European Journal for the Study of Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas' Aesthetics: Objective Beauty and the Moral Good

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EJSTA 43 (2025)

DOI: 10.2478/ejsta-2025-0008

Article history:
Received: 20.12.2024
Accepted: 11.4.2025
Available online: 8.12.2025

Abstract
Aquinas' recognition that "those things are beautiful which are pleasing when seen" has been consistently misinterpreted: since Kant, modern aesthetics has taken it as given that reference to an "eye of the beholder" must be understood as indicating a purely subjective response to beauty. This paper discusses how Aquinas anticipates and successfully disproves the claim that aesthetic response is essentially subjective by pointing out that all things in nature possess beauty "according to the nature of each" and by showing that the beautiful must possess *honestas*, which equates to virtue and thus to the good.

Keywords
beauty • *claritas* • appetite • moral purpose

In her remarkable – and beautiful – book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry presents us with a striking image from Shakespeare's Sonnet 94, in fact the poem's final line: "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds".[1] We know what Shakespeare means: an object we once perceived as beautiful, now fallen into decay and corruption, has become for us baser even than something we never thought beautiful at all. We feel bereft, pained, and the measure of our sense of being bereft and of pain is all the greater precisely because of, and in proportion to, the measure of beauty we had originally attributed to the object when we first beheld it. In this way, beauty becomes bound up with the idea of loss. The sense of loss, however, the knowledge that we are irrevocably removed from the object that we found so beautiful and that was so dear to us, is not itself beautiful; but it brings us back into the presence of the beautiful object by reminding us of it. The object remains beautiful in memory, and our minds recreate it again and again – sometimes against our conscious will – because beauty encourages replication of itself. Shakespeare recognizes this fact also when at the beginning of Sonnet 1 he reprimands his beautiful young friend for his failure to produce offspring:

[1] E. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being* Just (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

> From fairest creatures we desire increase,
> That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
> But as the riper should by time decease,
> His tender heir might bear his memory.

It is interesting that "we desire increase" from beautiful objects is stated as a given, something of which Shakespeare's readers would not need reminding, which makes the behavior of the sonnet's addressee in denying the world the replication and continuation of this particular beauty all the more reprehensible. Of course, the poem is also an exercise in flattery, but that does not mean that its intellectual content – what it says – should therefore not be taken seriously. What is being said in Sonnet 94 is added to when we read both lines of the final couplet together:

> For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
> Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Here there is a clear relation, one of dependency, between beauty and action; we are told that for beauty to be true there must be something in addition to, something beyond the outward appearance presented to the observer, something beyond our immediate impression which reinforces and completes it. If we think of this in terms of human beauty, we see that that beauty is undermined, perverted by deeds which are themselves unbeautiful. This is the theme explored by Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When at the end of the novel Dorian stabs his portrait, he is killing one aspect of the truth of himself, the spiritual and moral corruption beneath the beauty of the outward physical form. But this does not mean that the physical, observable beauty was false; Dorian's physical beauty was no illusion. But when we apprehend beauty, especially (though not exclusively) human beauty – what W.H. Auden calls "a soul-bewitching face" in his poem 'On The Circuit,' for example – we often, as Scarry points out, fall into what she accurately calls "the error of overcrediting," that is, the error of taking a part to indicate the presence of an assumed, a *desired* whole. How could something so enchanting, we ask ourselves, not be *wholly* beautiful? In actuality, we tend not to ask this question until we have been, as we feel, undeceived, until the lilies have festered beyond recognition or until we view with horror the body of Dorian Gray "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage".

We are also guilty of the opposite error, that of undercrediting. We become aware of this with "the sudden recognition that something from which the attribution of beauty had been withheld deserved all along to be so denominated".[2] Scarry regards this as the more severe of the two errors; but also notes that:[3]

[2] *On Beauty and Being Just*, 14.
[3] *On Beauty and Being Just*, 14-15.

> doubting the severity of the first genre of error does not entail calling into question the pain the person feels in discovering her mistake: she has lost the beautiful object in the same way as if it had remained beautiful but had suddenly moved out of her reach, leaving her stranded, betrayed: in actuality, the faithful object has remained within her reach but with the subtraction of all attributes that would ignite the desire to lay hold of it. By either path the desirable object has vanished, leaving the brain bereft.

Here I shall tentatively reiterate that, in the case of the first error, that of overcrediting, the desirable object has in a sense not vanished insofar as it remains present in memory – a kind of existence – at which unique distance from reality it continues to remind us of our loss.

Beauty, then, encourages replication; but there is something, not in the beautiful object itself but rather in our understanding of what beauty is, that leads us into the errors described by Scarry. Both of these errors are forms of injustice, the second obviously so since it entails denying beauty to something that deserves it; but the first also because it involves mistakenly attributing to the object aspects of beauty on the supposition (or, again, the desire) that the presence of one set of attributes somehow necessitates the presence of another, and then blaming the object when we find out that our supposition was false. This error is experienced most poignantly when the beautiful object is human. We see the soul-bewitching face, we fall in love – always "fall," note; never "ascend" – and set about attributing the object of our passion with further attributes which she may or may not possess but which we expect her to live up to either way. I mention love, or rather falling in love, only tangentially as an easily recognizable instance of the kind of error under discussion. It is not the nature of infatuation that is of interest here but that of the error itself, the fact that we so readily fall into it. I make the claim here that our willingness to enter into so reckless a relationship with the desired object, desired because outwardly beautiful, derives not necessarily from mere stupidity or emotional immaturity (the kind of emotional immaturity that incited Pygmalion to create "his" Galatea) but in something much more fundamental, namely, the human urge to completion which requires that the outward appearance of beauty lead us beyond itself to something enduring, something which we recognize as transcending the physical. In the face of inevitable decay, we feel that the "merely" physical is not enough: we tell ourselves there *must* be something more.

This idea, that for beauty to be complete or real it must be more than that which immediately presents itself to the observer, is one of some antiquity. Aquinas, for example, has provided us with a few assertions about the nature of beauty, and I ask readers' forgiveness if I now devote some time to discussing two in particular. Both are widely known, and both, outside academia, are frequently misinterpreted. The first has come into popular consciousness as the claim that beauty is "in the eye of the

beholder," but this is a misleading translation of "those things are beautiful which are pleasing when seen" (*pulchrae sunt quae visa placent*.) There is extensive commentary on Aquinas' use of *visa* (seen) but this article assumes no knowledge of specialist literature and it is enough to know that what Aquinas does not mean is the physical capacity of sight (*"If I close my eyes, I can't see"*.) The consensus is that he uses "seen" in the sense of "understood" (*"Ah, now I see what you mean"*.) The former would suggest that everything that causes us pleasure when we see it is necessarily beautiful, and this is obviously not the case. The latter offers a more productive reading, that we find an object beautiful when we understand its nature, when we perceive its essence, its thisness, that which makes it what it is. We can think for example of a television nature documentary showing footage of a tiger stalking its prey. There is nothing intrinsically beautiful about one animal being killed by another; but the film footage, with the frame rate often reduced to slow-motion, allows us to observe the instinctive skill of the predator, the workings of its musculature as it moves and pounces, the intensity of focus. We see, in other words, every aspect of the process coming together to result in a kind of perfection. We see the tiger being essential tiger – doing, it is tempting to say, what tigers are meant to do, and it is this which allows us (Aquinas would say compels us) to derive aesthetic pleasure from our observation. We find the tiger beautiful, more beautiful moreover than we would if we were to observe it sleeping or drinking at a river or merely walking along, because sleeping and drinking and walking are actions it shares with other creatures and reveal nothing of the tiger's quidditas.

This suggests that there is an objective quality to the animal's beauty. The eye of the beholder must behold *something* after all; there must be some property or quality in the object which can be perceived and which, when it has been perceived, elicits an aesthetic response. The objection might be raised here that it may be the case that not all people find a hunting tiger an object of beauty, or that some people are simply indifferent to tigers in the first place, hunting or otherwise. But it is difficult to believe that anyone would remain completely unmoved by the scene I have just described. It is hardly revelatory to point out that different people find different things beautiful or unbeautiful, and it would be foolish to deny a subjective aspect to perceptions of beauty. But this holds only if we focus on the outward form, the immediate physical appearance of the enchanting face or of the lily approaching full bloom, In the same way, it is only if we make this the focus of our attention that we can commit the error of overcrediting discussed by Scarry, because only then can we experience what we feel as betrayal when the face or the lily inevitably succumbs to the effects of time.

What we perceive in our essential tiger, the animal displaying its thisness, is a kind of harmony, a specific relation between the animal as we perceive it and the interplay of qualities of which its thisness is constituted. This is what Aquinas means when he tells us in the *Summa Theologiae* that every thing in creation is given beauty "according to

the properties of each,"[4] that is, the qualities of any given object are in relation and proportion to its thisness, to its nature. Our tiger has attributes that enable it to act as it does precisely because it is a tiger and without which it would not be a perfect tiger. When we perceive that relation, we perceive the beauty of the object in much the same way as we perceive the beauty arising from a successful relation between content and form, or meaning and configuration, in a work of art. Again, this indicates the presence in the object of certain attributes or qualities, or a configuration of attributes or qualities, which we recognize as bestowing beauty upon it.

This also throws light on the kind of pleasure we experience when we apprehend beauty; it is not purely detached and intellectual because it can, for example, fill us with a sense of longing.[5] At the same time, it depends on objective qualities in what is being observed. For Aquinas, beauty depends on the relation of qualities and properties to each other, and on the relation of qualities and properties to the object as a whole. For this reason he is able to propose that for an object to be considered beautiful it must possess *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas*: there are:[6]

> three requirements for beauty. Firstly, integrity or perfection – for if something is impaired it is ugly. Then there is due proportion or consonance. And also clarity: whence things that are brightly colored are called beautiful.

The translations of these terms need further explanation, unless we accept that Aquinas was content with what would otherwise be a startlingly simplistic assessment of aesthetic response. The first term, "integrity," appears to limit the interpretive possibilities of that response and thus its applicability. Aquinas equates "integrity" with perfection, and then claims that we do not find beautiful that which is impaired. This does not accord well with a modern sensibility; furthermore, the translation "impaired" can be questioned. Aquinas uses *diminuta*, which carries the general sense "lessened" or "reduced," and we must ask whether or how or in what circumstances a lessening or reduction could or should be considered an impairment. This question is inseparable from Aquinas' understanding of the relation between Idea (perfect or ideal Form) and the physical object which is its embodiment. For Aquinas, the Idea originates in God, and "every thing in creation" is therefore given the perfect form of itself. We might wish to say that it *is* the perfect form of itself, but in order to make this claim we must also acknowledge with Aquinas that the perfect form of the

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[4] *Omnibus entibus creatis dat pulchritudinem secundum proprietatem uniusquiusque:* [God] gives beauty to all things in creation according to the properties of each.

[5] Though it is not appetitive in the modern sense: it is not the same as the pleasure we experience in anticipation of the fulfillment of a lust or physical desire, for example.

[6] *STh* Ia q. 39 a. 8. Edition: Fathers of the English Dominican Province (transl.) (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

object consists in the consonance of its parts.[7] William Blake understood, or perhaps intuited this when (to return to our tiger) he asked

> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

What Blake recognized in his *Tyger* is precisely what Aquinas refers to as *integritas* and *consonantia*, where integrity, or perfection, is taken to mean a wholeness or completeness of attributes which together and in the right proportion result in perfect tiger. If we then feel obliged to ask what a perfect tiger is, we can respond that tigers, happily untroubled by any sense of obligation to conform to ideological constraints, do what tigers do, namely, survive and reproduce, and they survive by having perfected a method of hunting best suited to the environment they inhabit. Here it can immediately be argued that successful adaptation to environment is common to the whole of the natural world that we have not yet destroyed and is therefore too general a characteristic to be used as a measure of specific beauty. But it is the nature, not the fact, of the adaptation that captures our attention and draws us towards that moment of clarity in which we perceive the relation of parts to each other and to the whole. This is the meaning of Aquinas' "according to the properties of each;" beauty consists in the harmonious cooperation of properties upon which the thisness of the object depends, and the perception of beauty occurs when that harmony and cooperation are recognized as inseparable from the meaning of the object. In this way, we see that beauty is a way of knowing.

With humans things are not so straightforward. Unless we completely deny the possibility of free will, we must acknowledge that we are able to exercise choice in our behavior; we can choose one course of action over another, and having opted for one course we can still, and often do, change our minds. Moreover, in contrast to other animals, we frequently decide to act in ways which later turn out to have been directly opposed to our own best interests, especially in cases where a chosen course of action seemed to promise the gratification of an appetite. With this in mind we can look again at Aquinas' claim that if things are impaired (*diminuta*) they are therefore ugly (*turpia*). I have already suggested that *diminuta* carries the sense of "lessened" or "reduced" and that a reduction is not necessarily an impairment. We still find the obviously reduced Parthenon, for example, or the fragments of Sappho's poetry beautiful not least because they recall what they represented *essentially* when they were complete. Enough of them remains to us to allow our minds to perceive the beauty of the former whole, the geometrical proportions and relations in the Parthenon, in Sappho the lyric quality of her language and the relation of meter to subject matter.

[7] This obviously excludes man-made objects, which are subject to imperfections.

I also want to suggest that *turpia* is more accurately translated as “base” or “debased” than “ugly,” though it could be argued that ugliness is a kind of debasement of an ideal Form. In this case we find ourselves able to read Aquinas' claim as pointing out that a debasement is a lessening or reduction from a state of *integritas* or perfection and that this constitutes a kind of impairment: that which is debased is not beautiful. In the case of humans the implications are clear: there is a moral aspect to considerations of beauty and aesthetic response. For Aquinas at least there must be an ideal Form originating in a divine idea. Unlike other animals, which act on instinct, humans can choose to deviate from this ideal. Other animals, inhabiting a world of physicality and appetite, are not subject to considerations of the moral justification or rationality of their behavior. We however are; indeed there are only two creatures which naturally live appetitively: *infant* humans, to whom seeking to gratify immediate physical needs and desires is proper, and animals other than humans, to whom this behavior is proper also. Aquinas' natural conclusion must be that it is not in adult human nature to live appetitively and that for us to choose to do so is to choose to behave as other animals (“Simon acts like an animal;” “Simon is a pig;” “Simon is an old goat”) and therefore a kind of debasement since it involves ignoring an aspect of what it means to be human in the first place. There cannot be *integritas* in an object if one of its constituent parts is reduced or lacking, and it follows that one who manifests this lack cannot be considered truly, wholly beautiful (though in our everyday approach to human beauty we often tend to ignore this and focus instead on specific aspects: “X has beautiful eyes; X is beautiful”.) Similarly, there cannot be proportion or consonance if any of the aspects of integrity is reduced since this would automatically lead to a state of disbalance in which one aspect of being human – an aspect of the psyche for example – is given undue weight at the expense of another. We should beware of thinking of symmetry as a purely physical property. We should also note that it is not necessary to be of any religious faith nor even to believe in the existence of God to hold that one way we distinguish ourselves from other animals is by exercising our ability to choose not to live appetitively, or to hold that we debase ourselves if we do choose to live in such a way.

The last of the three qualities listed by Aquinas, *claritas*, also needs consideration. Again, what he writes is *Et iterum claritas: unde quae habent colorem nitidum, pulchra esse dicuntur*, literally “And then clarity: since those things that are brightly colored are called beautiful”. As this stands, it seems to equate beauty with the gaudy, which would be an abysmal proposition. He tells us that *claritas* means having *colorem nitidum*, translated as “bright color”. But *nitidum* also means “gleaming,” “well-favored,” “elegant,” with the general connotation of orderliness and freedom from any characteristic that could detract from its brilliance. (And the French derivation *net* denotes “clear” or “pure;” and for that matter everyone knows what “neat” whiskey is.) It is once again to William Blake and our long-suffering tiger that we can turn for further insight. Blake tells us that his *tyger* is “burning bright,” and since the words are clearly not meant literally they can be taken to indicate a

specific quality in the animal, a kind of radiance resulting from the perfect combination and balance of what Aquinas calls integrity and consonance of parts. We can, then, think of *claritas* as the result of other properties or qualities working together in an object and giving its essential being, the perfect embodiment of the (for Aquinas divine) idea "tiger". In my submission this reading is rather more interesting and profitable than the frankly fatuous suggestion that "brightly colored" is a necessary aspect of the beautiful.

If for Aquinas other animals can possess physical beauty they cannot, unlike humans, have beauty of the spirit, which requires different qualities, namely *honestas* (translated as "honesty") and *virtus* (virtue). He tells us that:[8]

> as may be gathered from the words of Dionysius[9], [physical] beauty or comeliness results from the concurrence of clarity and due proportion. For he states that God is said to be beautiful, as being "the cause of the harmony and clarity of the universe". Hence the beauty of the body consists in a man having his bodily limbs well proportioned, together with a certain clarity of color. In like manner spiritual beauty consists in a man's conduct or actions being well proportioned in respect of the spiritual clarity of reason. Now this is what is meant by honesty, which we have stated to be the same as virtue; and it is virtue that moderates according to reason all that is connected with man. Wherefore "honesty is the same as spiritual beauty". Hence Augustine says (*Questions* [83], 30): "By honesty I mean intelligible beauty, which we properly designate as spiritual," and further on he adds that "many things are beautiful to the eye, which it would be hardly proper to call honest".

Spiritual beauty, then, consists in the relation between our conduct or actions regulated by reason which in turn is informed by spiritual *claritas* insofar as this clarity of reason is apparent in our actions themselves. Spiritual beauty is *honestas*, which is the same thing as virtue, and it is this virtue which moderates our conduct in accordance with reason. This is a wonderfully symmetrical edifice of thought, and demonstrates the interdependence between aspects of spiritual beauty in the same way as occurs with the various aspects of physical beauty. It is grounded in the relation between between reason and action and the proposal is that it is ultimately this relation which enables us to make right ethical choices which in turn reveal beauty of spirit. The unethical is not beautiful; and again, the assertion that ethical conduct is related to reason is not dependent on belief in a divinity.

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[8] *STh.* II-II q. 145 a. 2.

[9] Dionysius the Areopagite (1st century C.E.) a judge at the Areopagus Court of Athens. He converted to Christianity and later became Bishop of that city. He is today venerated as a Saint by both Orthodox and Roman churches. Aquinas is quoting from Dionysius' work, the *Treatise on the Divine Names*, iv.

We should also pay attention to Aquinas' choice of the lines he quotes from Augustine; they make a clear distinction between "intelligible beauty" that can be understood by perceiving the essence of the observed object, and those things which are merely "beautiful to the eye" which lack the quality of *honestas* because their attraction for us is not related to "clarity of reason". In other words, in the context of spiritual beauty, the eye of the beholder is a reference not to subjective responses based on predilection but to the *capacity* of the beholder to perceive essential, universal qualities in the object. Physical beauty allows of some degree of subjective interpretation while spiritual beauty does not, though the two can of course co-exist. Aquinas makes this clear with the following passage:[10]

> The object that moves the appetite is an apprehended good. Now if a thing is perceived to be beautiful as soon as it is apprehended, it is taken to be something becoming and good. Hence Dionysius says (*Divine Names* iv) that "the beautiful and the good are loved by all". Wherefore the honest, inasmuch as it implies spiritual beauty, is an object of desire, and for this reason Tully[11] says "Thou perceivest the form and the features, so to speak, of honesty; and were it to be seen with the eye, would, as Plato declares, arouse a wondrous love of wisdom".

When Aquinas talks about appetite and desire he does not mean the urge just to satisfy the demands of our impulses, or our responses to physical beauty alone. What this passage does is reaffirm the relationship between the beautiful, the good, and *honestas*. Physical beauty is not excluded and can be observed and admired for itself, but without taking part in this relationship, it cannot be considered wholly beautiful. If we choose to ignore this relationship, we shall have no problem accepting the reduction of the perception of beauty to a purely subjective response to a quality or qualities which in the narrow, everyday sense of the word we find pleasurable. And if we find this unproblematic, what we are saying about ourselves is that we are content to think of beauty as devoid of any meaning beyond the superficial. That which is immediately apparent – the lily, the face, the landscape or the sculpture – is amenable to subjective responses. But the problem we face in thinking of aesthetic response as purely subjective is that it works *only* if we limit our understanding of beauty to the superficial. There is nothing to prevent us from doing so, and apprehending superficial beauty is certainly a pleasurable experience; but limiting beauty in this way is a self-inflicted aesthetic and intellectual impoverishment and thus an impoverishment of the human experience.

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[10] *STh.* II-II q. 145 a. 2.

[11] Tully, i.e. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC). Aquinas is referring to the *De Officiis* (On Duties) i.5 of 44 BC.

But it would be wrong to insist that physical beauty is of no value in itself. Contemplating it, in humans and in nature generally, has given rise to much that we find profoundly moving in art; it acts a conduit and presents us with a particular, a detail that inspires us – and in successful art compels us – to seek underlying universals, by which I mean those ideas and human attributes that we find most profoundly moving or valuable. This is important because of the relation between art and philosophy and especially that between aesthetics and ethics. The *Iliad* for example lets us know details of the Trojan War, the actions and words of Achilles, Hector, Menelaus and so on, the situations they find themselves in and their responses to them. But all of this, gripping and entertaining as it is to read of, is not what the poem is *about*; it is detail, a backdrop, it gives us the framework within which those ideas of fundamental value to us are revealed: courage, love, loyalty, sympathy and empathy, the moral. And they are rendered even more clear to us by being often contrasted with their opposites: treachery, stubbornness and stupidity, selfishness, hubris, impetuosity and lust. The words and deeds of the Iliad's characters, the details of the progress of the war, are what entertain or "delight;" but they also provide the context which allows universals to be revealed to the reader. The relation between delight and edification that comes with the experience of well-made art is germane to the relation between art and philosophy: as the philosopher Richard Dien Winfield puts it, "philosophy (…) conceives what is necessary and universal, leaving aside what is particular as something incidental to the realization of the universal".[12] He also points out that: [13]

> If art is of value for its edifying imitation, then it follows that art criticism must consider whether the subject to be represented has the proper ethical character, as well as whether it has been imitated sufficiently accurately and with the skill adequate to have the desired edifying effect.

First, "edifying imitation" is an aspect of what Elaine Scarry calls replication. Skillful imitation, *mimēsis*, does not require photorealistic reproduction in order to have the "desired edifying effect" mentioned by Winfield. We know this when we contemplate paintings by, for example, Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock, which represent emotional experiences – this is how Rothko described his color-field paintings – or the workings of the unconscious mind, which is what Pollock said of his drip paintings. In fact modern technology has enabled us to see the similarity between Pollock's canvases and micro-photographic images of neurons firing and interconnecting. Second, Winfield's use of "proper ethical character" is extremely useful and deserves careful attention. His claim depends on accepting Aristotle's assertion that part of the

[12] Winfield, Richard Dien, *Systematic Aesthetics*, Gainesville, Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1995, p.28.
[13] *Systematic Aesthetics*, 25.

job of poetry is to instruct or edify. If we do accept this, then it must be the case that not only the critic but also the artist must ask whether the theme of the proposed work is one that lends itself to this kind of consideration – whether it is in fact a universal. If we say that we do not accept Aristotle's assertion, and that art is under no obligation to seek to edify us, then we must ask what art is for in the first place: what qualities remain to it without this necessity? It may be a vehicle to allow the artist to manipulate his chosen medium in order to demonstrate his technical skill. Or it may be decorative, where its superficial qualities are pleasing to the eye but do not lead us to anything beyond or other than themselves. Or in the case of literature it may be humorous, or witty in the renaissance sense of demonstrating a clever use of metaphor, but without seeking to be anything other than rhetorically effective. In these case we may well be delighted and entertained; but then again, we may not. This is of interest here because once again it suggests that the subjective aspect of aesthetic response applies only to particulars in the same way as with physical beauty. We must ask ourselves whether this is all we expect from art.

I have discussed beauty in terms of relations, those between the object and its constituent aspects, and those between the object and the observing (or, in the case of music, the hearing) subject. Another important relation is that between content and form in the object. In his writings on aesthetics, Hegel discusses this as the relation between meaning and configuration. He recognizes that beauty has certain formal qualities in that it forms a unity of various elements harmoniously organized in such a way as to become an organic whole – that which Cleanth Brooks recognized as a Well Wrought Urn – and he points to the profile of the human face in Greek sculpture as an example.[14] For Hegel, as for Aristotle and Aquinas and for serious contemporary systematic philosophers such as Winfield, the importance of a work's content is self-evident; but for many modern art-theorists this does not always seem to be the case. Their claim is that the choice of content is immaterial, that art can be about anything or that it does not have to be about anything at all. We need to think about what this means. If the claim means that art, say a painting, does not have to be a representation of a physical object, with a title like *The Orient Express*, or *Looking North on West Broadway*, then this is unproblematic. But it is hardly a new idea. Norse knot designs, apart from those depicting intertwined serpents or dragons, are not representations of physical objects. But this does not mean that they are not representations of things that exist. First, they are very obviously representations of ideas that exist in the artist's mind, and it is easy to see how the intricate, endless patterns can be seen symbolize, for example, the cycle of life and death and its inevitability, reassuring perhaps at a period in history when little else about human life seemed secure. We respond to them in two ways. On the one hand we accept their invitation to consider their symbolism,

[14] *Aesthetics*, 2: 727-30.

to actively seek meaning as though we were being asked to follow quite literally their intricate paths that bring us back to their beginning. And at the same time we find them pleasing to the eye, we admire their configuration as manifested in the skill of the artist. Neither Norse knot designs nor the paintings of Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko are works in which content are irrelevant or absent; all of them depend on the relation between form and content, and they are all capable of edifying by leading us from particulars that are pleasing to behold into the presence of underlying universals. The meaning of any work of art *is* its content, and with this is mind we have to ask ourselves whether art without intellectual content is a serious possibility at all.

I have argued that Aquinas was right to distinguish between physical and spiritual beauty and to recognize beauty as an objective quality that can be equated with the good: [15]

> 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.

I have also argued that subjective responses to beauty are necessarily concerned with particulars rather than with universals, and that universals themselves are the same thing as the content or meaning of an object perceived as beautiful. My argument is based on Aristotle's distinction between particulars and universals and his claim that the function of art is to delight and to edify. In my submission this is better phrased in this way: *good* art has the *effect* of delighting and edifying. To be delighted is a subjective response and occurs in different ways. On the one hand it is a sensuous experience insofar as a person can feel pleasure on observing nature – a landscape for example – or the skill with which an artist has arranged the materials at his disposal – the shades and hues in a painting, the striations in stone used for a sculpture, the development of phrases and motif in a piece of music. These are all things which elicit in us an immediate response which may well differ from person to person. But there is another kind of delight that we experience, namely, the intellectual pleasure we take from recognizing the relation between the external aspect of an object, its immediately apparent properties, and its meaning, the universal to which these external aspects have led us. In this way, if the particulars of an object have this effect, that is, if there *is* a universal they can reveal to us, and if they have been so configured as to make this possible, then being delighted and being edified are inseparable from each other; indeed they are two aspects of the same thing.

Kant discusses this relation in terms of what he calls the "free play" of imagination and understanding that the object has inspired and which leads us to find the object beautiful. He does not, however, hold beauty to be a property possessed by

[15] *STh.* Ia q. 1 a. 5.

the object; rather, he maintains that judgments of beauty are based in feeling, and particularly in feelings of pleasure. But this pleasure must be disinterested, or free from any desire for the object on the part of the observer. This seems in contrast to Aquinas' claim that that the beautiful and the good are essentially the same and that he good is desired by all. Also in contrast to Aquinas's view is Kant's assertion that beauty is not an objective property. For Aquinas, beauty is not a subjective response or an intellectual concept; beauty in things is objectively perceived through a cognitive process of seeing or hearing. The objection to Kant's view might be raised here that if an object inspires a feeling in us that leads us to call it beautiful, then the object must be possessed of some quality or qualities to which we are responding. For Kant however these qualities do not themselves constitute beauty. This is not unreasonable, but it does raise a question: what is then the nature of these qualities that they elicit in us the response that the object possessed of them is beautiful? Or are we to conclude that the word "beautiful" is simply a designation we give to an object that arouses a certain feeling in us, so that for instance *This rose is beautiful* means *This rose makes me feel such-and-such*? Even if we were to take *pulchrae sunt quae visa placent* in the "eye of the beholder" translation to suggest that the perception of beauty is purely subjective, there still must be an understanding prior to the perception of the object of what beauty is. If this were not so, we would not be able to give a name to the feeling – Kant calls beauty a feeling – either as a response to beauty or as beauty itself. In the same way, if "beautiful" is simply the word we use to describe this feeling, we are still left with the question as to what it is in the object which elicits this feeling in the first place. This question seems to be the real point, because any given object is possessed of a finite number of observable attributes and properties and therefore a finite number of relations between observable attributes and properties. Also, if the object possesses properties or qualities which cannot be directly observed but which the subject somehow "senses," then this poses further difficulties: to what extent, if at all, is this sense to be considered reliable? The subject might respond in this way: "I observe this object and experience as a result an aesthetic response, a feeling, and this response I call the experience of beauty". All this does is leave us in precisely the position we found ourselves in before. If we speak of responses and effects, then clearly an object is involved. We cannot respond to nothing (not the same thing as what Beckett called "nothingness"[16]) and nothing cannot create an effect. Also, the experience of beauty is not the same thing as beauty itself. For the moment we can ask, what is the nature of those possible qualities in the object which may not be consciously perceived yet nonetheless have a sensible effect on us? One possibility is that they are quite random, related only to something in the sense-memory of the subject recalling a situation in which the subject had a similar experience. In this case, the quality or property might be said to have nothing to do with any intrinsic beauty in the object, and in this sense

[16] "Every word is like a useless stain on silence and nothingness." (*Chaque mot est comme une souillure inutile du silence et du néant,*) From the essay "Le calmant," 1955.

the experience of beauty would be an essentially subjective one and beauty not a quality of the object itself, existing rather in the memory of the observer as something eliciting a certain feeling.

Kant's assertion that beauty is a feeling and that aesthetic response is subjective rests on the argument that there are no fixed qualities in the object that qualify it as beautiful. But this is anticipated and dealt with by Aquinas' *secundum proprietatem uniuscuiusque*, because if things are possessed of beauty according to their own properties then it is not to be expected that those properties be uniform. The beauty of a tiger is not the same as the beauty of a butterfly and neither is the same as the beauty of a rose: each of these possesses certain specific properties which differ from those of the other two. Of course, this holds for all objects and is that which enables them to be distinguished from each other; the *content* of the properties cannot be the same in objects which can be distinguished from each other in their natures. But it is not the content of properties which is of first importance in the perception of beauty. Rather, it is their relation to each other – order, number, proportion, consonance, and the accord of this relation with the nature or essence of the object itself which results in its *claritas*. In this view, Kant's claim that perceiving beauty is a subjective response, justified on the basis that there are no common fixed qualities in objects which qualify them as beautiful, is insufficient because it focuses on the content of properties rather than on their relation to each other or that relation in the context of the nature of the object.

Aquinas' "according to the properties of each" offers important insight into how beauty is to be understood, and I wish to stress again this holds in the absence of any religious or even broadly deistic faith. Aquinas has perhaps suffered from translation by scholars who, immersed in his life and work, undertaking the monumental task of translating the *Summa* first and foremost for other scholars, perhaps forgot that most people have not devoted so much thought to Aquinas' works as they have. But I think it safe to say that they would have no problem with the claim: "To say that *those things are beautiful which are pleasing when seen* means that we call those things beautiful *the apprehension of which pleases*, that is, we recognize them as beautiful if and when we have the capacity to perceive them in their essence, to perceive their true nature, in which case we cannot fail to find them beautiful". The caveat here is that he is talking about properties given *omnibus entibus creatis*, to all things created by God, so we must ask where that leaves those of us who do not share his faith. It would be very easy, and very infantile, to dismiss Aquinas' assessment of the perception of beauty on the basis that the supernatural has no place in serious philosophical debate. To take this view suggests that Aquinas must be wrong because of his religious belief, that adherence to a particular faith inevitably results in the falsehood of all utterances made by one of that faith. This is demonstrably untrue. We do not reject Augustine's claim that words are signs on the basis that he wrote the *City of God*, nor for that matter do we reject "Thou shalt not kill" on the basis that it appears in Exodus.

There is, though, a question that needs to be addressed. If, as I claim, beauty in objects lies in the relation of their properties to each other in the context of the object's nature, then we cannot ignore the question of what is fundamentally proper to the object. What does it mean when we ask "What is proper to X"? The question becomes easier to answer if we ask instead "What is proper to a good X"? where "good" means fulfilling its intended or natural function or purpose. Now this will raise immediate objections in those who point to the association between purpose and an external agent, an *auctor* or creator whose intentions they claim to be unknowable and, in the case of a creating divinity, whose existence they call into question or simply deny. Such objections can be dealt with when we consider the natures of different classes of object in turn. Easiest to deal with are those inanimate, man-made objects whose purpose or intended function is obvious. Think for example of the beauty of the movement in a mechanical wristwatch. When out of curiosity I once removed the back cover from my own and observed the interplay of moving parts, of cause and effect between one part to the next, the necessary proportion and consonance of all parts coming together in a unity directed towards one undisputed function (in which I too am involved since I must wind my watch's mainspring every morning to enable the continuation of the interplay of parts) I was struck above all by the sense of *completeness* in what I observed. What had happened was that I had experienced *claritas*, that clarity of vision and understanding which, even if only for a moment, revealed the nature of the beauty of what I had observed. This would not have been possible without the final cause of my wristwatch's purpose: without it, I would have observed, and taken pleasure in, something of apparent beauty, a composition of details: delicate wheels and cogs moving together in harmonic arrangement in such a way as to lead me to expect a kind of revelation. We observe the beautiful details and desire their fulfillment in something that takes us beyond themselves, however individually beautiful they may be. At some point we find ourselves asking, why go to the trouble, why employ such obvious skill? The delight we experience in perceiving it leads us inexorably to expect the edification Aristotle tells us we should require as its counterpart: good art is never solely "for art's sake". The only way I might question the purpose of my wristwatch would be by imposing some unwarranted semiotic value upon it. Certainly it could be used metaphorically, but even then all that would have happened is that its function, or an effect of its function, had been applied to another object, and this could not happen without a prior *acknowledgment* of that function.

What edification then did I experience by observing the immediate beauty of the mechanical intricacy of my wristwatch? The answer is that I am instructed in the nature of human potential to create beautiful things, not just for their own sake but for the benefit of humanity as a whole – not in a utilitarian sense but in the sense that because beauty leads us towards knowledge it is of universal benefit. I am instructed in the nature of the beauty of those creations, and of our will, our unquenchable drive to create beautiful objects that unify form and function, and that beauty comes into

being through the expression of that function by means of beautiful details. Above all I am instructed that contemplating beauty elicits in us the desire to *understand*. Tennyson shows us that he experienced precisely this moment of realization while contemplating a chasmophyte flower rooted in the stonework of a well:

> Flower in the crannied wall,
> I pluck you out of the crannies,
> I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
> Little flower – but if I could understand
> What you are, root and all, all in all,
> I should know what God and man is.

We do not need to share Tennyson's (often troubled) faith in a creating God (we can simply use the word "nature" instead) in order to share his perception of the beautiful object as having the capacity to lead us to a truth beyond its own immediate appearance. The beautiful object here presents itself as an invitation to discover it in its entirety, to follow it back to its origin in the particular configuration and consonance of biochemical reactions which resulted in *this* flower. But not only this flower, because as soon as we have understood this we realize that we have also understood the nature of all such flowers and their place in the natural world; and through our interaction with this particular beautiful object we are reminded that we are also part of that world. This is not a case of what Scarry calls "overcrediting;" there is nothing extravagant or fanciful in our contemplation of the flower, nor has the flower been "reified". It remains exactly what it is, a flower growing on a stone wall, quite unaffected by our observation of it: what happens – if it happens – is in us. Again, this does not mean that we attribute qualities or properties to the flower which it could not possibly possess; it simply means that we see it for what it essentially is, "all in all," beyond its immediate appearance. We are not obliged to pursue the line of thought that leads us to this understanding. But if we choose not to, if having noticed the flower and having been delayed by its outwardly attractive appearance, we content ourselves with noting its prettiness and move on – if we respond in this way it is not the case that we shall have committed some wrong, no person (or flower) will have been harmed nor any principle violated; but we shall have declined the invitation extended by the beautiful object to fully understand it. The poignancy of Tennyson's poem lies in his awareness of all this. He accepts the invitation, takes the flower in his hand to contemplate it, and he understands that by doing so he has entered into a kind of agreement, as we do every time we contemplate a beautiful thing, or read a poem, or listen to a string quartet. The agreement is that we allow ourselves to be edified, to be instructed in the nature of the object of our attention. Tennyson acknowledges this with his frustrated "if I could understand / What you are" – he *wants* to understand, and he perceives, as he tells us in the poem's final line, the knowledge that understanding would result in.

Here we see how the observation of beautiful objects, far from distracting our attention from "more serious" matters, brings us straight to the heart of one of the most fiercely debated issues of Tennyson's day. Four years before the composition of "Flower in the Crannied Wall" Darwin had published *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Tennyson, who knew Darwin personally, had certainly read it, and his poem is an attempt to account for Darwin's theory, to accommodate it in his understanding of the world: beauty leads to knowledge by engendering in us the desire to understand the nature of the beautiful object.

We are justified in attributing purposiveness to the natural world of plants and animals insofar as its inhabitants do what they do – they reproduce and pass on genetic material to the next generation, and in so doing they carry out "instructions" given to them by nature according the properties of each. They respond to signs such as changes in ambient temperature by lying dormant, mating, hibernating, or springing back into exuberant life.

But nature manifests beauty also in effects that are inanimate, insentient. Think for example of a cobweb beaded with droplets of dew that catch the sun on a late-autumn morning. Think of this moreover in those terms formulated by Aquinas, in terms of its harmony of parts and attributes; and then think of these in terms of the object's function and efficacy. Let us say that our attention is first caught by a glint of light reflected by the dew in the way that we might first notice a person, of whom we otherwise know nothing, because of a personal adornment – a necklace, a pair of earrings. We can of course walk on and think no more of the encounter; but if we pause to consider the object to which we were initially drawn by a striking external attribute, we do so fundamentally because we want to understand something: why am I drawn to this production of nature? What qualities and what properties does it possess that hold my attention? And the longer we contemplate it, the more we see, in Aquinas' sense of the word, that beyond the pleasing spectacle of its reflective adornment there is a relation between its form and function, we see again something familiar, but with a renewed clarity of understanding. The more we *know* about the beautiful object, the more apparent its beauty becomes.

I have touched upon beauty in the natural world in the context of Aquinas' recognition that objects are possessed of beauty according to their own essential properties, and I have followed him regarding the relation of objective properties to each other, and regarding the relation of those properties to the object itself in the context of purposiveness in the object. In this way, the beauty of objects becomes apparent when the observing subject is capable of perceiving these relations working together. It is in this sense that *pulchrae sunt quae visa placent*. This capacity may be inherent in the subject's character or temperament; but it may also be the result of education, and herein lies a problem because in our schools and universities we shy away from discussing beauty in objective terms on the grounds that this approach to aesthetic

response equates to an imposition on, and therefore a limitation of, intellectual freedom that amounts to telling students how and what they should feel. This argument can only then be valid if we insist that beauty is a wholly superficial quality. In the case of human beauty, too, we can return to Aquinas' recognition that beauty is dependent upon the relation between aspects of or properties in the object. But what can be said to be proper to humans? We know that the most fundamental properties, the drives to survive and to reproduce, are common to both humans and all other animals, and we must therefore ask what is proper to humans specifically. The capacity for ratiocination, and the ability to imagine and consider abstract concepts that are not necessarily related to survival and reproduction, present us with alternatives, possible courses of action that are sometimes in direct conflict with each other. In other words, we have to make choices, and we do so through an exercise of free will. So far as we are aware, other animals are unencumbered by such difficulties and act in accordance with their immediate needs, that is, they act appetitively because it is in their nature to do so, and if this involves killing another animal in order to feed themselves or their young we find this perfectly natural. (It certainly is not "cruel" – cruelty is a human attribute.) But in humans instinctive behavior often conflicts with the will, the free exercise of which distinguishes us from other animals: we can (in cases of normal psyche) choose or not choose to opt for the immediate gratification of desires, cravings, lusts or mere whims, none of which needs have anything to do with the continuation of our species.

As we saw in Aquinas, there are those appetites which in humans draw us to "conduct or actions being well proportioned in respect of the spiritual clarity of reason," or *honestas*, which he equates with virtue since it is that which "moderates according to reason all that is connected with man," and for this reason *honestas* is the same as spiritual beauty. For the same reason, those objects whose contemplation leads to our edification are also rightly rightly acknowledged as beautiful – bearing in mind Augustine's caveat that "many things are beautiful to the eye, which it would be hardly proper to call honest". Our own words and deeds, the choices we make and the effect they have upon others, can be seen in the same light, that is, we can think of human beauty in terms of its being dependent on *honestas*. We can also choose to limit our understanding of beauty to a subjective response to physical appearances. But if we do this, then that is the end of any serious discussion of what human beauty means. It is also an admission that the superficial is what we find important.

For Aquinas, "appetite" here refers to that which impels us towards completion through the fulfillment of a spiritual need, which will always result in the kind of pleasure that accompanies edification. There are of course other kinds of appetite, those whose goal is the lessening of physical or mental discomfort brought about by the desire for an object or sensation which when obtained may well cause pleasure, but pleasure that is unconnected to edification of any sort and always proves to be temporary. Such appetites are obliterative in that their gratification removes the cause of discomfort but leaves us with nothing of substance in its stead. The fulfillment of

the first kind of appetite harms no-one, and constitutes a positive addition to the subject. In this way, the contemplation of beauty becomes a moral act in itself.