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The Effects of Beauty and the Redemption of the Ugly

This paper aims to discuss the aftermath effects of beauty, the ugly, and the ways of how to get rid of the ugly. Firstly, we will attempt, in lieu of a definition of beauty, to examine the three classical conditions for beauty, which would otherwise be regarded as in some sense a mystery. Secondly, we will turn to the effects of beauty by analogy to the six effects of love as elucidated by Thomas Aquinas; in addition, we shall add three other effects of beauty found in classical Greek thought: catharsis, epiphany, and pleasure. Thirdly, we will review, by way of contrast, the corresponding effects of the ugly; as we do so, we shall propose just how the ugly may be “redeemed” by beauty.

The Underlying Notion of Beauty

A Mystery

For a long time now, philosophers could be said to have agreed on at least one thing: “All that is beautiful is difficult.”¹ Dostoyevsky reiterated this complaint in *The Idiot*: “It’s difficult to judge beauty; I

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¹ Plato, *Greater Hippias*, 304e, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1925). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

am not ready yet. Beauty is a riddle.”² We are all idiots in the face of beauty, which remains one of the great human mysteries. Beauty could hardly be a mystery for animals, which are lacking something in an aesthetic capacity for beauty.

When we ask what is beauty, we soon tend to find ourselves immersed in a paradox. For beauty is all but inexplicable. But the most obvious things are often the least explicable: how do we explain that the heavens are immense, that loneliness makes us sad, that the earth keeps us from falling? Or that beings exist? And, as regards beauty itself: why is the moon so beautiful? Why are stars so pleasant? Maybe the most adequate way to answer is with St. Augustine’s words: “If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain to one that asketh, I know not.”³ Or, in a similar vein, “I don’t know what beauty is, but when I see it, I know it.”

Beauty exists, whether we know what it is or not. One scientific proof is quite sufficient: just look at a beautiful woman. Innumerable artworks celebrate feminine beauty. Or look at the sky as the light slowly fades in a bright red sunset. Beauty enchants, and we simply accept it. Even in our modern age it is felt that beauty manifests the depths of things, that our own well-being is conditioned by an unfathomable mystery. It seems impossible to find someone who could refute the person who, in the early hours of the night, discovers a huge moon rising over the mountains and exclaims, “What a beautiful moon!” Who could contradict him?

Unlike arguments about the true, when someone exclaims about beauty, sceptics can hardly be bothered to object. Some people may not believe that truth exists, but few can deny beauty. Even so, we do find

² Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2002), 118.

³ *Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey (Religious Reprints, 2012), 161.

millions of aesthetic relativists and other such confused people. Macbeth's witches had already screamed: "The beautiful is ugly and the ugly is beautiful!"⁴ Voltaire urged us to consult a toad about his ideal beauty: "He will answer you that it is his toad wife with two great round eyes issuing from her little head, a wide, flat mouth, a yellow belly, a brown back." Or to ask the devil: "He will tell you that beauty is a pair of horns, four claws, and a tail."⁵ In these modern times, truth and beauty have become subjective, they have lost their anchor in reality, such that a degraded conception of beauty predominates in the world. Just as each person has his/her own truth, each person sees beauty in her/his own way, such that, in the absence of any absolutes, there is no truth, no beauty at all. What a sad story, this oblivion of beauty!

In such a world, something may even seem beautiful to you, though it is not beautiful at all. For example, take a song like "Baby" by Justin Bieber or "Stupid Hoe" by Nicki Minaj, or any other equally inane remix you may recall from the days of your youth. You may have laughed with your friends at the absurd lyrics, but it may also have been playing in the background as you were declaring your love. And so, as the years pass by, an otherwise cheesy song may still seem beautiful to you. But what is beautiful about it? The old friendships or "Stupid Hoe"? A youthful love or "Baby"? Because we have associated the song with something that really mattered in life, quite unconsciously, the song itself seems beautiful.

In Search of Beauty

Where can we find beauty? Outside us? Or within? It is a mark of the modern age that beauty has become, so to speak, caged within

⁴ Cf. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I, 1: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Available online—see the section *References* for details.

⁵ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. H. I. Woolf (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2010), 53.

the subjectivity of the person. Anyone may now declare anything to be beautiful. As one consequence, beauty has been reduced to the domain of art. Thank God, beauty has not become quite so imprisoned within us. If a corrective is needed, we have only to look back to the thoughts of the classical philosophers.

For Plato, beauty was closely associated with the principle of all that exists, the Good or the One. Beauty was not identical with the One, which utterly transcends our experience, but was rather a manifestation of the *hyperuranion*, or place beyond the heavens, wherein the One dwells. Even today it is felt that, in its depths, beauty manifests some unfathomable mystery that is intimately related to our own well-being.

In lieu of the Platonic first principle, the Good or the One, Aristotle proposes the “unmoved motor,” an eternal act that moves the universe without itself being moved. The desired things and intelligible things—Aristotle argues—are moved by this motor; the motor moves both without being moved. In their primary forms, these two are identical. The object of the appetite is the apparent good (τὸ φαινόμενον καλόν), and the primary object of the will is beauty (τὸ ὄν καλόν).⁶ Whether as desirable or intelligible, all that is moved is both good and beautiful, not only in the heavens but even in the moral life of human beings. Note that, in Aristotle’s extension of the concept, beauty has become an object not only of the intellect but also of the will.

Fast forward some sixteen hundred years and, with Aquinas, the beautiful has all but taken its place among those other transcendental predicates, such as the good, which can be said to “transcend” all of the Aristotelian categories and so be predicable of all things: “All things

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a24–28 (Greek version), in *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

are good, inasmuch as they have being.”⁷ Everything is beautiful, at least in some degree. A drop of water is beautiful, but more beautiful is the sea where the view is lost in the distance, a boundless horizon that suggests the infinite. More beautiful than a rock is a mountain, but there are mountains everywhere in the universe. The fullness of being is manifest in what is most beautiful. A life, even the smallest one, is worth more than a mole of hydrogen, even as it explodes in an exuberant and incessant way for thousands of years. Even within life—classically defined as the capacity for self-movement—there are different intensities: vegetative, animal, human life, due to the different capacities for self-movement. But human life is the most beautiful, its value is so superior that we do not speak even of its “value,” but rather its “dignity.”⁸

For Aquinas, “the ‘beautiful’ is something pleasant to apprehend.”⁹ Beauty is “that” which is apprehended through the window, but also “that” which I apprehend. There is the subjective apprehension of beauty, and yet, objectively, the starry sky at night remains beautiful though no one may be present to see it. Better to have friends than to read a novel about friendship; more poignant is the sight of real poverty than its depiction in painting; more inspiring is a heroic action than the equestrian statue that honors him.

⁷ *S.Th.*, I, q. 6, a. 4, in *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920). Available online—see the section *References* for details. For a discussion on whether for Aquinas the beautiful was “a distinct transcendental,” see Jan A. Aertsens, “Beauty in the Middle Ages: A Forgotten Transcendental?” *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 1 (1991): 68–97.

⁸ See Robert Spaeman, *Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 181. Ignacio Yarza also comments on the relation between value, beauty and being: “[I]t might be said that being is the absolute condition of all value, and also the substantive foundation of beauty. Beauty is linked to a transcendental property; that’s why it will always be an analog and dynamic value. For this reason there is a wide analogy of beauty and an immense variety of it” (Ignacio Yarza, *Introducción a la estética* [Pamplona: Eunsa, 2000], 175).

⁹ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

Aquinas was an intellectualist because he understood that the beautiful “relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen.”¹⁰ Beauty could lack the apprehension by one or more senses, but never by the intellect. A painting cannot be heard, nor a song seen, but both are apprehended as beautiful by the intellect which is fascinated by them and by the will which loves them. Neither can our eyes apprehend ultraviolet light, or the full light spectra that birds can see, nor can our ears hear more than ten full octaves (frequencies between 20 and 20,000 Hz). Nevertheless, Aquinas’s discourse on beauty opens a door to other human dimensions of beauty. If, for Plato, beauty is an idea that seduces the intellect or the will, for Aquinas, beauty is always immediately apprehended by a human sensory potency (primarily those of sight and hearing). Beauty requires a human sensory potency that tends toward a particular good, an “appetite” that is conaturalized with that which it receives, because “‘beauty and goodness are beloved by all things;’ since each single thing has a connaturalness with that which is naturally suitable to it.”¹¹

To summarize what we have found thus far in our search for beauty, let us employ the etymology for the German word for beauty, *Schönheit*. This noun derives from the verb *schauen*, which means “to contemplate.” Thus, *Schönheit* or beauty originally means simply “what

¹⁰ *S.Th.*, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1. This statement is made within the context of a comparison of two transcendentals, the good and the beautiful. As with all transcendentals, they are alike in one sense, while unlike in another sense: “Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly relates to the 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)” (*Ibid.*).

¹¹ *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 26, a. 1, ad 3.

can be contemplated.”¹² And so, if beauty is to be seen, two things are needed: (1) the extramental existence of something beautiful that can be seen, and (2) an intellect that, through sensory potencies, can both see and be affectively pleased with what is seen. Within the Romance languages, the word “beauty” (*belleza* in Spanish, *beauté* in French) has its origin in the feminine form of the Latin adjective *bellus*, *bella*, *bellum*. It is interesting to note that *bellus* is a contraction of *benelus* which is the diminutive form of *bonus*, the Latin word for “good.” Thus, beauty is both ontologically and etymologically related to the good.

The Promise of Beauty

In accord with the platonic intuition of beauty, though beauty cannot be identified with the One, it is nevertheless a manifestation of the One. Some of the brightest stars in the sky, which are also the largest, nevertheless appear to be small because they are so distant from us. A few of these stars, among the some four thousand that can be seen in either hemisphere, may no longer even exist; they may have died as their light had been traveling through space for millions of years. There are stars that, though records show they were seen long ago, now no longer exist. If it is the light that manifests the beauty of a star, but a star that no longer exists, then is not the light as well as the beauty that it manifests in some way separate from the star?

Beauty, as it is manifest in the light of a star, is yet a promise of something deeper and more valuable. As with the other transcendentals—the true and the good—beauty tends to remain hidden. And hidden within beauty is ever more beauty, a bottomless depth into which you may immerse yourself ever more deeply. Beauty is a treasure mine where you must dig to get for diamonds, just in order not to be

¹² Cf. Walter Brugger, *Diccionario de Filosofía* (Barcelona: Herder, 1975), 71. The word later came to mean what is bright, shiny, glowing, and so gradually giving rise to the present meaning of the word.

deprived of their light. Every beautiful object is an epiphany because, as it manifests itself, it promises still more. What is not manifest is not beautiful; it has no light, there is only darkness. Cultivating hay flowers would be a bad business: they open only at sunrise, but then die at sunset.

Just in order to subsist, beauty calls to eternity. It is a mystical experience that all of us have had: clocks stood still at the first sight of something beautiful. An hour passed by in a second. The eternal now. A fragment of eternity broke into our life; everything made sense. If detached from the limits of time, beauty is an invitation to infinity. As Schelling described it, the beautiful is “the infinite finitely displayed.”¹³ Great works of art and music have survived many generations because they manifest such beauty. Pope John Paul II rightly said that “art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery.”¹⁴

Who then can say what beauty is in any absolute terms? It seems that no man, but only God, can. Far from grasping the nature of beauty, the grace of beauty, which is heaven-sent and sacred, we can only grasp at the sparks of such a dazzling beauty. Not even that, but only the reflection of such a beauty. For, just as Moses could not bear to see the face of God, could we bear the excessive light of such a beauty? Perhaps that is why beauty has been signified in art with a halo that illuminates a holy person. It is easier to see the things that God illuminates. In their light, the stars shout that God exists, and, as the hay flowers turn toward the light, they echo the message.¹⁵ Without God, beauty would be improbable.

¹³ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 225.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), §10.

¹⁵ This idea is repeated time and again in Scripture, e.g.: “[S]ince he was the very source of beauty that created them” (*Wisdom*, 13:3); “[S]ince through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures we may, by analogy, contemplate their Author” (*Wisdom*, 13:5).

Three Conditions for Beauty

By way of both a summary of the foregoing and a transition to what follows, let us briefly consider the three conditions or requirements for beauty as Aquinas has listed them:¹⁶

1. *Brightness* or *clarity*. One requirement for beauty is luminosity or brightness, “whence,” as Aquinas states, “things are called beautiful which have a bright color.” The luminous colors of a painting contrasted by shadows can be beautiful, but less so if the colors are dulled with age. The luminous sound of a symphony contrasted with a momentary silence can be beautiful, but less so if it is difficult to hear. Nothing, of course, can be beautiful in the complete absence of luminosity. The “nothing” of a mute silence or complete darkness has nothing of beauty in it.

As luminosity or brightness implies a physical beauty, Aquinas sometimes prefers to speak of the “clarity” of beauty, such as the clarity of an idea, the very manifestation of a deeper principle, the radiance of truth that emerges resplendent. Truth is beautiful in this way; a lie is not beautiful. And love is beautiful if it is love of the true.¹⁷ In other words, love, if it is true, will “manifest” beauty.

2. *Integrity* or *perfection*. The greater the integrity or unity, the more beautiful a thing is, and the more perfect. As with the other transcendentals the true and the good unity is also convertible with beauty. Actions are beautiful if they are well finished. A fully actualized human being may be said to be beautiful who possesses a sense of maturity, wisdom, courage and the other virtues necessary for life. Beauty is fullness.

¹⁶ See *S.Th.*, I, q. 39, a. 8, resp.

¹⁷ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d–e, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1925). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

The integrity of a thing is deficient in beauty if it does not possess all of its parts. As Aquinas comments, “those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly.” There is no dispersed beauty. A cat is beautiful, unless a truck has run over it and split it into two. A living and a dead animal have the same organs, but the latter is ugly. Death is so ugly that even an allusion to death can be ugly. A terminal disease is ugly, such that even a comment about death may cause offense if one lacks the horizon of eternal life.

3. *Due proportion* or *harmony*. In *De ordine*, St. Augustine examined the relationship between beauty and order.¹⁸ When everything is in order, with due proportion, measure, moderation and harmony, no more, no less, that is beauty. The most beautiful action is that which is best ordered toward its ultimate end. A heroic action is beautiful if it is ordered toward a great end such as peace or liberation from tyranny. No one would die to save a mosquito; such an utter absence of due proportion would at once provoke both amusement and horror.

Paradoxically, a certain defect in proportion may not be ugly. For, as Aquinas comments, “an image is said to be beautiful, if it perfectly represents even an ugly thing.” The difference between the beautiful and the ugly, such as in the case of Socrates’s nose, may be nothing more or less than a centimeter. Here, we have a first hint how the ugly may be redeemed by the beautiful. Emerson once wrote that “when we grow old, beauty becomes an inner quality.”¹⁹ In old age, though the skin has deteriorated, the years may have allowed a number of virtues to be engendered inside by way of refinement, culture,

¹⁸ Cf. Bibiana Unger Parral, “De ordine. La búsqueda de la belleza,” *Universitas Philosophica* 28, no. 56 (2011): 129–140.

¹⁹ Cited after Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, “Prologue,” in Luz María Londoño, *The Elderly Are Those Who Have Been Lucky Enough to Reach Old Age* (Bilineata Publishing, 2014). Kindle Edition.

experience. Within the mystery of the person, beauty has always something creative to offer.²⁰

The Phenomenology of Beauty

The Discovery of Beauty

It would be impossible to grasp beauty if there were no beauty. Beauty is more than just a tranquilizer. Beauty requires the existence of paradise, something full of splendor and grace, something upon which to rest the eyes of the soul. One could be a happy bug in the midst of paradise, surrounded by beauty but without even realizing it. That would be the very essence of mediocrity. For mediocrity involves being in front of greatness, but without realizing it. How many people populate our cities, oblivious to libraries full of splendid books and concert halls full of exceptional music? Today, though there are more people than ever, they seem more isolated and lonely. Hell can be in heaven.²¹ If you cannot love Beauty, then anguish, repulsion, and hatred will stifle the spirit and turn beauty into a demon. For beauty brings joy only to those who know how to love it.²²

The discovery of beauty is an event that demands our sole attention. The perception of beauty involves the entire human being: one's senses, one's culture, habits and virtues, one's love, one's understand-

²⁰ Cf. Luz González Umeres, "¿Es lo bello un trascendental personal?" *Persona: revista iberoamericana de personalismo comunitario* 11 (2009): 76–80. Citing Leonardo Polo's conception of personal "radicals" (e.g., coexistence, freedom, knowledge and love, the "character of adding," giving and accepting, intimacy, the irreducibility, and novelty), Umeres believes that beauty ought also to be considered a personal radical.

²¹ Several mystics define hell as the inability to love a God who invites us to love. The idea has also been suggested by Karl Rosenkranz who defines the ugly as a "hell of the beautiful" (*Aesthetics of Ugliness*, trans. Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widrich [London: Bloomsbury, 2015], 31).

²² Cf. G. K. Chesterton: *A Selection from His Non-Fictional Prose*, selec. W. H. Auden (London: Faber, 1970), 177: "There is the great lesson of 'Beauty and the Beast,' that a thing must be loved before it is lovable."

ing. A deaf ear is an aesthetic barrier, while an attentive ear is the gateway to a musical paradise. But even if one had the ear of Mozart, who at the age of 14 was able to transcribe the *Miserere* of Gregorio Allegri after hearing it in performance in the Sistine Chapel, the best of music will not be enjoyed if we do not cultivate an aesthetic taste for music. Almost all people are able to see the same range of colors, but relatively few can fully appreciate *masterpieces* in the museums or even cave paintings. Taste can be taught. To savor abstract art, it is necessary to know how to decode a work; otherwise the work is banal. So too, we must cultivate our taste and our intellect. Many statues and monuments are absurd until the symbolic content has been decoded. Consider the Bebelplatz in Berlin, the monument to the burning of books under the Hitler Youth in 1933. It is a simple frosted plate of glass flush with the floor surface, and illuminated from below. At first, it seems banal, until someone explains that below the glass there is a library with long bookshelves, but with no books. For, as the creator of the exhibit intended to express, although the books had been burnt, the light of the ideas within those books would rise to the sky. Truth will yet overcome barbarism.

The perception of beauty involves us completely, but not in the same way. Without sight, it would still be possible to grasp the beauty of a melody, and, without hearing, it would still be possible to see a sunset. What is indispensable is the intellect in its relation to the true. Lacking such an intellect, not even the most perfect animals can have aesthetic taste. As opined in the Greek classics, beauty manifests the One, the Good and the True. Light must first be available, then beauty, and finally the good.²³

We have said what we needed to say. Beauty requires the good and the true, but it is not a question of an exact truth or of a material

²³ Cf. Saint Albertus Magnus, *Super Dionysius De Divinis Nominibus*, trans. Paul Simon (Aschendorff: Monasterii Westfalorum, 1972), 181.

good. On the contrary, if beauty generates hope, it is because it reflects the eternal, the infinite, and with a reflex that does not leave us indifferent, but gets us totally involved.²⁴

The Effects of Beauty

A quick gloss on the history of beauty: the Greeks discovered beauty, the medievals linked it to the intellect and will, modern thinkers held it within themselves, while contemporary intellectuals killed it by diluting it into triviality. A simple brushstroke that leaves a background upon which thousands of colors may be painted, though they may also not be painted. But it is enough to conclude that, at this point in the history of beauty, it is possible to study beauty within the self, taking into account the phenomena that occur in the body, the mind and the will.

One of the most spectacular explanations of the phenomenon of love is that given by St. Thomas Aquinas, far ahead of his time in displaying a quite refined phenomenological technique. Our thesis is that this discussion of love can be applied analogously to the phenomenon of beauty, because beauty has a subjective side situated in the will. His discussion of love appears in the *Summa Theologiae* in a question regarding the effects of love.²⁵ There are six replies: union, mutual indwelling, ecstasy, zeal, passion and what we shall call obnubilation. To these, let us also add three other specific effects of beauty, as they appear in various Greek and modern thinkers: catharsis, hope and delight. As we follow the thread of Thomas's splendid discussion of the effects of love, we shall add a few of our own comments.

1. *Union*. The first effect of love is union, an affective and effective union. Affections enable us to approach genuine closeness with the

²⁴ Cf. Yarza, *Introducción a la estética*, 181.

²⁵ *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 28.

beloved object. In antiquity, it was Aristophanes who wrote that two lovers strive to become one,²⁶ and that “the craving and pursuit of that entirety is called Love.”²⁷ It is not as though he meant a material union, a sort of anthropophagy that would cause the destruction of both or one of them. On the contrary, “they seek a suitable and becoming union—to live together, speak together, and be united together in other like things.”²⁸ Someone might be so fascinated by Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son* that they would desire to acquire this splendid picture in order to have kept it close by. If the painting is not for sale or funds are lacking, at least the person may endeavor to visit the Hermitage where the work hangs, in order to examine up-close the brush strokes and colors from every angle. And if the airfare to St. Petersburg is not affordable, then the person must probably be content to go on the Internet and feast their eyes on a copy of it. In any case, it is important to note that the painting cannot for long be out of the person’s sight, or far from the person’s heart.

It is interesting that Thomas holds that “the union caused by love is closer than that which is caused by knowledge.”²⁹ This unitive power happens also with beauty: a beautiful woman is loved more than she is understood; loved even if she were full of puzzles and her actions inexplicable. “Love is blind,” people say, but it is blind because of the beauty we encounter.

2. *Mutual indwelling.* In our heart, in our memory, in our mind, and even in our crazy fantasies, we carry beautiful objects that we have seen long ago. These dwell in us, we become their homeland, and we

²⁶ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 28, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 192e–193a, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1925). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

²⁸ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 28, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁹ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3.

dwell in them. We dwell in them because “the lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to penetrate into his very soul.”³⁰ Who buys a painting, but then does not take time to observe it? And while examining the beloved painting, who would not be curious about a new detail when they discover one? In reality, we are gradually becoming more immersed in the beauty, because it is not easy to remain dispassionate about it and, in any case, it is probably irresistible.

3. *Ecstasy*. Think of a day full of gloomy problems, or of a life full of melancholic suffering, where suddenly a huge glowing moon appears in the sky, profoundly suggestive. In that moment, one might become entirely forgetful of oneself, lost in enquiries before the moon, such that, in the viewing, the viewer finds oneself in heaven.

One suffers ecstasy when one is “placed outside oneself.” This may be

due to his being raised to a higher knowledge; thus, a man is said to suffer ecstasy, inasmuch as he is placed outside the connatural apprehension of his sense and reason, when he is raised up so as to comprehend things that surpass sense and reason; or it may be due to his being cast down into a state of debasement; thus a man may be said to suffer ecstasy, when he is overcome by violent passion or madness.³¹

We have already seen how beauty is a promise, how it shows something but suggests more; it always manifests something deeper.

The effect of such a love is akin to that of mutual indwelling because it “makes the lover dwell on the beloved.”³² But the greatest ecstasy is produced by the love called friendship because the one who

³⁰ *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 28, a. 2, resp.

³¹ *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 28, a. 3, resp.

³² *Ibid.*

loves no longer reserves something for oneself but only seeks the good of the beloved. Many have claimed the same for the romantic contemplation of the beautiful lover. For this beauty can also precipitate a great ecstasy, a glory. Who has ever professed one's love and failed to experience the glory, when the beloved accepts it?³³

4. *Zeal*. It “arises from the intensity of love. For it is evident that the more intensely a power tends to anything, the more vigorously it withstands opposition or resistance.”³⁴ Aquinas provides examples: a husband may harbor jealousy in relation to his wife because he wants her only for himself and will not tolerate that this exclusivity would be hindered by the company of others; or, having a zeal for God, a person repels any word contrary to the honor of God (similarly, with regard to zeal for a friend).³⁵ And so it is, too, with beautiful things, whose disappearance would never be tolerated. Beauty merits protection. There are laws that protect the beauty of nature and that of the greatest works of humanity. We ourselves experience this zeal for beautiful things. The preservation of beauty is a task for everyone. Beauty cannot cease to exist.

5. *Passion*. Beauty is grasped by the human potencies that “suffer” it. The eye suffers colors, the ear music, the intellect truth, the will the good. A potency must be adapted to its object in order to experience beauty; without this coadaptation it would be impossible to grasp beau-

³³ Cf. *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 28, a. 3, resp., where Thomas maintains that ecstasy “is caused by love directly; by love of friendship, simply; by love of concupiscence not simply but in a restricted sense. Because in love of concupiscence, the lover is carried out of himself, in a certain sense; in so far, namely, as not being satisfied with enjoying the good that he has, he seeks to enjoy something outside himself. But since he seeks to have this extrinsic good for himself, he does not go out from himself simply, and this movement remains finally within him.”

³⁴ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 28, a. 4, resp.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

ty.³⁶ With respect to this passion of love, the Angelic Doctor describes some of the effects “suffered” by those who love:

[I]t is to be observed that four proximate effects may be ascribed to love: viz. melting, enjoyment, languor, and fervor. Of these the first is “melting,” which is opposed to freezing. For things that are frozen, are closely bound together, so as to be hard to pierce. But it belongs to love that the appetite is fitted to receive the good which is loved, inasmuch as the object loved is in the lover . . . Consequently the freezing or hardening of the heart is a disposition incompatible with love: while melting denotes a softening of the heart, whereby the heart shows itself to be ready for the entrance of the beloved. If, then, the beloved is present and possessed, pleasure or enjoyment ensues. But if the beloved be absent, two passions arise; viz., sadness at its absence, which is denoted by “languor” . . . and an intense desire to possess the beloved, which is signified by “fervor.” And these are the effects of love considered formally, according to the relation of the appetitive power to its object. But in the passion of love, other effects ensue, proportionate to the above, in respect of a change in the organ.³⁷

These effects, and others, are also “suffered” by those who contemplate beauty. Beauty arouses admiration and, when beauty is extraordinary, it shocks. The most shocking is the *sublime*, something possessing a degree of greatness that stands above the rest. Kant distinguishes the beautiful from the sublime: “The sublime moves, the beautiful charms.”³⁸ He illustrates this by writing:

The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or Milton’s portrayal of the infernal kingdom, arouse enjoyment but with horror; on

³⁶ Aquinas explains that “love denotes a certain adapting of the appetitive power to some good” (*S.Th.*, I–II, q. 28, a. 5, resp.).

³⁷ *S.Th.*, I–II, q. 28, a. 5, reply to the objections.

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, et al.: University of California Press, 2003), 47.

the other hand, the sight of flower-strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks, the description of Elysium, or Homer's portrayal of the girdle of Venus, also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling.³⁹

Though, in reality, the sublime is a kind of beauty, it is a "sublimated beauty." To us, the sublime manifests itself as superhuman, worthy of wonder, often immense or infinite. It is the greatest appeal to the existence of the Absolute.

Let us return to Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, at the point when prince Myskin has been bewitched by a lady: "You are very beautiful, Aglaya Ivanovna, so beautiful that one is afraid to look at you."⁴⁰ Great beauties leave us stunned, speechless. The soul fears losing such beauty, or hurting it in the least.

6. *Obnubilation*. In the science of optics, obnubilation is a disease in which all objects appear to the eye as if seen through a cloud. Like it or not, all our actions are obnubilated by our feeling for the things we love and for what we consider to be beautiful. For the love of beauty is that which moves the world.⁴¹ This claim is supported by Aristotle's idea of the Unmoved Mover who appears as the most beautiful object of desire,⁴² or simply as "a God standing to the world as the Be-

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 118.

⁴¹ Cf. Yves M. J. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. II, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 220: "Love moves the world, and Aristotle put forward the idea of the Prime Mover who was himself unmoved, but who moved all things *hōs erōmenon*, 'as loved.'"

⁴² Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. 12, trans. W. D. Ross: "The object of desire . . . move[s] without being moved. . . . But the beautiful, also, and that which is in itself desirable are in the same column . . ." Available online—see the section *References* for details.

loved stands to the Lover.”⁴³ Thus, everything in this world is moved by the love of beauty.

Beauty is the final end: it is an end in itself, it is sought for itself, it does not allow any substitution. Beauty is to be preferred in itself,⁴⁴ it is that “which attracts us by its own power and draws us by its own dignity.”⁴⁵ Beautiful things are useless, a painting is useless. But beauty is glory. Beauty would be negligible if it were not the principal aim of life.

7. *Transformation and catharsis.* Beauty transforms the world and transforms us. The act of love transforms the good and the true into something beautiful: when we speak with love, when we say “it is good that you exist!” the loved one is transformed before us and begins to shine—the beloved’s existence is justified in itself.⁴⁶

At the same time, beauty does not leave us indifferent. Beauty provokes admiration, excitement, knowledge, reflection . . . and finally purification. Plato was anti-tragic: he did not like tragedies; he viewed them as pure deception. By contrast, Aristotle enjoyed theater, poetry and music. He understood that spectators were able to see themselves reflected in the plot of a tragedy and so could clarify, illuminate, and elevate their own passions. For Aristotle, tragedy causes catharsis, and

⁴³ Theo Gerard Sinnige, “Cosmic Religion in Aristotle,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 14 (1973): 19.

⁴⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1362b6–9, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2166: “[B]oth pleasant and beautiful things must be good things, since the former are productive of pleasure, while of the beautiful things some are pleasant and some desirable in and for themselves.”

⁴⁵ To use Cicero’s words for the sake of discussion about beauty. Aquinas uses them in his *S.Th.*, II–II, q. 145, a. 1, ad 1: “[W]herefore Tully says . . . that ‘some things allure us by their own force, and attract us by their own worth, such as virtue, truth, knowledge.’”

⁴⁶ Cf. Ricardo Yepes Stork and Javier Aranguren Echeverría, *Fundamentos de Antropología* (Pamplona: Eunsa, 2000), 152.

catharsis reveals and enables our feelings to be what they must be.⁴⁷ We must remember that catharsis was the touchstone of the poetic. “Catharsis is not a simple emotional state but an emotional *discharge* that releases the one that suffers from the excesses of passion, so that the spirit regains balance or measure necessary for action.”⁴⁸

I myself believe that there are two types of catharsis, conscious and unconscious. The first requires reflection. As opined by Chesterton, fairy tales are true, not because they can persuade us that dragons exist, but because they explain to us how dragons can be defeated. But to get to such a life-changing insight, we need to meditate upon dragons. In addition to such a conscious catharsis, a catharsis may be unconscious when, for example, we see a movie that can enable us to mourn, to live with our sorrows, to smile at life, to improve our attitude, or simply to allow us to disconnect for a couple of hours from the concerns of the week.

8. *Epiphany and hope.* Beauty also leaves an impression on the intellect, whereby it knows more, knows better and knows with hope. It *knows more* by contemplation which allows one to recognize what is already known in a new dimension, the dimension of beauty. It *knows better* because of its epiphanic character. A beautiful work, art or poetry reveals in an instant what a treatise would take much longer to reveal. More than a psychological model, more even than a photograph, a good portrait can reveal in a single glance the character and mood of one who

⁴⁷ There is an interesting debate about the meaning of *catharsis* in Aristotle. A popular interpretation, centered on *Politics* VIII 7.1342a4–16, asserts that, for Aristotle, tragic catharsis is helpful only for healing people who suffer hysterical emotions. A revised understanding, constructed with the study of more works by the Stagirite (*On Poets, Poetry, Ethics*, etc.), suggests to us that for the philosopher the labor of catharsis is also helpful for the education of healthy people. See Richard Janko, “Introduction,” in *Aristotle, Poetics I*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), ix–xxvi.

⁴⁸ María Antonia Labrada, *Belleza y racionalidad* (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 1990), 179.

is sitting. Remember the words “*tropo vero, Velázquez, troppo vero!*” that Innocent X said when he first saw his portrait.⁴⁹ A short work of fiction can show, in a more immediate way, a wide array of truths about the human being and society for which a treatise of anthropology or ethics would require a hundred pages.

The intellect *knows hopefully* because, as we have seen, beauty does not manifest the truth in a precise and detailed way, but in an ob-nubilated way. It suggests rather than describes; it promises rather than lists the details. It is an appetizer prior to the main course, which allows us to admire what we have not seen yet, and to better enjoy what we have not yet enjoyed.

9. *Pleasure or delight.* Finally, all authors would probably agree that beauty brings delight. For, by definition, beauty is pleasant. All human potencies are recreated by the beautiful—the eye by seeing it, the ear by listening to it, the intellect by knowing it, the will by loving it, etc. For “man alone takes pleasure in the beauty of sensible objects for its own sake.”⁵⁰ Only a human being has an intellect, which enables contemplation. A dog cannot contemplate a bone; it simply bites it and tears it apart. Beauty has something divine, and only those who have the divine image can contemplate it.

Pleasure is born in the contemplation of the finished perfection of beauty. One deeply recollects one’s psychic forces in beauty; one reaches a sublime state of being. When beauty is sublime, ecstasy is complete. One reaches out of oneself to encounter the suprahuman. That is why there the pleasure is mixed with admiration, respect, and a shudder of astonishment.

⁴⁹ Cf. Shirley Glubok, *Great Lives: Painting* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 214: “When the pope first saw the results he said, ‘All too true.’ The portrait brought the artist great respect.”

⁵⁰ *S.Th.*, I, q. 91, a. 3, ad 3.

The Phenomenology of the Ugly

The Ugly and the Horrible

The ugly exists. This is quite obvious. There are abominable events in history, there are mythological horrors, there are unspeakable cruelties, as when Saturn devoured his son, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, Oedipus killed his father, and the like. The ugly is embodied in the Gorgons, sphinxes, harpies, cyclops, centaurs, hydras . . . and also in our own lives—for the ugly is just around the corner. When we go outside, we discover the ugly everywhere: litter on the ground, insults as we climb on the bus, and so on. We cannot rid ourselves of the ugly even in a museum where, next to a beautiful work of art, we find a painting that appalls us, that simply should not be hanging there.⁵¹

If beauty is transcendental, if it can be predicated of all that exists, how can the ugly even exist? The answer is analogous to that given in relation to the problem of good and evil. Just as evil is the absence of good, the ugly is the absence of beauty. That is just how a monster is painted: the most endearing form is chosen—that of a human, a child—and then the form is altered, without arms, without eyes, without tongue, without other due properties. Beauty is withdrawn from the form in order to create the ugly. If beauty is bright, harmonious and whole, the ugly is the opposite: a butchered lamb, a broken diamond, a dark alley, a speech full of contradictions, a nose that is one centimeter too large or small.

⁵¹ Cf. Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 227: “‘Anti-art’ movements such as dada and Russian constructivism or the authors of anti-art gestures such as Marcel Duchamp or John Cage, for example, were often ambivalent toward the category of art and the art institutions they attacked, and those institutions in turn were quick to recuperate anti-art works and actions.”

All created things have certain beauty, but also some defect. Even demons are beautiful, as they are angels: they possess a singular intelligence that any human would envy. Literature is full of repellent heroes who nevertheless steal our hearts. Who would not prefer the tender Beast over the bland Prince in *The Beauty and the Beast*? Who would not identify more with the disfigured specter of *The Phantom of the Opera* rather than the pretentious Raoul? We also find beauty in a stick man named Pinocchio, in a hunchback named Quasimodo, and many other unfortunate characters with good hearts. The lesson is that, it seems, there is no joy in this world without sorrow, no beauty without the ugly. It is our eternal complaint in life but, at the same time, our eternal hope: everything could be better.

The ugly is not the *nothing*, nor even the negligible, but it is *what should be beautiful*. A grain of sand offers no promise, and so it cannot be ugly. Outer space, that enigmatic emptiness that fills the void between stars, neither can it be ugly. But a walk in the cold rain, a honeymoon full of fights, a marriage that fails, those are ugly.

When the beautiful is destroyed, the ugly emerges. There is no right to degrade beauty. In the degradation of the beautiful, there is an injustice. The bombing of civilians in War II was detestable, but the bombing of the Convent of Monte Cassino, where many incunabula works and magnificent letters of antiquity were stored, was an absurdity. The ugly arises when the promise of the fullness and ecstasy of beauty is breached, or when the affections are stretched toward an impossible promise, to what will never be. We grieve for not living up to another's expectations. This is the source of the classic complaint of an unrequited love: "you are too beautiful and, by comparison, I am not."

At its extreme, the ugly is the horrible. The horrible is the fall of the majestic, an offense to the infinite. *Corruptio optimi pessima est*,

philosophy says.⁵² A bunch of rotting grapes may be ugly, but the presence of gangrene on an arm would be horrible. Office politics can be ugly, but constant bickering within a family can be horrible. In sum, the most horrifying ontological ugliness is depicted in the story of the Dragon and his sin, that beautiful star that shone in the sky, but then fell from above like lightning,⁵³ dragging one third of the stars with it.⁵⁴ It is the story of a beautiful creature that turned ugly.⁵⁵ Who can find reason in such behavior? No one. What was accomplished? Nothing.

Life in Hell

In principle, if the ugly is the opposite of beauty, its effects will also be. As we have seen, beauty unites, as it causes mutual indwelling, ecstasy, zeal, noble passions, obnubilation, hope and a catharsis that all occur with great pleasure. On the other hand, nobody wants to befriend a gruesome criminal, live at a garbage dump, be possessed by a thousand demons. Rather than unite, the ugly causes disgust, revulsion; we jump back instinctively from terrifying images, people leave towns that are haunted.

The ugly does not bring hope, but rather it depresses us. There seems no escape from it. As with the most unbearable pain, the ugly preoccupies us, accelerates the heart, makes us shudder. There is no outgoing ecstasy, but only a bitter imprisonment within the ego. The ugly enslaves a person, not by tying the hands, but by blocking the eyes

⁵² Cf. J. Budziszewski, *Companion to the Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 46: "As Aristotle had written in his comparison of political regimes, 'That which is the perversion of the first and most divine is necessarily the worst.' The Latin adage, *corruptio optimi pessima est*, 'the corruption of the best is the worst,' would have been ringing in the ears of St. Thomas's readers."

⁵³ Cf. Luke 10:18.

⁵⁴ Cf. Rev 12:4–9.

⁵⁵ Certainly other beautiful spirits that were created did not fail, but the most beautiful that reneged was Lucifer.

and ears. The ugly sinks the spirit. A society without beauty destroys the innocence of the children, our sense of humor, even the will to live. Rousseau already glimpsed it: “Take this love of the beautiful from our hearts, and you take all the charm from life.”⁵⁶ A face where a smile has not passed for a long time reflects a soul where beauty has no place.

Mutual indwelling is not possible. People seek to forget the ugly, but can only succeed with difficulty. They try to drown it out, employing every distraction, including alcohol and drugs. No wonder, then, that Nietzsche viewed the ugly “as a sign and symptom of degeneration.”⁵⁷

The ugly brings neither pleasure nor noble passions; instead it provokes hate and suffering. And so, we have no zeal for the ugly. The ugly must be bombed and destroyed, banished to hell and, if possible, annihilated once and for all. Neither is there any epiphany in the ugly that inspires truth, nor a catharsis that would elevate. On the contrary, if a muse inspires beauty, a demon only inspires terror. A sublime beauty elevates, makes time stop, carries us fleetingly into a blissful eternity; the horrifyingly ugly is unbearable, a second becomes a hopeless eternity. It is with good reason that Thomas Aquinas described hell as having no end⁵⁸ and heaven as being eternal.⁵⁹

Finally, nothing is accomplished in the name of the ugly. For, as we said, all is done for love. Why then sin, ugly actions, and the crimes against humanity? The answer is to be found in Plato’s *Symposium*,

⁵⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010), 450.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, trans. Richard Polt (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 62.

⁵⁸ Cf. *S.Th.*, III Suppl., q. 99, a. 3: “[T]he punishment of the damned will have no end.”

⁵⁹ Cf. *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1, where Aquinas speaks of achieving man’s happiness by participating in eternity.

where Socrates states that Eros is a “demon”⁶⁰ which mediates between gods and men so as to make them love only the beauty of the body. And indeed, the “demon” of love for the beautiful has often enchanted people, who will then sacrifice everything to possess these trivial beauties which the devil displays to them. So blinded with such tawdry lights, they forget the highest and most splendid things. It is difficult to avoid being entangled by the demon.⁶¹ But such paltry beauties are transient. They disappoint because they promise much and deliver little. Hence, the abysmal sadness of Greek culture.⁶²

No one seeks the ugly for its own sake, but rather only because it appeared to be beautiful. Once the beautiful is revealed to be only an appearance, once the beautiful vanishes, only sadness remains. This is how the “demon” of beauty acts: he places an appetizing bait in his trap, a delicacy beautiful to the eyes of the intended prey, in order to devour the prey once it falls into the trap. If the demon would inadvertently reveal himself, ugly as death, he would not catch anything.

Redemption of the Ugly

Only beauty can redeem us. An ignominious insult from the boss, a back-breaking work, can become beautiful, if endured to support one’s starving children. The worker is thus ennobled in the midst of the

⁶⁰ Plato’s *Symposium*, 203a: “Many and multifarious are these spirits [δαίμονες], and one of them is Love [Ἔρως].”

⁶¹ Augustine described such an entanglement: “But the framers and followers of the outward beauties derive thence the rule of judging of them, but not of using them. And He is there, though they perceive Him not, that so they might not wander, but keep their strength for Thee, and not scatter it abroad upon pleasurable weariness. And I, thought I speak and see this, entangle my steps with these outward beauties . . .” (*Confessions of St. Augustine*, 147).

⁶² Cf. Brugger, 73. If humans would not let the devil seduce them, they would perceive beauty as a reflection of the afterlife, of the absolute perfection of God and His creation. So the heart ascends the fragmentary beauty of this world to the primitive pure beauty.

dehumanizing work. In its utter senselessness, the ugly can begin to make sense. It begins with the promise of a single flower within the desert until, over time, the ugly is overrun by an abundance of beauty.

There was a time when I thought that a love poem could only be written with a hundred nice words and a flower. But, like Cyrano de Bergerac, I was wrong when I imagined that love could be attained with letters and poems.⁶³ I was wrong and I realize it. Love poems, rather, are like nails on the hands, a pierced chest, a gaze blurred by tears and blood. A love poem is a crown of thorns, a cross, an ignominious death. A love poem is the broad path that was opened up in the chest with a spear. Now, I know, love is not won by letters or poems, but in a life when there is pain, the pain of love. If you want to write a genuine love poem, it must be written with the ink of days upon the paper of life. Though the cross was the worst, the ugliest that the Romans could contrive, God turned it into a love poem. Only Beauty can redeem us from our ugliness. If beauty did not exist, there would be no redemption.

It is not enough, though, that Beauty exists. We may be committed to the beautiful, but we need also a warrior spirit. Beauty is not easy to attain. We need to acquire a love for beauty, but we must battle the dragons of life. Whenever we want, there is beauty to be found within. If, for instance, we lose the ability to laugh at our faults, we lose a capacity to embellish this valley of tears. If Beauty exists, it is worth giving up everything for it.

So, it is here that any philosophy of beauty must end and a chapter on the theology of beauty must begin.⁶⁴

⁶³ See Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, trans. Anthony Burgess (London: Nick Hern Books, 1991).

⁶⁴ Several of the ideas expressed here have their parallel in spiritual or theological documents. Cf. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *The Way* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 2006), 171: "Surely God's Love is worth any love;" *ibid.*, 780: "*Deo omnis gloria*: all the glory to God;" *ibid.*, 783: "If life's purpose were not to give glory to God, how contemptible, how hateful it would be."

The Effects of Beauty and the Redemption of the Ugly

SUMMARY

This paper ponders on the aftermath effects of beauty, the ugly, and the hypotheses on how to get rid of the ugly. Due to the impossibility of addressing the effects of something that is entirely unknown, the author first attempts, in lieu of a definition of beauty, to examine the three classical conditions for beauty, which will otherwise be respected as in some sense a mystery. Secondly, he turns to the effects of beauty by analogy to the six effects of love as elucidated by Thomas Aquinas; in addition, he adds three other effects of beauty found in classical Greek thought: catharsis, epiphany, and pleasure. Thirdly, he reviews, by way of contrast, the corresponding effects of the ugly; and then he proposes how the ugly can be “redeemed” by beauty.

KEYWORDS

Thomas Aquinas, transcendentals, beauty, ugly, love, catharsis, epiphany, pleasure.

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