

LOVE AND BEAUTY: THE “FORGOTTEN TRANSCENDENTAL” IN THOMAS AQUINAS

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“Beauty opens our heart only because at the same
time it opens our eyes.”



Beauty's place in the thought of Thomas Aquinas is a disputed question: while on the one hand he appears to accord beauty a great dignity, he does not explicitly mention it alongside truth and goodness in his most substantial account of what we might call the “relational” transcendentals, the universal properties of being that come to expression specifically in relation to the human soul.¹ The ambiguity in beauty's status characterizes not just Aquinas's work, but in fact may be said regarding the period of the high Middle Ages in general, so much so that Etienne Gilson was able to refer to beauty, famously, as the “forgotten transcendental.”² If there have

1. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, 1.1.

2. See Etienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 159–63.

been a number of scholars in the past century who have sought to set into relief the importance of beauty in Aquinas, there are always others who respond with efforts to deflate their claims. Recently, one of the more respected intellectual historians on this theme, Jan Aertsen, concluded his assessment of the evidence, pro and con, with a sober judgment: “discussion of beauty occupies a marginal place in [Aquinas’s] systematic works.”³ However much one might want to defend beauty, it is difficult to dispute what Aertsen says here, at least as far as first impression goes. It is simply not possible, for example, to imagine Aquinas’s philosophical theology without the notion of truth, goodness, or unity; if any of these were missing, the very foundation of his thought would be compromised and the entire edifice would topple. If, by contrast, we were to remove any reference to beauty from the pages of his works, it would at least *appear* to be the case that, though it may have lost some of its ornamentation, the building would nevertheless remain standing, just as solid as before.

This apparent marginalizing of beauty, which, as I said, we find in many of the prominent figures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, stands out in a particular way when we consider the medieval discussions of *love*. In the preceding tradition, especially in its Platonic current, love was typically tied in an essential way to beauty. (Gilson called it “forgotten,” after all, not simply “neglected,” which implies that it was once recognized.) Plato’s two great dialogues on love, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, center on beauty.⁴ Plotinus identified beauty as the precise cause of love;⁵ and indeed the three great masters of love in the Christian era, who represented the authorities on this topic in the Middle Ages, namely, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius the Areopagite, invariably include beauty in their treatment of love: “Late have I loved thee, o Beauty, ever ancient and ever new,” writes Augustine, famously, in book X of the *Confessions*.⁶

3. Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suarez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 173.

4. Both dialogues identify beauty as the principle and object of eros: see *Phaedrus*, 237d–238c; 250b–e; *Symposium*, 204d.

5. See the opening pages of Plotinus’s treatise “On Love,” *Ennead* III.5.1.

6. Augustine, *Confessions*, X.27. Dionysius presents the connection in *Divine Names* IV. On the fundamental role of beauty in Gregory of Nyssa,

But when we turn to the main thinkers of the high Middle Ages, we cannot fail to sense a fundamental shift: the essential object of love (using the term “object” here in its broadest sense) is no longer beauty, but now *goodness*. To be sure, the ancient and patristic thinkers also recognized goodness as playing a role in love, but one may justly say that, for them, goodness plays this role for the most part by virtue of its kinship with beauty. Dionysius, for example, presents the divine name of “Love” in his chapter on the Good, but he does so specifically in the section in which he introduces the name “Beauty.”⁷ In Aquinas, by contrast, goodness appears to stand effectively alone as the cause of love.⁸ We cannot help but ask: *Why*? What accounts for this shift? What are its implications, and what is ultimately at stake in the question whether we think of love *principally* in terms of goodness or *principally* in terms of beauty?

It would be far too much in a single essay to try to answer all of these questions, especially since each one of these generates dozens more the moment we begin pursuing it. My focus here, in any event, is not in the first place intellectual history; nor do I mean to mount a criticism of Aquinas, to set into relief deficiencies or to try to drive his thought into contradiction by isolating passages from his vision of the world more generally and compare them. Rather, my aim in this essay is to dig out elements in Aquinas’s treatment of love that point back to this ancient tradition. I will suggest that traces of this tradition remain buried deep inside his thinking, and so while it is indeed

see David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), esp. 187–210. The Eastern Church has held onto the tradition I am describing in a more obvious way: the “handbook” of Christian life in that tradition, a giant anthology of the spiritual fathers, is tellingly called *The Philokalia*, i.e., *The Love of Beauty*.

7. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, book IV, chapter 7. After introducing “Love” and “Beauty” together in this chapter, he generally refers to the comprehensive object of love as the “beautiful-and-the-good.”

8. When Aquinas asks whether “the good is the sole cause of love,” he answers that it is (*Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 27, a. 1 [hereafter cited as *ST*]). Interestingly, in the course of elaborating his response, he considers as an objection (under the authority of Dionysius) the possibility that beauty might also be a cause. He answers that in fact beauty ultimately reduces to goodness. Aquinas acknowledges that beauty “adds an ordination to the intellect,” but does not take this to be directly significant in the movement of the will, at least as far as a straightforward reading of the texts suggests.

the case that Aquinas explicitly, on the surface, replaces beauty's role with that of the good in relation to love, when we penetrate below the surface we discover a profound connection with the older tradition, recognition of which turns out to bring out a novel dimension in the meaning of both beauty and love that in fact carries that tradition creatively forward.

My endeavor will proceed in four steps. First, I will sketch out very briefly Aquinas's conception of love; second, I will suggest that, although Aquinas characterizes love essentially as ordered to the good, his own way of understanding love does not in fact fit this context well. Instead, I hope to show that there are many reasons to think that it falls more naturally into the order of the beautiful. In the third part, I will indicate how associating love with beauty helps resolve a number of difficulties that otherwise emerge in Aquinas's conception of love, and, conversely, how this association grants a new weight to beauty. Finally, in the last part, I will propose that the question of whether love is a matter first of goodness or first of beauty has implications that go far beyond the problem of interpreting Aquinas properly, but bears on how we think about both love and beauty more generally. It seems to me that, read in the way I will propose, Aquinas offers profound insights that deepen both our understanding and therefore *also* our experience of love and beauty. If it is true, as John Paul II said several decades ago now, that "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it,"⁹ then these insights have something to offer each one of us without exception. Some parts of the essay will unavoidably be somewhat technical, and may thus appear quite abstract, but I hope, especially in the concluding section, to show in a more concrete way why this is a matter to be concerned about beyond the borders of the history of philosophy.

1.

So, let us start by asking, what does Aquinas mean by love (*amor*)? According to Aquinas's most mature formulation, love is the

9. John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 10.

primary *passion* of the soul.¹⁰ The Latin word, “*passio*,” is often translated in contemporary contexts with the word “emotion” (we tend to reserve the English word “passion” for the most extreme emotion, or an intense desire, of a particular type). But what gets, if not altogether lost from view, at least somewhat clouded, in this translation is the root meaning: *passio* comes from “*patior*,” “to suffer” or “undergo,” which indicates a being affected by something other than oneself. In classical thought, the “passions” (or “*pathē*” in Greek) were the various ways an individual could be directly affected by the things he or she encounters in the world (or it: animals have passions too in classical philosophy). By saying “directly,” I mean to indicate the kind of immediate impact that physical or sensible things have on us. When we come into contact with a physical thing that has significance for our bodily life, something that will satisfy our nature in some respect, or else threaten to do violence to it, we do not simply register that fact like a detached spectator, or disinterested third party; instead, we are *moved* by our perception of such a thing. It provokes a bodily change within us, whether subtle or overwhelming: our heart beats a little faster, we feel a surge of adrenaline, our face reddens, our hands sweat, or perhaps, like Winnie the Pooh catching sight of a full pot of honey, we feel “a rumble in our tumbly.” These are “passions”: movements in our sensible appetite—i.e., in our desire for a good that corresponds to our nature—that are accompanied by some stirring of the body (*transmutatio corporalis*). According to Aquinas, there are eleven basic passions: love and its opposite hatred; desire and aversion; hope and despair; fear and daring; anger; and joy and sadness (the reason there is an odd number is that, interestingly, anger does not have an opposite).

We cannot enter, here, into a discussion of how these various passions relate to each other, but, if the contemporary world thinks of the emotions as essentially irrational, you may rest assured that, for Aquinas, they actually follow a fairly straightforward and common-sensical logic. Our focus in the

10. *ST* I-II, q. 25 a. 2. More specifically, he calls it here “the first of the concupiscible passions,” but he also shows that the concupiscible passions are prior to the irascible ones, which is why one can say that love is the “first of the passions” simply, which Aquinas also does.

present context, however, is the passion of love, which, as I mentioned before, Aquinas designates the *first* of the passions. The reason it is first follows from its definition: as Aquinas formulates it, love is the “aptitude or proportion of the appetite to good” or “*complacentia* in the good”¹¹—which is not at all a “complacency,” as the English word suggests, but indicates a much more lively and vigorous disposition. A *complacentia* is a fundamental disposition toward something, a recognition that a particular thing is good for us—not in the purely intellectual sense of recognition, something my brain does but leaves my body coldly indifferent, such as when we say, “I recognize that quinoa is good for me” (we say this, and mean it, but we still wish it was not so: our body does not say it along with our mind), but rather a recognition that resonates through the whole of my being. It is a *passion* after all, so it involves a stirring of the body. To have *complacentia* for a particular thing is to say, and at the same time to feel, *I want this*; I know that this will bring me happiness.

Once we understand that this *complacentia*, this recognition that a particular thing is good, is what love is, it becomes obvious why love is the first of all the passions. Every other passion presupposes love, which is to say it presupposes a disposition toward something as good for us. I *hate* something, for example, only because I take it to be opposed to what I regard as good for me; I *hope* to receive something I regard as good for me; I take *joy* in something toward which I am disposed as good for me, as satisfying my nature, and so forth.

Now, Aquinas says not only that love is the first of all the passions, but, in another context, also that it is the “first movement of the will.”¹² It is interesting that he “extends” the meaning of love in this way specifically in a discussion of *God’s* love. God, as Creator, i.e., as the *transcendent* origin of the world, as absolute First Cause of the universe, and therefore as pure spirit and pure actuality, strictly speaking has no passions, because he has no body.¹³ If we may speak of God’s *love*, which we obviously

11. Ibid.

12. *ST I*, q. 20, a. 1.

13. Aquinas is making this observation in part I of the *Summa*, prior to any consideration of the incarnate God, who most emphatically *does* have a body, but to think this through would raise questions that would take us far afield,

must do as Christians since this is not an incidental part of revelation, it is not because we think of God as undergoing a bodily change, but rather because of the specific difference expressed in the definition of love, which distinguishes love from all the other passions: God loves, and indeed, most perfectly, because he is perfectly disposed toward the things he created as good.

But this “extension” of love beyond the sphere of the passions in the discussion of God allows us, in turn, to think of the human will in terms of love. Aquinas defines the will as an “intellectual appetite”: To understand what he intends by this phrase, it is crucial to note that the word “appetite,” in the scholastic lexicon, does not mean simply “hunger,” as it tends to for us. Instead, it simply means a movement toward, a kind of attraction that draws us to a thing (appetite = *ad petere*). What distinguishes the intellectual appetite, i.e., the will, from the *sensible* appetite, which is the seat of the passions, is that the will represents a dimension of our attraction to goodness that transcends the merely sensible or physical level. In our acts of will, we may be disposed bodily by our passions, but the will is not ultimately determined by that disposition; we are capable of pursuing a good that conflicts with our sensible desire—we may, for instance, force ourselves to eat quinoa—but we nevertheless can do so only because and insofar as we recognize that thing as good for us, as something that will bring us happiness, even if it brings us some bodily discomfort along the way. It is in this sense that love—the recognition that something is good and the positive disposition toward it as such—precedes every act of will, just as it precedes every physical desire.

2.

For our present purposes, that will have to suffice for a sketch of what Aquinas means by love, though of course there are many interesting and important aspects that I am leaving out (for example, Aquinas’s profound observations on friendship, on charity, on the Holy Spirit as Love, and so forth). Having in any

and in any event I am going to be introducing a different way to think about love in just a moment.

event explained the nature of love in its most rudimentary sense *in nuce*, I would like now to offer a couple of reasons to think that love does not fit as well into the order of goodness as it does into the order of beauty. I just said that love *precedes* every act of will and every desire, or to unify this point, it precedes every act of appetite. But, note, for Aquinas, the soul's relation to the good precisely *is* appetite: Aquinas defines goodness, following Aristotle, as "that which all things desire," or in other words as "desirability,"¹⁴ and desire is a seeking, as a being drawn, an attraction, a "movement toward" (*ad petere*). To say that love *precedes* every act of appetite, as I am doing, is to say in fact that it precedes the order of the good, insofar as that order is actualized in the soul's operations.¹⁵ When Aquinas, for his part, says that love is the "first movement of the will and of every appetitive faculty,"¹⁶ it is crucial to see that he does not mean it is the first act of a series of similar acts,¹⁷ the initial step toward the good, which will be followed by a second and a third, along the same line. Instead, love is a movement of a *radically different sort*. This becomes clear when he spells out exactly what sort of "movement" love is. In article 2, question 26 of the *prima secundae*, Aquinas draws on John Damascene to raise a possible objection to his own characterization of love as a passion, namely, that, while passion is a movement of the appetite, love is not itself such a movement, but instead the *principle* or *cause* of the movement. His response to this objection is profoundly illuminating: "Although love does not denote the movement of the appetite in tending toward the appetitive object, yet it denotes that movement whereby the appetite is changed by the appetible object, so as to have complacency therein" (ad 3). The reason I say this is a "movement" of a radically different sort is that it turns out to be in the precisely

14. *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1.

15. In the broad sense, which includes passions.

16. "Primus enim motus voluntatis et cuiuslibet appetitivae virtutis" (*ST I*, q. 20, a. 1).

17. Aquinas specifically describes love as "principium motus tendentis in finem amatum," that is, the principle of the motion toward the end that is (already!) loved. Note that, in *ST I-II*, q. 25, a. 2, Aquinas says that "amor praecedit desiderium," and desiderium he defines as "motus ad bonum," which is precisely what constitutes appetite. So love precedes appetite in its operation.

opposite direction of all of the other movements of the appetite. As we have seen, “appetite” denotes the soul’s movement *toward* the object: a pursuit. Love, by perfect contrast, is as it were the object’s movement toward the soul. It is the soul’s “being changed” by the object. To spell this out more clearly: in appetite, we seek something that corresponds to our desire, something that will thus bring it satisfaction. In love, again by contrast, the object is not measured against our desire, but rather our desire is made to fit the measure of the object (the word Aquinas uses here is “*co-aptatio*,” which indicates a kind of adapting or attuning of things to each other). As Aquinas puts it, in love “the appetible object gives the appetite . . . a certain adaptation to itself, which consists in complacency in that object, and *from this* follows movement toward the appetible object” (my emphasis). Love is thus an “*immutatio appetitus ab appetibili*,” which we can translate as an *inward transformation* of desire brought about by the desirable thing, a transformation that precedes, and indeed makes possible, every single act of desire without exception.¹⁸

Because it is not the soul’s movement out to the object, but the object’s acting on the soul, so to speak, we can say that love has an essentially “*ad intra*” or *receptive* character, which distinguishes it from the externally-directed acts of appetite in general, which Aquinas says tend toward goodness “in things” (*in rebus*) and take their rest therein. This makes love a curious paradox. On the one hand, love is all about the appetite—in Aquinas’s words, “love pertains to appetite”¹⁹—which as we have said indicates precisely the soul’s relation to the good. But, on the other hand, as an essentially *receptive* movement, love seems to be much more similar to the act of intellect, or the faculties of perception and apprehension more generally, which Aquinas characterizes precisely as acting by taking their objects in, as opposed to moving toward them. While the act of appetite terminates in the thing, the act of intellect terminates in the soul. If love is a motion that precedes appetite, a motion that terminates in the soul as the *immutatio appetitus*, the *inward transformation* of

18. This is what Aquinas means by “*omne agens, quodcumque sit, agit quancumque actionem ex aliquo amore*” (*ST* I-II, q. 28, a. 6), which could not be more unconditionally universal.

19. He says, “*amor est aliquid ad appetitum pertinens*” (*ST* I-II, q. 26, a. 1).

the appetite, then love appears to have the form of an intellectual act more than it does an act of appetite. Recall that, when I described love earlier, I characterized it as the “recognition that something is good for me”—*recognition* is an intellectual act. At the same time, I qualified that by saying it is a kind of “bodily” recognition, a being stirred deep in our soul, rather than a purely conceptual recognition. Love appears to be an odd hybrid, somehow both intellectual and appetitive at once, as if our desire in this case were acting, not exactly like appetite, but more like an intellect, or our intellect were acting, not like intellect, but more like an appetite.²⁰ Love seems, therefore, to transgress the specific boundaries of the good and the true and their corresponding faculties in the soul.

And so we must ask, Is there any place for it? Where exactly does love *fit in* to Aquinas’s philosophy, specifically, his philosophy of human nature? As it turns out—and of course I gave the solution to this problem away already at the beginning—love, as we have interpreted it in Aquinas, fits most perfectly, not simply with goodness, but with *beauty*:

The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms desire; while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms desire by *being seen or known*. . . . Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty, so that ‘good’ means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the ‘beautiful’ is something that is pleasant to apprehend.²¹

Love is a *reception* that occurs, not in the intellect per se, but in the appetite, and beauty is the experience in which the appetite comes to rest, not in the actual enjoyment of the thing in itself, but rather in the reception of a thing’s outward form. Love and beauty therefore perfectly coincide.

Aquinas himself indicates this connection, though to be sure he does so in passing and without highlighting the significance or unfolding the implications. The place in which he does

20. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* IV, q. 19, a. 4 on love as residing both in the intellect and in the will.

21. ST I–II, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3.

so occurs in the article that follows the one I just cited in the *prima secundae*, in which Aquinas seeks to explain precisely how knowledge functions as a cause of love. Here, he writes the following:

Love demands some apprehension of the good that is loved. For this reason the Philosopher (*Ethic* ix. 5, 12) says that bodily sight is the principle of sensitive love: and in like manner the contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the principle of spiritual love.²²

(Note that “spiritual” here does not simply mean “religious,” but in this context designates the dimension of love and beauty that goes *beyond* the merely physical.) It is an oft-repeated axiom of Thomistic anthropology that every act of appetite is *necessarily* preceded by some intellectual or sensible perception. If we connect this axiom with Aquinas’s statement that every action of every agent arises “out of love” (*ex amore*), which implies that love likewise precedes every act of appetite as its principle, we can scarcely keep ourselves from drawing the inference that the apprehension that triggers the movement of desire, so to speak, is *just what love is*, namely, a reception in the appetite, which disposes it positively toward a given object. And insofar as this being disposed is a movement that comes to rest *in* the appetite, this occurrence can only be described as a delight that occurs in the mere apprehension of an object, independently of a direct enjoyment of it, or to put it in less technical terms, as an experience of beauty. Given Aquinas’s own characterization of love, it turns out to be the proper correlate, not of goodness simply, or of truth simply, but of their transformative coincidence in beauty.

3.

To strengthen this proposal that we recover *in Aquinas* the ancient tradition that roots love in beauty, let us consider how this recovery would help resolve a number of potential problems in

22. *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 2 (translation slightly modified). Note that the standard translation (by the English Dominicans) refers to beauty, not as the “principle,” but simply as the “beginning” of love, a weaker translation that is perhaps due to the conviction that it is goodness that in fact causes love most properly.

Aquinas's interpretation of both love and beauty, and indeed to resolve them in what seems, to me at least, to be a rather elegant fashion. Because of the shortness of space, I will simply list here a number of issues requiring resolution in Aquinas's interpretation of love, without much elaboration. There are several tensions we can identify, some of which we have already hinted at, but are nonetheless worth gathering up in a summary fashion here. First, as we have seen, Aquinas presents love as pertaining to the appetite, but while the movement of the appetite terminates in the *bonum in rebus*, the movement of love terminates in the soul. This seems like a contradiction. Second, Aquinas defines love as a passion, but at the same time distinguishes between *amor concupiscentiae*, love of desire—which is the more properly “passional” form of love—and *amor amicitiae* or *benevolentiae*, which is precisely *not* a passion (in the strict sense of a change in sensible appetite), and identifies love of friendship as the proper sense of love.²³ The proper sense therefore fits the definition of love only in an analogous sense, which, one would have to admit, is odd. Third, Aquinas defines love as a *passion*, a movement of the sensitive appetite, and yet attributes love in a non-incidental sense to God, who has no passions. Fourth, Aquinas distinguishes between love and simple benevolence, i.e., willing the good of another, by saying that love implies a kind of prior bond, which benevolence does not necessarily have.²⁴ But if love were *simply* an appetitive movement toward the good, the basis of this important distinction would simply disappear. Fifth, the movement of appetite, like all movements, is a transition from potency to act. But when Aquinas explains the friendship that represents love in its most proper sense, as we just mentioned, he reveals that this proper sense of love is not a transition from potency to act, but rather a relation between two actualities, which share in a single form, as it were. In this case, once again, the proper sense of love cannot be *defined* as a movement within the appetitive order. Sixth, if actuality precedes potency, and so directs it, love as the *root* of all of the potencies of desire and the will, cannot itself be an ordination to the good, a mere potency seeking actualization,

23. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, q. 91, a. 10.

24. *ST* II–II, q. 27, a. 2. See especially the reply to objection 2.

but must itself already be an actuality, the presence of a form, and not simply a desire for it or an ordination *toward* it as a simple yet-to-be-achieved object.²⁵ And, finally, Aquinas affirms at one point that we are able to love more than we are able to know,²⁶ or in other words that the scope of our love exceeds the scope of our knowledge, but it is not obvious how such a transcendence would be possible if the apprehension that preceded love and so set its horizon were interpreted *simply* according to the order of knowledge, and thus of truth.

It may be the case that one can reply to each of these difficulties ad hoc, on the basis of accepted Thomistic principles, but I wish to suggest that the whole lot of them disappears at a single stroke with the introduction of the order of the beautiful in distinction from the order of the good and the order of the true. And if, as mathematicians and scientists tend to recognize, elegance is a sign of truth, then it seems to me this solution is worth considering. I propose that we not define love most basically as a passion in the strict sense, i.e., a movement of the sensitive appetite, which we then extend analogously, and somewhat awkwardly, to God, to the spiritual, and so non-passional faculty of the will, to friendship, and so forth. Instead, let us define love most basically as the soul's response to *beauty*, the reception of beautiful form—a reception that involves not only the intellect and will, but also, in human beings, the senses in their apprehensive as well as their appetitive capacities, a reception that transforms the appetite so as to be suited to the object, and *in this way* to provide the context within which the appetitive acts of will and desire take place.²⁷ If we do so, it seems to me we are able to

25. In what is certainly the classic article on Aquinas's concept of love ("Autour de la solution thomiste du problème de l'amour," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 6 [1931]: 174–274), H. D. Simonin points to an evolution from a more static to a more dynamic conception, in which love ceases to be the reception of form (as it is in Aquinas's *Sentences* commentary) and becomes more a movement *toward* the good. But of course this movement itself has to be ordered by a prior reception of form, which Simonin identifies with the act of intellect (188), while we are proposing it is love itself as a reception of aesthetic form *as distinct from* intelligible form.

26. ST I-II, q. 27, a. 2 ad 2.

27. The definition we are proposing, it ought to be noted, has much in common with the notion of love as a *passio*, insofar as the word indicates a fundamental receptivity. The definition differs in being broader and more

include the various dimensions that appear in Aquinas's account of love, gathering up the different claims, which may otherwise appear to rub against each other, into a harmonious unity. First, the connection to beauty brings home the *receptive* aspect of love (the movement from the thing into the soul),²⁸ which distinguishes love from all the other acts of appetite,²⁹ while at the same time distinguishing love clearly from the specifically intellectual reception of truth. Here, it becomes perfectly obvious how the scope of love would in some respect extend beyond our explicit understanding. Moreover, it illuminates why love tends to have a passional dimension—recall: passion means to undergo, or to receive—in beings capable of passion, while at the same time it does not exclude the properly spiritual act of affirmation that we see most perfectly in God, in his acts of creation and redemption, but also in the human acts of will. Finally, if beauty is a reception of form that comes to rest in the apprehension itself as distinct from the satisfaction of the appetite per se, this *complacentia* may be said to establish the *actual* context within which acts of appetite take place. In this case, it is clear both how love would be distinct from mere benevolence (it is a unity *from* which one acts), and how it would not represent a transition from potency to act but a sharing of actuality, which *precedes* all such transitions and gives them order (as act precedes and orders potency). The *real bond* of friendship thus presents itself naturally as the paradigm of love. In sum, the various tensions that I enumerated in Aquinas's understanding of love disappear the moment we reconceive love as a response to beauty.

As for the problem of beauty itself in Aquinas, we face the dilemma I alluded to at the outset. On the one hand, beauty seems for a variety of reasons to warrant inclusion on the list

comprehensive, including the higher dimensions of the soul already at the beginning, and not only by analogous extension.

28. Frederick Crowe is the author who has no doubt emphasized this element the most, and he does so under the belief that it has been widely neglected: see "Complacency and Concern in the Thought of St. Thomas," *Theological Studies* 20 (1959): 1–39, 198–230, 343–95.

29. More precisely, it is what accounts for their receptive dimension: preceding them, it *is* the receptivity that then characterizes what is proper to each. Note that otherwise the passions will tend to be interpreted in a more subjective direction.

of the transcendental properties of being. On the other hand, when he presents his most detailed and extensive account of the transcendentals and their relation to each other, Aquinas does not mention it. Now, against those who would take this silence to imply exclusion, Professor Michael Waddell has drawn our attention to a point that is often overlooked in this debate: Aquinas does not claim in this exposition to be offering a definitive list of the transcendentals, but instead describes them sufficiently to bring to light the nature of truth. The exposition in the *De veritate* occurs, after all, in response to the question “What is Truth?,” and not in response to the question “What are the transcendental properties of being?”³⁰ This observation challenges us, who would want to include beauty on the list, to find a fitting place for it in Aquinas’s account.³¹ Aquinas may not explicitly exclude beauty, but it is also not obvious where one might discover a hole in his account, so to speak, big enough for beauty. To defend beauty’s status as a transcendental property requires that we complement the negative argument that silence does not imply exclusion with a positive argument that would make clear specifically what *contribution* beauty makes to our understanding both of being and of the human soul that corresponds to being in its very essence, such as Aquinas presents this in the *De veritate*.³² To put a final seal on the effort to find a place for beauty, it seems to me that a stronger argument could hardly be found than to show that beauty is the essential correlate of *love*, as distinct from the goodness that correlates to the appetite simply. Not only does this correlation elevate the significance of *love* in a manner that fits Aquinas’s thought well insofar as he is a Christian thinker and not only an interpreter of Aristotle, since this account makes love more than just a moment in the soul’s satisfaction of appetite, but a complete perfection

30. See Michael Waddell, “Truth or Transcendentals: What *Was* St. Thomas’s Intention at *De Veritate* 1.1?,” *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 197–219.

31. Aertsen rightly insists on this point.

32. Here we may consider Waddell’s arguments in another essay, “Integrating Beauty,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 1–18, which demonstrates the interplay between intellect and will, thought and appetite, that beauty implies. This is an indispensable piece of the puzzle.

already in itself;³³ the correlation also establishes a foundation for what we might say is the irreducible distinction of beauty from the good. Those that deny the transcendental status of beauty—like Aertsen, mentioned at the outset—argue that beauty is at most an expression of the subordination of goodness to truth in the soul's normal operation, but if beauty transcends the appetitive order in the manner I have suggested, the connection between goodness and truth that it represents turns out to be, not a mere moment, but a complete event in itself, with its own proper potency and actuality, its own principle and terminus, distinct from the act of intellect in relation to truth and the act of will or appetite in relation to the good. Beauty turns out in this case to be an essential dimension of the meaning of reality, and, if this is indeed the case, there are serious consequences if it is neglected. If we recognize a connection between beauty and love, we see that beauty cannot be removed from the edifice of Aquinas's thought any more than goodness or truth, without the whole thing crashing down. Indeed, beauty would turn out to be even *more* foundational than goodness and truth, since it establishes the context within which all of our acts of understanding and desire take place. "Every agent, whatever it be, does every action from love of some kind,"³⁴ which is to say that *every action is ultimately a response at some level to beauty*.

4.

Having looked at some of the technical aspects of the question, let us now turn in our concluding section to think through the more concrete and general consequences of this argument. There are quite a few in fact, but I will highlight just three of them, which strike me as especially significant. First of all, connecting love to beauty, rather than goodness alone, sets into starker relief

33. At the same time, it is a perfection that is not closed, but, as positively disposing the appetite, opens up and indeed in some sense already starts the soul in the path toward the particular acts of intellect and will in which the soul then directly appropriates its object. Simonin misses this point: if love is a *terminatio*, he asks, how can it be the *principle* of the acts of appetite? See Simonin, "Autour de la solution thomiste du problème de l'amour," 182–83.

34. ST I-II, q. 28, a. 6.

than might otherwise be the case the gratuitous, or the essentially non-possessive, dimension of love. In the *Summa*, Aquinas observes that love designates a relation to goodness in its *absolute* sense, which is to say in a sense that is in a fundamental respect indifferent to the immediate presence or absence of the beloved object.³⁵ What he means is that, if I love something, I affirm it as simply good in itself, in a way that goes beyond its relativity to my own desires and needs. There is a free generosity of spirit that arises in this affirmation.³⁶ The world is a better place because you, my beloved, exist. This absolute sense of goodness, as certain medieval thinkers noted, is directly connected to *beauty*,³⁷ since it designates goodness specifically in its truth, its simple in-itself reality, and the unity of goodness and truth is beauty.

Goodness normally speaking bears more immediately on appetite in one way or another: we recognize a thing as good because it satisfies some desire or need, because it conveys some benefit. When we think of goodness in this way, we think of a thing's being good *for me*, being useful *to me*, serving some purpose *that I have*. All of these forms of relativity to appetite are, of course, indispensable at some level and I do not at all mean to disparage or demonize this aspect. But it does not take great powers of imagination to see that if our relation to things falls exhaustively into this category, a certain "magic" and wonder disappears from our world. In such a world, there is nothing surprising, nothing that takes our breath away, nothing that causes us simply to stand back and marvel, because everything has a pregiven place, a function to fulfill, a clear and distinct explanation. Beauty, by contrast, is the "just-is-ness" of things. When we look up at a starry sky—to take the classic example, even if it is becoming an increasingly rare experience—we are not in-

35. *ST I*, q. 20, a. 1.

36. We do not mean to suggest that the love of beauty excludes desire, as for example Kant proposes with his notion of disinterestedness, but that love of beauty includes desire in a way that transcends it, or in other words that desire is essential to the love of beauty, but desire does not wholly circumscribe that love.

37. See Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 113, in which he refers to the discussion in Alexander of Hales's *Summa Theologiae*. Alexander defines beauty as the good that pleases our apprehension: *Summa Theologiae* I, tract. III, q. 3, a. 2, n. 103.

structed or fed, we do not envision the benefits that this marvel might bring to us; instead, we are simply moved in a deep way, and if we say anything at all, it is just the painfully inarticulate, “wow.” This “being moved” is just the *co-aptatio* or *complacentia* that constitutes love. If we interpret love as the first step inside the appetitive movement toward the good, we would think of this experience as a being poised to satisfy my desire, a prompting to undertake some particular action; but if we think of love in terms of beauty, this being moved is my resting in the simple affirmation of the thing as I behold it. The starry sky is no doubt an especially poignant example of free, almost reverent, admiration, but there is something analogous to it in every experience of beauty, whether it be the beauty of a person, of a child, or even something as simple as a plastic bag tossed about in the breeze, as presented in the film *American Beauty*, from a decade or so ago.³⁸ The movement of the reception of beauty is not first an appetitive movement toward, a desire or pursuit or seeking, but rather a stepping back that lets be in simple gratitude.

This “gratuitous” aspect of love, as a response to beauty, becomes especially interesting if we think of it, not as a relatively rare occurrence that perhaps knocks us off our feet from time to time, but as a fundamental dimension of our relation to the world generally. As we have seen, Aquinas says that every single act by any agent whatsoever is done out of love, *ex amore*.³⁹ If love is a response to beauty, as I have been proposing, this means that at the core of everything we do, even if we are unconscious of it, lies some experience of beauty, a glimpse of the gratuitousness and wonderfulness of reality that displays itself before us and invites us in. We cannot pursue this in any detail here, but it would be quite fruitful, I think, to reflect on the shape our action would take if we recognized in a more serious way this moment of gratuity that lies at its root. We would no longer, in this case, be able to reduce the sense of action simply to the rational pursuit of self-interest, as is so often the case in the contemporary

38. For all of its problems, one of the points of the film was to show how beauty interrupts the monotony of mere appetite. The main character initially sees beauty as eliciting appetite, but in the end experiences beauty as a life-changing epiphany.

39. *ST* I-II, q. 28, a. 6.

“neo-Darwinian” vision of man as the animal that has turned the natural drive for self-preservation into a rational project, a political order, and a global economic system. Instead, we would see that there is a reference to the other beyond the self, a fundamental receptivity, at the *very heart* of all our desires, and that what characterizes desire as such is an interest that *necessarily* transcends mere self-interest, which means that everything we do has a dimension of gift as much as desire, receptive generosity as much as calculated self-seeking.

Second, in addition to the note of “gratuitousness” the linking of love to beauty introduces, this connection also reinforces the proper place of reason or intelligence in love. It may be that beauty defies simple explanation in the sense that it refuses to subordinate itself to some instrumental purpose, but this does not make beauty—and therefore its correlate, love—irrational. Instead, as Plato showed at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition, love is not *ir*-rational, but *supra*-rational; it is not less than reason, but more than reason, which means that it *includes* reason even while transcending it.⁴⁰ The assumption that love is irrational, that it is simply a feeling or emotion in which the mind has no significant involvement, is a fairly common one in our society. It may be that this way of conceiving love has arisen in part as a protest against the tendency to reduce love to appetite, and from there to calculated self-interest, and thus this notion represents a desire to recover a sense of the “magic” I mentioned above. But it seems to me that this protest inevitably ends in self-defeat. The more love is conceived as an irrational feeling, the more it allows itself in fact to be reduced to a sort of animalistic drive for gratification. If we recognize the connection between love and beauty, by contrast, and interpret beauty in continuity with the classical tradition, we see that love, in its most proper sense, requires reason. Just as beauty cannot be recognized except by a rational creature, so too does the existence of love in intellectual beings—i.e., in *persons*—provide the paradigm for what love most essentially is. Without reason, a creature can take in only the sensible appearance of things and can respond to these in an immediate way according to the

40. On this theme, see Josef Pieper, *“Divine Madness”: Plato’s Case Against Secular Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

only alternatives that appetite allows, namely, pursuit or flight. An animal reacts by instinct to sense stimulus, and that reaction concerns the animal's immediate physical wellbeing: it stalks, it pounces, it fights, it flees, it hides, but it does not—for the most part—stand back and marvel in astonishment. Animals do not contemplate.⁴¹ Reason, by contrast, is precisely what lifts us above immediate instinctual response in relation to appetite, and sets us free to affirm the truth of a thing's goodness, its absolute, in-itself goodness, the "just-is-ness" that I connected above with beauty. Love is more than mind, but it is *full* of mind, and if it is not it will lose the very quality that makes it *love* in the proper sense as distinct from simple animal desire. For a true love to be sustained requires us, not to look beyond beauty, as we are sometimes told—a recommendation that concedes in fact that beauty is "only skin deep"—but to deepen our sensitivity to beauty, to increase our openness to it.

Finally, as this last point already indicates, recovering the link between love and beauty deepens our sense of beauty's fundamental *importance*. We have grown accustomed to thinking of beauty as merely "cosmetic," so to speak, as an ultimately trivial delight in our senses. From this perspective, beauty does not really add much to human existence, and insistence on beauty would seem to indicate some character flaw: I want experiences of beauty in order to escape from what would otherwise be the drudgery of ordinary existence. I decorate myself just to attract attention, to manipulate, to get what I want, and I decorate my surroundings in order to create a pleasant atmosphere, to sweeten the monotony of reality. But too much attention to beauty, from this perspective, would be self-indulgent, and would distract us from the serious business of living, from the decidedly unromantic work of our daily tasks, our earning a living, our service in attending to our responsibilities.

But the picture changes quite dramatically if we acknowledge the essential connection between beauty and love,

41. Of course, there is something analogous in their play. In his illuminating studies of animal forms, Adolf Portmann suggests that there is much more going on in the animal world than the mere struggle for survival: see his *Animal Forms and Patterns: A Study of the Appearance of Animals* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967). Attempts to reduce beauty in the natural world to this schema have been shown invariably to commit all sorts of logical fallacies.

and the centrality of love in proper human existence. In this case, beauty is not just pleasant sense stimulation. Instead, it is, we might say, the world's calling us to attention, it is a surprising intrusion of sorts into our workaday routine, our repetitive cycles of desire and gratification, that opens us from our very core to reality, an "epiphany" that recalls us to give heed to the meaning of things. We all know what it means to say that the experience of love, in its purest examples, is "transformative." This is not merely metaphorical language; the expression is metaphysically true in the strictest sense. Aquinas, as we saw, describes love as the soul's being *acted on* by an object, an event in which the beloved object gives the subject a desire, tunes the soul *specifically* to itself, by communicating to it a particular form. This is the *complacentia* we spoke about earlier. We ought to think of this communication of form, this attunement of a subject to itself, as the display of beauty. Beauty is not, in this case, just sense stimulation; it is a call that awakens us to things in their deepest reality.⁴² When we experience beauty, we undergo a transformation, which is perhaps somewhat obvious in the dramatic and overwhelming experiences, but in fact remains subtly true for every experience of beauty we have, no matter how apparently trivial. The oft-quoted phrase from the nineteenth-century German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, expresses just this transformation. His poem "The Archaic Torso of Apollo" describes the beauty of this statute gradually coming into focus as the poet gazes on its various aspects, a beauty that finally reveals itself in a dramatic instant, "bursting, like a star, from all the borders of itself." The epiphany of beauty coincides with a sort of implicit command, which Rilke presents in the poem's concluding lines: "For here there is no place that does not see you. / You must change your life." I want to suggest that this experience of beauty is not just a transformation of our heart, our desires, but at the very same time of our *minds*. We not only feel differently after a deep experience of beauty, we not only have the direction of our lives altered, but we also *see* differently. Beauty opens our heart only because at the same time it opens our eyes. This vision makes us more serious human beings, more substantial, more real.

42. Ancient writers connect beauty, "*to kalon*," with the verb "*kaleo*," meaning "to call." See, for example, Dionysius, *Divine Names*, IV.

If all this is true, it confirms something intuited by some of the great visionaries of education, especially, but not exclusively, with respect to children, from the past century: we can think of names like Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Charlotte Mason, and even John Dewey.⁴³ From the previous century, I would put on the list the one I esteem most myself, Friedrich Schiller.⁴⁴ In their very different ways, these thinkers recognized that the experience of beauty lies at the foundation of education. It is beauty that generates love by opening us up to the world in its truth and goodness, and so we could quite plausibly argue that beauty is *central* to any properly human endeavor at education. When we experience beauty, we are not just gratifying our appetite, but being *in-formed*: we are taking *in* the form of things as they communicate themselves to us in their appearances.⁴⁵ This reception of form, with its attunement, deepens our understanding of the world, not through the acquisition of knowledge or skills, but through the development of a receptive space in the core of our being, rendering it a place of hospitality, so to speak, that allows us to welcome in all that we do learn, to give it its proper place, and to be ourselves changed as a result. In this respect, we need beauty to deepen and fructify our love.

In a word, a recovery of the primacy of beauty would transform both our *thinking* and our *doing*: it would introduce contemplative wonder more fundamentally at the origin of all our knowing⁴⁶—an origin that constantly abides as a life-giving

43. To mention all of these pedagogical thinkers together is not to imply a general approval of their theories of education, nor of the anthropology (and metaphysics) implicit in these theories. Dewey's notions warrant particular criticism on this level. The point of mentioning them here is simply to note that these thinkers, on the far ends of various spectrums, nevertheless agree on the fundamental significance of beauty for education.

44. See Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

45. For a beautiful description of this point, which opens up into themes of profound metaphysical and theological significance, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 59–67.

46. Aristotle famously begins his *Metaphysics* with the claim that “all men by nature desire to know,” and he demonstrates that desire by the “delight we take in the senses,” especially the sense of sight. He goes on to explain that this desire becomes philosophical when it deepens into won-

principle—and it would introduce a disposition of gratitude more fundamentally at the origin of our action. The primacy of beauty coincides with a sense of being as gift, to such an extent that we cannot have one without the other. We may now return to the starting point of our essay and see that what is at issue in the question of the “forgotten transcendental” is much more than a question of intellectual history. In the end, it does not matter whether or why or under whose influence the principal thinkers of the Middle Ages seem to have departed from the classical tradition in certain ways by marginalizing beauty and conceiving love more exclusively in terms of the appetitive order of goodness. What matters, finally, is what is *true*, and what this implies for our self-understanding, but also for our understanding of the world in general, still today. In this regard, the insights Aquinas offers into the precise nature of love, and also the meaning of beauty, are indispensable, and bring out features of the classical tradition that might otherwise lie buried. It is my hope to have indicated, however modestly, some of the potential fruitfulness of connecting what he says about beauty and what he says about love, and perhaps to have awakened some genuine admiration, both for this great medieval thinker, and also for the great tradition that speaks through him, and so manages, still today, to say something essential to us.⁴⁷ □

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der. Delight in perception is, of course, the traditional description of the experience of beauty.

47. This paper was originally delivered on November 3, 2016 as the annual “McMahon Aquinas Lecture” at St. Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Indiana. The present essay is a very slightly revised version of that lecture, but the more “conversational” tone, fitting for a lecture, has been preserved. I wish to thank the philosophy faculty and administration of St. Mary’s for their hospitality, and above all Professor Michael Waddell, holder of the George and Edna McMahon Chair in Philosophy at St. Mary’s, for his invitation, gracious welcome, and stimulating conversation.