelatory character of the basic structure of the real.

5. Conclusions

As mentioned before, one of the most repeated scholastic mottos, especially by Aquinas himself, is *bonum est quod omnia appetunt*. The presupposition underlying this affirmation is that there is a community of appetite (*omnia*), which surprises the contemporary reader educated in the moral and aesthetic subjectivity that dominates modern thought. If, according to Aquinas, the *pulchrum* is intimately related to the good, it seems logical to think that *pulchra enim dicuntur quae omnibus visa placent*. This is a fundamental point that needs to be developed.

It is worth remembering that, in the Thomistic approach, the beautiful is not mainly the artistic, which is the dominating category in modern aesthetics. Modern authors tend to think all beauty from this sort of supreme analogate and so beauty in general will be “contaminated” by this artistic narrowness. However, there is more beauty than artistic beauty. Currently, there are several studies being undertaken in the fields of evolutionary aesthetics, neuroaesthetics, etc., that seem to sustain a universal character of beauty and that can be made to converge with Thomistic thought, and, in a way, oppose the proposals of Hume and Kant. Hume considers that everyone is deceived in the perception of beauty, since it is something that is “in the eye of the beholder.” Not everyone is in a position to perceive the dispositional elements that exist in objects and which, analogous to the objective elements that make it possible for the sense of taste to taste sweet things, give rise to the feeling of the beautiful. Hence, Hume is compelled to institute the class of true judges, who cannot be deceived. To this we might say, *non omnia pulchritudinem appetunt, sed veri iudices tantum*. Kant goes a step further and develops his aesthetic theory based on certain characteristics of the transcendental subject in order to postulate the universality of the aesthetic judgment; that is, to show it as a judgment that implicitly declares that what pleases one should please everyone. The Kantian *sollen* postulates that everyone should regard as beautiful what one judges to be beautiful, but there is no basis for demonstrating or forcing this feeling. This Kantian duty, with its ethical nuance, has a clear metaphysical character in Aquinas. The beautiful pleases; there is no notion that it “ought” to please. Kant is more indebted to his system than to experience. Aquinas prefers to start from empirical verification.

The passage from the Middle Ages to modernity with regard to the relationship with the beautiful can be understood as an entrapment of taste within the increasingly limited limits of subjectivity. From *omnia* we pass to *nonnulli* (only the Humean judges) and finally to *unum tantum* (the Kantian subject, who can only *postulate* that same judgment of taste in others). Any return to the openness of the community of *omnia* passes through the recognition of the reality of beauty. In this, Thomas Aquinas sets a milestone in a luminous tradition that tries to shine through the shadows of our time.

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Notes

- ¹ This key text, in which Aquinas identifies the three characteristics of beauty, is found within the context of what we would today consider a strictly theological discussion, in which the saint inquires about the attributes that should be ascribed to each Trinitarian person, following mainly the contributions of St. Hilary and St. Augustine. In this passage, Aquinas determines that to the Father corresponds to eternity (*aeternitas*), the Son to beauty (*species sive pulchritudo*), and the Holy Spirit to use (*usus*). The three characteristics of beauty derive from this reflection on the Second Person of the Holy Trinity: the Son truly and perfectly has the nature of the Father (*integritas*), He is the perfect image of the Father (*debita proportio sive consonantia*) and He is the Word,

light and splendor of the intellect (*claritas*). All these elements will be present in his defense that it was more convenient for the Person of the Son to assume human nature than for another Divine Person (*Summa Theol.* III q. 3, a. 8).

- 2 In *Summa Theol.* I q. 73, a. 1, Aquinas, in addition to these two perfections, speaks of an ultimate perfection, which also has to do with integritas. This perfection, the end of the whole universe, is *perfecta beatitudo sanctorum*, which will happen at the end of time. Aquinas describes it as an apparent reflection of the *perfectio prima*, which was given in the first institution of things. Contemporary aesthetics is full of references to an inchoate eschatological perfection even in contemporary art's rejection of all reference to beauty (Castro 2018). On the other hand, in his eschatological reflections, Aquinas introduces beauty as a constitutive element of the future world, especially in reference to the glorious body, which is beautiful fundamentally by virtue of its *claritas* (*Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 44, q. 2, a. 4, co.) and of its form devoid of any deformity. Beauty, as St. Anselm had already pointed out, is one of the attributes of the resurrected body: "*Anselmus enim, videtur ponere septem: dicit enim quod septem erunt beatitudines corporis, scilicet: pulchritudo, velocitas, fortitudo, libertas, sanitas, voluptas, diuturnitas*". *Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 49, q. 4, a. 5, qc. 3, arg. 1.
- 3 Aquinas relates beauty and form in several places, in very different contexts. Among them, he points out that species can be translated as both form and beauty ("*quantum ad speciem: pulchritudinem vel formam, secundum aliam translationem*"; *In De div. nom.*, cap. VIII lect. 4). Likewise, when he states that the supreme beauty is in God, he uses the idea of form to justify this assertion ("*Summa pulchritudo est in ipso Deo, quia pulchritudo in formositate consistit: Deus autem est ipsa forma informans omnia*". *Super Ps.*, 26, n. 3). He also relates the lack of beauty of the *materia prima* to its privation of form (*Summa Theol.* I, q. 69, a. 1).
- 4 On the disappearance of form/figure in abstract art and its metaphysical foundations and consequences, see Chapters XV–XVII of Jaroszynski (2002).
- 5 Aquinas does not speak about beauty in the hylomorphic compound as explicitly or as often as Albertus Magnus. However, this does not mean that his doctrine is not clear. In his commentary on *De divinis nominibus* (cap. IV, lect. 21), Aquinas claims that matter can be understood in two ways (*dupliciter*): on the one hand, in itself (*prout intelligitur secundum seipsam*), as if it lacked any quality and form, but it can also be understood as existing under a form (*ut sub forma existens*), and as such it participates in form regarding substantial being and in beauty as regards proportion and appropriateness (*decor*). It is then by virtue of form that matter participates in beauty (*In De div. nomin.*, cap. IV, lect. 5).
- 6 See, e.g., the cognitive character of the supernatural *visiones* of Hildegard von Bingen (Rabassó 2012).
- 7 All this, including problems and supposed inconsistencies, is discussed in McQueen (1993) and Campbell (1996). From phenomenology, the aesthetic relevance of these senses is defended (Diaconu 2005). In evolutionary aesthetics, on the contrary, it is argued that we will never be able to construct works of art from these senses, especially from smell (Dutton 2009).
- 8 The relationship between Kant and Aquinas is emphasized by Zimmermann (2000), p. 145. Ekbert Faas presents Thomas Aquinas as a precursor of Kant concerning disinterested pleasure in the appreciation of art, albeit for the wrong reasons. He argues that in order to avoid "polluting the soul by inducing phantasies of appetency, even sexual desire (...) all links to such emotions have to be severed". Aquinas, thus, considers the beautiful "as a special force arousing neither instinctual desires nor pleasurable interests. For that, the beautiful had to be severed from the good". Further, since we desire to attain what is good, once this is isolated from the beautiful, "we are pleased with the mere, disinterested contemplation of beauty" (Faas 2002, p. 74; Kovach 2019).
- 9 Other authors have called this a "subjective definition", not in the sense that beauty is subjective per se, but to underline the appreciative role of the subject (Jaroszynski 1988, p. 81).
- 10 A criticism of this author can be found in Roblin (1977), pp. 229–31. Kovach (1978) is a response to Roblin. Since part of Roblin's critique is based on the fact that the beautiful does not, in fact, please everyone, Kovach's transcendentalist positions are taken as an object of criticism by Tollefsen (1979).
- 11 Many texts on this topic can be found in Sellés (2006). This author defends the transcendental nature of beauty, distinct from truth and good, posterior to truth and prior to good (Sellés 2006, p. 99). Transcendentality is also defended by Clavell (1984). McCall (1956) and Reilly (1956) have also argued about the topic.
- 12 *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 1 ad 12: "*Ad duodecimum dicendum, quod appetitum terminari ad bonum et pacem et pulchrum, non est eum terminari in diversa. Ex hoc enim ipso quod aliquid appetit bonum, appetit simul et pulchrum et pacem: pulchrum quidem, in quantum est in seipso modificatum et specificatum, quod in ratione boni includitur; sed bonum addit ordinem perfectivi ad alia. Unde quicumque appetit bonum, appetit hoc ipso pulchrum. Pax autem importat remotionem perturbantium et impediendum adeptionem boni. Ex hoc autem ipso quod aliquid desideratur, desideratur etiam remotio impedimentorum ipsius. Unde simul et eodem appetitu appetitur bonum, pulchrum et pax.*"
- 13 *Super Sent.*, lib. 1 d. 31 q. 2 a. 1 arg. 4: "*Item, secundum Dionysium, pulchrum et bonum se consequuntur. Unde videtur quod omnia pulchrum et bonum appetunt; unde secundum nomen in Graeco etiam propinqua sunt, quia bonum dicitur calos, pulchrum callos.*"
- 14 *In De div. nomin.*, cap. IV, lect. 5: "*Quamvis autem pulchrum et bonum sint idem subiecto, quia tam claritas quam consonantia sub ratione boni continentur, tamen ratione differunt: nam pulchrum addit supra bonum, ordinem ad vim cognoscitivam illud esse huiusmodi.*"
- 15 *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 2 cap. 19 n. 6: "*Quando materia iam perfecte disposita est ad formam, eam recipit in instanti. Et inde est quod, quia diaphanum semper est in ultima dispositione ad lucem, statim ad praesentiam lucidi in actu illuminatur.*"
- 16 *Summa theol.* I–II, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3: "*Ad tertium dicendum quod pulchrum est idem bono, sola ratione differens. Cum enim bonum sit quod omnia appetunt, de ratione boni est quod in eo quietetur appetitus, sed ad rationem pulchri pertinet quod in eius aspectu seu cognitione quietetur appetitus. Unde et illi sensus praecipue respiciunt pulchrum, qui maxime cognoscitivi sunt, scilicet visus et auditus rationi*"

deservientes, dicimus enim pulchra visibilia et pulchros sonos. In sensibilibus autem aliorum sensuum, non utimur nomine pulchritudinis, non enim dicimus pulchros sapes aut odores. Et sic patet quod pulchrum addit supra bonum, quendam ordinem ad vim cognoscitivam, ita quod bonum dicatur id quod simpliciter complacet appetitui; pulchrum autem dicatur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet."

- 17 *Super Sent.* lib. 1. d. 15, q. 4, a. 1 ad 3: "Videmus autem in cognitione duos gradus: primum, secundum quod cognitio intellectiva tendit in unum; secundum, prout verum accipit ut conveniens et bonum. Et nisi sit aliqua resistentia ex tali cognitione, sequitur amor et delectatio; quia, secundum philosophum, delectatio consequitur operationem perfectam non impeditam." Compare with *Comp. theol.* Lib. 1. cap. 165: "Ex apprehensione convenientis, delectatio generatur, sicut visus delectatur in pulchris coloribus." Another text states that the true extends to the good (*Super Sent.* lib. 1, d. 27, q. 2., a. 1): "Et quia potest esse duplex intuitus, vel veri simpliciter, vel ulterius secundum quod verum extenditur in bonum et conveniens, et haec est perfecta apprehensio".
- 18 This interpretation is also supported by the opusculum *De pulchro et bono*, long attributed to St. Thomas, but which is in fact a Thomasian copy of lectures given by Albertus Magnus in Cologne in which he offers an exposition of the theses of Pseudo-Dionysius on the beautiful. The text of *De pulchro et bono* can be found in [Thomas Aquinas \(1980\)](#), vol. 7, pp. 43–47). For the attribution of the manuscript to Aquinas by Pietro Antonio Ucelli and its later rejection, see [Soria \(1974\)](#), pp. 293–94). In the opusculum it is said that beauty is a simple idea in itself, but that it results from the union of diverse elements: *Pulchritudo autem in sui ratione plura includit*. The attribution of this text to Aquinas makes [García de Paredes \(1911b\)](#), p. 6) affirm: "Beauty, rather than an integral and constitutive element, is a reverberation of all the constitutive and integral elements of being, combined and organized under the impulse of creative art and elevated, by virtue of this most singular aspect, to express a superior relationship, a superior existence and a superior life and to be the image of that ideal fullness that is only found in what Plato called the great geometrician and who is the universal and eternal Artist."
- 19 "It was above all not utilitarian scientific accuracy but aesthetic superiority that would attract those crucial supporters to the Copernican cause [Kepler, Galileo]. Without the intellectual bias created by a Neoplatonically defined aesthetic judgment, the Scientific Revolution might well not have occurred, certainly not in the form it took historically." ([Tarnas 1991](#), p. 255).
- 20 "*Pulchritudo enim creaturae nihil est aliud quam similitudo divinae pulchritudinis in rebus participata.*" In *De div. Nom.* c. IV, lect. 5.

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