

Beauty, Transcendence, and the Inclusive Hierarchy of Creation¹

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INTERPRETERS OF THOMAS AQUINAS have long argued about whether he holds that beauty is a “transcendental,” a feature of reality coextensive with all that exists, like unity, goodness, and truthfulness.² In the first part of this article, I will argue that Aquinas can

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² A helpful survey of modern scholarly opinions is presented by Jan A. Aertsen in *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (c.a. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 161–76. Jacques Maritain argues that beauty is a transcendental in *Art and Scholasticism: with Other Essays*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Scribner’s, 1939). Etienne Gilson speaks of *pulcrum* as “the forgotten transcendental” in *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 159–63. John Wippel does not include beauty in his account of the transcendentals in Aquinas in *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 192–94. Aertsen himself seems to be of two minds. In his earlier *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), he speaks of beauty as a kind of transcendental (335–59), while in the later work noted above, he expresses reticence. See also the brief but insightful interpretation of Pasquale Porro, *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical and Philosophical Profile*, trans. J. Trabbic and R. Nutt (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 203–5, who treats beauty as a transcendental in Aquinas’s thought.

be read to affirm in an implicit way that beauty is a transcendental. In the second part, I will consider what it might mean from a Thomistic point of view to speak of a transcendent divine beauty, given Aquinas's metaphysical commitments, particularly with respect to his doctrine of divine simplicity. In the final part, I will treat the question of how the beauty of the creation both manifests and conceals divine beauty.

Beauty as a Transcendental Feature of Reality

Aquinas does not list beauty as a transcendental term in texts on transcendental notions. Perhaps, then, one should simply exclude it from a responsible account of his teaching on this subject. However, at least two well-known texts should give us reason to pause before reaching such a conclusion. One is found in his *Commentary on Dionysius' Divine Names*, chapter 4, lectio 5. The other is in his discussion of the beauty of the eternal Son of God in a discussion of the Holy Trinity in the *Summa theologiae* I, q. 39, a. 8.

In the first of these texts, Aquinas is commenting on Dionysius. The extended text is analytically dense. Aquinas is discussing ways in which one might say that God is beautiful and in what ways one might not say so. I will return to his topic below. Here, however, it is pertinent to consider Aquinas's discussion of the presence of beauty in all that exists. He makes six main points.³ First, all beauty comes

³ *In divinis nominibus*, ch. 4, lec. 5, no. 348–49: “Pulchrum de Deo dicitur secundum causam. . . . Dicit ergo primo quod ex pulchro isto provenit esse omnibus existentibus: claritas enim est de consideratione pulchritudinis, ut dictum est; omnis autem forma, per quam res habet esse, est participatio quaedam divinae claritatis; et hoc est quod subdit, quod singula sunt pulchra secundum propriam rationem, idest secundum propriam formam; unde patet quod ex divina pulchritudine esse omnium derivatur. Similiter etiam dictum est quod de ratione pulchritudinis est consonantia, unde omnia, quae, qualitercumque ad consonantiam pertinent, ex divina pulchritudine procedunt; et hoc est quod subdit, quod propter pulchrum divinum sunt omnium rationalium creaturarum concordiae, quantum ad intellectum; concordant enim qui in eadem sententiam conveniunt; et amicitiae, quantum ad affectum; et communionem, quantum ad actum vel ad quodcumque extrinsecum; et universaliter omnes creaturae, quantamcumque unionem habent, habent ex virtute pulchri” (“The beautiful is said of God according to cause. . . . He [Dionysius] says therefore first that from the Beautiful esse [existence] comes to all existing things: for it is clear from the consideration of beauty, as was said; but every form, through which a thing has esse, is a certain participation of the divine brightness; and this is what he adds, that singulars are beautiful according to a proper notion, i.e., according to a proper form; whence it is apparent that from the divine Beauty the esse of all things is derived. Similarly, also it was said that consonance is from the

from God insofar as God is the cause of all that exists. Second, he gives a first definition of beauty: beauty can be defined ontologically as the splendor (*claritas*) that results from form; everything has a formal determination of some kind insofar as it has existence (*esse*); therefore, insofar as anything exists (and has some formal ontological content) it has some degree of beauty. Third, the splendor of the form in created things is a participation in the divine splendor from which it originates. The divine nature is the transcendent exemplar of beauty in diverse finite created realities. Fourth, then (and perhaps most importantly), “*ex divina pulchritudine esse omnium derivatur*”: literally, the existence of everything originates from divine beauty. Fifth, a second definition of beauty is considered: beauty can be defined ontologically as a property of being that emerges from proportion or harmony (*consonantia*). For example, authentic relationships of personal friendship imply spiritual harmony or concord and are beautiful and noble in this respect. Sixth, then, the concord or beautiful harmonies we find in the created order are expressive of the wisdom of God, who is the author of creation.

Evidently, if the *existence* of everything derives from divine beauty, and if everything that has existence is in some way beautiful by virtue of its intrinsic form, then it would seem to follow logically that beauty, for Aquinas, is a characteristic of being that is coextensive with all that exists. We see a similar idea expressed in the aforementioned passage of *ST*. Here, however, Aquinas gives a more synthetic definition of beauty in things that combines both the definitions found in our previous discussion, *claritas* and *proportio*, but it also adds a third, *integritas*: ontological integrity or wholeness.

Species or beauty has a likeness to the property of the Son. For beauty includes three conditions, “integrity” or “perfection,”

notion of beauty; whence all things, which pertain to consonance in any way, proceed from the divine Beauty. And this is what he adds, that because of the divine Good there is concord of all rational creatures with respect to intellect: for they agree who come together in the same opinion and friendship with respect to affection; and communication with respect to act, or something extrinsic; and universally all creatures, whatever unity they have, they have from the power of the Beautiful”). All Latin for this work will be taken from *In librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio*, ed. C. Pera (Turin, IT: Marietti, 1950); all English translations will be from Harry C. Marsh, “Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas’s *In librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus exposition*” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1994), here at 361–62.

since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due “proportion” or “harmony”; and lastly, “brightness” or “clarity,” whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color.⁴

The implication of this point of view is readily apparent. God is essentially beautiful, and God has created all that exists in light of the eternal Word and Wisdom of God, who is the Son. Consequently, all that exists and that derives from God is in some way beautiful. The beauty in things themselves has a threefold foundation. Most fundamentally, there is the integrity or wholeness of a thing. A given tree is beautiful because it is integral, having all its limbs, leaves, and flowers, having reached its maturity and magnificence. Second there is proportionality. A tree is beautiful because of the proportions that emerge from the form. The quantitative arrangement of the branches in proportionate arrangement to one another is beautiful, but so are the arrangements of the colors of the trunk, leaves, and flowers, which are harmonious in both qualitatively and quantitatively proportionate ways. Most ultimate in the order of beauty is splendor. When the form is integral and perfect and expresses itself through the right proportion of harmonious perfections, what emerges is an innate splendor or clarity of form. A tree that is beautiful has a splendid magnificence that derives from its ontological perfection, its integrity and harmonious proportions.

If this is the case, we must ask about the relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty. Beauty is the splendor of the species or form, and its attraction is that of the truth or formal determination of a reality insofar as it has the power to garner our admiration. In other words, when beauty does attract, whether intellectually or sensibly, it does so by virtue of the splendor of the form, which is capable of eliciting the appetite. We might say that beauty is the goodness of the truth of a thing, the delightfulness (or appetibility) of its intelligibility. To state things in this fashion is to place emphasis on the formal determination as the key element, rather than the splendor, a decision that gives primacy to the truth of the beautiful reality, emphasizing its goodness only secondarily. However, we could also say that beauty is the species or intelligible determination of goodness. This way of

⁴ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 39, a. 8. All translations of *ST* are taken from *Summa Theologica*, trans. English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

speaking places emphasis on the goodness of beauty but notes that it implies formal determination (and thus a truth) of a definite kind. This is why beauty invites admiration, while goodness perfects. Goodness is grounded in final causality, while beauty is grounded in formal causality. Beauty has the power to hold our gaze. Goodness has the power to give our lives ultimate purpose or meaning. The two are not to be confused, even if they are often found together.

The Beauty of God

Aquinas clearly affirms that God is beautiful, but what can it mean to say this? St. Thomas typically avoids offering any definition of God in his writings, and instead makes thematic appeal to the threefold *viae* taken from Dionysius the Areopagite in his *On the Divine Names*, ch. 7, lec. 3.⁵ According to this way of thinking, creatures do resemble God as the effects of the creator resemble their cause, by similitude. Therefore, they allow us to signify positively what he is essentially by analogy. However, this process of signifying must be qualified by a series of well-thought-out negations, since God is also in many respects unlike or dissimilar to his created effects.

Aquinas makes clear in his *Commentary on the Divine Names* that one can speak of the uncreated beauty of God. However, when considering this procedure in accord with the threefold *viae* mentioned above, one must take into account first and foremost Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity. In *ST* I, q. 3, Aquinas considers divine simplicity in several respects, four of which are particularly consequential for our considerations.⁶ First, St. Thomas affirms that God does not have

⁵ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 12: "From the knowledge of sensible things, the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can his essence be seen. But because they are his effects and depend upon their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God whether he exists, and to know of him what must necessarily belong to him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by him. Hence, we know of his relationship with creatures in so far as he is the cause of them all; also, that creatures differ from him, inasmuch as he is not in any way part of what is caused by him; and that creatures are not removed from him by reason of any defect on his part, but because he super-exceeds them all" (translation slightly modified). Note that, just after this text, Aquinas proceeds to clarify (in q. 13) the analogical character of the knowledge this way of thinking permits. For similar texts employing the triple *viae*, see: *Summa Contra Gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 30; *In divinis nominibus*, ch. 7, lec. 4; *De potentia Dei*, q. 7, a. 5, ad 2.

⁶ The summary offered here of Aquinas on divine simplicity is a succinct echo of two longer treatments: Thomas Joseph White, "Divine Simplicity and the

a body.⁷ Second, there is no distinction of individuality and natural form in God.⁸ There are no other gods than God. Third, there is in God no distinction of essence and existence.⁹ God's being is not in a genus. He gives existence to all that is. God is intelligible for us only as the origin and author of all that falls within the transcendental range of being, and not as that which is ontologically common to all created being. Fourth, there exists in God no distinction between substance and properties (or "accidents").¹⁰

How do these four considerations of divine simplicity affect our understanding of divine beauty? God is the cause of perfections in creatures, such that perfection names like "goodness," "wisdom," and "beauty" can rightly be attributed to God. All that exists is beautiful, and beauty is in some way an expression of the splendor of a form or nature. Consequently, the divine nature or essence may be said to be beautiful as the transcendent, hidden cause of the beauty present in all things. However, we must remove from perfection terms attributed to God any notion of ontological imperfection (by way of negation) so as to posit them of God in a super-eminent way. Furthermore, beauty was defined in creatures by recourse to three notions: integrity of form, proportionality or harmony, and splendor. However, in light of the metaphysics of divine simplicity, we clearly cannot attribute the modalities of beauty we find in creatures directly to God. What might we say, then, about the beauty of God when employing Aquinas's Dionysian framework for divine naming?

First, God is not a body or a hylomorphic subject, composed of matter and form. But beauty as we experience it in physical realities always emerges in a material form, with its own integrity, quantitative and sensibly qualitative proportions, and physical splendor. By contrast, if God is beauty, his beauty is literally hidden from view. There is no icon of God, no sensate representation of the ineffable divine essence. Nor can the formal beauty of God be conceived after the pattern of a nature or essence abstracted by us from a material subject, like the beauty of a human being, a star, or

Holy Trinity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 1 (2016): 66–93; White, "Nicene Orthodoxy and Trinitarian Simplicity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2016): 727–50.

⁷ *ST I*, q. 3, aa. 1–2.

⁸ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 3.

⁹ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4.

¹⁰ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 6.

an orange tree. The immaterial beauty of God transcends all our abstract conceptual notions.

Second, God is not an individual of a common kind, nor is he a member of a larger genus. Therefore, the beauty of God is not that of a particular *kind* of reality.¹¹ Rather, it is the uniquely transcendent beauty that is the cause of all else that exists, the beauty that gives being to the world.¹²

Third, God does not receive his existence from others and is not a member of the transcendental set of all created beings (*ens commune*). Therefore, the beauty of God is not a part of the transcendental range of beauty found in all existence. Rather, this beauty is known only by analogy as the unique total cause of all created existence, as the beauty that gives being to all else that is beautiful. Nor can God be alienated from this attribute, since God is not contingently beautiful. Rather, this property must be attributed to him eternally and in ontological distinction and independence from the whole created order.

Finally, there is no composition in God of substance and properties, and so one must also say that God is his own beauty and that, in God, beauty is identical in some way with being, goodness, wisdom, and power.¹³ These divine names are appropriately drawn from

¹¹ *In divinis nominibus*, ch. 4, lec. 5, no. 345.

¹² Aquinas makes this point quite clearly in *In divinis nominibus*, ch. 4, lec. 5, no. 343: "Excessus autem est duplex: unus in genere, qui significatur per comparativum vel superlativum; alius extra genus, qui significatur per additionem huius praepositionis: super. . . . Et licet iste duplex excessus in rebus causatis non simul conveniat, tamen in Deo simul dicitur et quod est pulcherrimus et superpulcher; non quod sit in genere, sed quod ei attribuuntur omnia quae sunt cuiuscumque generis" ("But excess is twofold: one in genus, which is signified through the comparative or superlative; the other outside of genus, which is signified through the addition of the preposition 'super' [outside]. . . . And although this twofold excess in caused things does not come together simultaneously, nevertheless it is said in God simultaneously both that God is most beautiful and super beautiful [beyond all created beauty], not that God is in a genus, but since all things which are in any genus are attributed to God").

¹³ *In divinis nominibus*, ch. 4, lec. 5, nos. 345–47: "Sed Deus quoad omnes et simpliciter pulcher est. Et omnium praemissorum assignat rationem, cum subdit quod ipse est pulcher *secundum seipsum*; per quod, excluditur quod non est pulcher secundum unam partem tantum, neque in aliquo tempore tantum, neque in aliquo loco tantum; quod enim alicui secundum se et primo convenit, convenit et toti et semper ubique. Iterum, Deus est pulcher in seipso, non per respectum ad aliquod determinatum et ideo non potest dici ad aliquid sit pulcher et ad aliquid non pulcher et neque quibusdam pulcher et quibusdam

distinct features of created reality to denote by analogy something that is mysteriously one in God himself.

If we return to the threefold definition, we can consider the apophatic character of God's super-eminent beauty. There is *integritas* in God because the divine essence is one and integral. Surely we may say by analogy that God's divine essence is splendid and eternally beautiful. May we attribute a beauty of proportionality or harmony to the divine essence? In a human being, spiritual properties may emerge progressively that are beautiful but also complex due to their proportionate arrangement. A discursive philosophical argument may be beautiful due to its integrity as expressed through a proportionate chain of reasoning, attaining to a kind of intellectual splendor. But in God, divine knowledge is of a higher order that is non-compositional. In a human being, a spiritual moral virtue like charity may emerge over time and appear beautiful. But God is eternally charitable and his properties are identical with the divine essence as such. We may conclude, then, that there is no compositional proportionality of quantity or quality in God, and therefore no strict analogy of beauty between creatures and God in this particular sense. However,

non pulcher. Iterum, est *semper* et uniformiter pulcher, per quod excluditur primus defectus pulchritudinis, scilicet variabilitas. Deinde, cum decit: *et sicut omnis . . .* ostendit qua ratione dicatur Deus superpulcher, in quantum in seipso habet excellenter et ante omnia alia, fontem totius pulchritudinis. In ipsa enim *natura simplici et supernaturali* omnium *pulchrorum* ab ea derivatorum praeexistunt *omnis pulchritudo et omne pulchrum*, non quidem divisim, sed *uniformiter* per modum quo multiplices effectus in causa praeexistunt" ("But God is beautiful in every respect and simply. And he [Dionysius] designates the reason of all the foregoing, when he adds that God is beauty in himself; through which it is excluded that God's beauty is not according to one part alone, nor in some time alone, nor in some place alone; for what is befitting to something according to itself and first, befits it wholly and always an everywhere. Moreover, God is beauty in himself, not with respect to something determinate [according to a finite form], and for this reason neither can it be said that in some respect God is beautiful and in some respect he is not nor that in some ways God is beautiful and in some ways not beautiful. Again, God is always uniformly beautiful, through which is excluded the first defect of beauty, namely of variability. Then when he says 'and as of all beautiful etc.' he shows why God is called 'beyond' the beautiful. And he says that God is excellently and before all others the fountain of all beauty. For in God's simple and supernatural nature itself all beauty and every beauty of all beautiful things derived from it preexist, not indeed dividedly, but uniformly through the mode in which multiple effects preexist in a cause") (translation slightly modified from Marsh, 661).

the beautiful proportions of complex created things, both within themselves and among themselves (as diverse realities related to one another), are beautiful by virtue of the existence and formal determinations that God has given them. Therefore, they are expressive in their created complexity of what must exist in God in a wholly other, higher, and utterly simple way. The wisdom of God is eternally beautiful, and he expresses this wisdom within the complexity of creation by giving radiantly intelligible forms to so many diverse and complementary beings. The goodness of God is eternally beautiful, and he expresses this goodness within the complexity of creation by giving spiritually and sensibly attractive forms to so many diverse and complementary beings. The wisdom and goodness of God's beauty are expressed outwardly by the giving of existence to the created world, in its innately attractive intelligibility, and in the splendor of its diverse and manifold created forms.

Created Order as Concealment and Manifestation of Divine Beauty

How does this monotheistic vision of creation relate to the question of created beauty? From what we have argued, it follows that the created world is a kind of iconostasis of God. On the one hand, it serves to manifest, however imperfectly, the hidden beauty of God. The creation is not God, but God is omnipresent within all things, more interior to them than they are to themselves, as the inward cause of their very being. Consequently, their beauty is an expression of God's eternal wisdom. On the other hand, the world of finite beings is so utterly unlike God and wholly disproportionate to God ontologically that it cannot communicate directly any knowledge of what God is in himself. Therefore, the same beauty that is present in all that exists also conceals God. He remains hidden from sight, as the unknown ground of creation.

The world that God has created is beautiful in diverse ways. Based on Aquinas's threefold definition of beauty, we can note that each thing that exists is beautiful by reason of its inherent form: its integral wholeness, its manifold proportionate properties, and its expressive splendor. As already noted, such formal beauty in things reflects, in however faint a way, the transcendent beauty of God and relates each individual reality, however seemingly insignificant, directly to God as the primary author of its beauty. However, there is also an integrity of order *between* diverse individual forms of created reality and a corresponding proportionality and splendor that emerges from that

order that exists between them. From collective order, natural beauty emerges on a much larger scale.

Aquinas accepts the basic understanding of created reality as hierarchically differentiated, as one finds in classical Neo-platonic authors, Christian and non-Christian alike.¹⁴ There are realities that have being and are physical in kind but that are not alive. There are realities that are physical and living but that do not have knowledge. There are realities that are living and have sensate knowledge but have no rational knowledge or deliberate freedom. And there are beings that are alive and are characterized not only by sensate knowledge but also by intellectual understanding and the capacity to love by means of deliberate freedom. Each of these *kinds* of realities reflects something unique about the beauty of God.¹⁵ At the same time, each of these *kinds* of realities can contribute to the good of the others, but in a hierarchically differentiated way. Aquinas thinks that it is possible for living things to emerge ontologically from non-living things, but he also argues that, even if such emergence takes place, the specific form of living things is different in kind from that of non-living realities.¹⁶ Non-living things exist principally to create

¹⁴ See, for example, SCG III, ch. 22, where this metaphysical view of the ontological hierarchy of being is clearly presented.

¹⁵ The non-living physical universe does not need living beings in order to reflect something of the governing wisdom, grandeur, and power of God. Its physical magnitude, vastness, intricacy, intelligible historicity, and temporal order all seem to reflect something of the divine beauty. But this also is refracted amidst the physical contingency, ontological fragility, and sheer material and accidental arbitrariness that characterize much of its internal order. Living beings are unlike non-living things and like God by virtue of the fact that they are alive, but of course, their life is physical in its realization and not spiritual or everlasting. Consequently, they can be said to imitate the eternal life of God primarily by reproduction and self-propagation, a form of ontological persistence through time that resembles the unchanging eternity of God in an ontologically faint and imperfect but real way. Ecosystems of living creatures depend on one another even when their inhabitants prey on one another, or especially in such cases, and evolutionary systems suggest that the realization of new differentiations among various living things occurs in great part in reaction to, and thus ontological dependence on, the pressures brought to bear from the operations of other living and non-living things in a shared environment.

¹⁶ St. Thomas thinks that it is possible at least in principle for living things to arise historically from non-living material bodies, even if life represents a principle not merely reducible to material parts and their quantitative arrangement (see: ST I, q. 69, a. 2; q. 71, a. 1, ad 1; q. 73, a. 1, ad 3; q. 118, a. 1, sc). Consequently,

a context or setting in which living things can emerge. Plants exist for the sake of animals, and plants and animals exist for the sake of human beings. Human beings exist for the sake of life in community with one another, and ultimately for God. The visible cosmos exists so that human beings may live in pursuit of union with God by grace, in friendship and society with one another, and in harmony with the wider created order.¹⁷

The interdependent hierarchy that emerges from differentiated kinds of beings gives rise to a larger overarching order, one that implies all three notes of beauty. This cosmic and ontological order has its own relative *integrity*, its own *proportionality* or *harmony* between distinct kinds of beings, and its own *splendor* that is present in the ontological “mystery” of the universe. Distinct kinds of beings are characterized by distinct operations, and therefore they pursue distinct ends.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the distinct kinds of beings we find in the universe can be seen as profoundly complementary, set within a larger cosmic framework. This physical world is capable of supporting

Aquinas is able to situate a differentiated hierarchy of being (from non-living beings to plants to animals) within a gradated ontological spectrum that allows for the progressive emergence of higher forms from lower ones. On this topic with regards to evolution, see Lawrence Dewan, “The Importance of Substance,” in *Form and Being: Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 96–130.

¹⁷ SCG III, ch. 22, no. 8–9: “And since a thing is generated and preserved in being by the same reality, there is also an order in the preservation of things, which parallels the foregoing order of generation. Thus we see that mixed bodies are sustained by the appropriate qualities of the elements; Plants, in turn, are nourished by mixed bodies; animals get their nourishment from plants: so, those that are more perfect and more powerful from those that are more imperfect and weaker. In fact, man uses all kinds of things for his own advantage: some for food, others for clothing. . . . Other things man uses for transportation. . . . And, in addition to this, man uses all sense objects for the perfection of intellectual knowledge. Hence it is said of man in the Psalms (8:8) in a statement directed to God: ‘You [have] subjected all things under [your] feet,’ And Aristotle says, in the *Politics* I [5.1254b 9], that man has natural dominion over all animals. So, if the motion of the heavens is ordered to generation, and if the whole of generation is ordered to man as a last end within this genus, it is clear that the end of celestial motion is ordered to man, as to an ultimate end in the genus of generable and mobile beings” (in *Summa Contra Gentiles III*, trans. V. Bourke [New York: Hanover House, 1957]).

¹⁸ Aquinas’s understanding of natural end is analogical and quite flexible, modest enough to accommodate even the operations of atoms or minerals as realities having intrinsically oriented and statistically predictable agency that stems from their intrinsic forms.

the existence of living things and is capable of becoming a theatre for human rationality and freedom where specifically human communities can flourish. This overarching ontological order is beautiful in its own way, even if it is strange and vast and the detection of its deeper purpose can seem elusive or enigmatic to the human mind.

Conclusion

A theocentric understanding of beauty interprets the created world in light of God, who is uncreated beauty. An anthropocentric account of the centrality of the human community within the larger cosmos sees the beauty of the world as being of utility to the flourishing of the human community. These two visions are not opposed to one another. Nor are either of them opposed to a metaphysical and ethical vision of beauty in non-human creatures, one that acknowledges their intrinsic ontological worth apart from human beings, as creatures of God. The hierarchy of being is inclusive. Human beings should acknowledge the order of nature that preexists them precisely so as to live in the midst of nature with wisdom and aesthetic moderation. In one respect, God has created the vast, beautiful cosmos and the strange and wondrous development of living creatures in view of the emergence of human beings, in whom the created world becomes spiritually self-aware and capable of personal love. Acknowledging this means accepting and respecting the structures of nature that precede the human community and that sustain it in being. In another respect, God has created all things in view of himself, of his own eternal goodness. One can learn to receive the beauty of the created order from God and to offer that order back to God through the religious acknowledgement of God. Human beings can learn to acknowledge, then, not only the beauty and dignity of the creation that preexists them and their own hierarchical status within creation but also, and especially, the Creator, the uncreated beauty from whence all things come forth and to which they all inevitably return. Aquinas's metaphysics provides key insights for thinking about the beauty of existence in an integral and balanced way. N·V