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SUMMARY

The theology of beauty by Thomas Aquinas is not exceptionally complex. One may say that it is surprisingly simple, yet at the same time full of its own distinctive charm. The Dominican suggested two precise definitions of beauty. The first definition is called subjective – it refers to beauty as an event occurring between an object and its perceiver. Beauty needs somebody not only to spot it and to recognize it, but also to become fascinated and take pleasure in it. By nature, beauty wants to offer itself to the other. And in Thomas’ view, the very delight and pleasure testify to the presence of beauty.

Notwithstanding, is it true that beauty is of a subjective nature? In other words, is it only the perceiver who is capable of passing judgement on what is beautiful and what is ugly, what provokes disgust and repulsion, what is not even worth mentioning? The Dominican would say no. For in his view, there are objective criteria which enable people to determine whether a given thing is and may be called beautiful. Thomas created a list of these qualities and put them together in the second definition of beauty called objective. The first quality – and this is Thomas’ own original concept – is *integritas*, meaning fullness, wholeness, perfection: a thing is beautiful when it has everything it should, when it does not lack anything and there is nothing that needs to be added. The second quality is *proportio*, which relates to harmony and consonance of all elements of a given thing: not only does it have everything it needs, but also all its components are assembled in perfect order and consort with one another. The third quality is *claritas*, which is splendour, clarity, a clear demonstration of the thing’s internal truth which becomes evident and shines towards others. *Integritas, proportio, claritas* – these are three general criteria which, according to Thomas, are enough to determine whether a thing is objectively beautiful. These two definitions – subjective and objective – constitute the whole Thomas Aquinas’ theory of beauty.

Those definitions were not a result of any scholarly project conceived by Thomas or of his will to create a new aesthetic theory. Suffice it to say, he was not particularly attracted by philosophical aesthetics. Presumably, he was sensitive to the fine arts and the beauty of nature, but he never conceived any treatise on beauty – most likely he never even thought of it. His interest in beauty was plainly the result of him discovering that God was beautiful and He, as Beauty Uncreated, was the source of all created beauty. We must state it explicitly that the origin and explication of Thomas’ aesthetics lies in his theology.

In this book, I put forward a reconstruction of Thomas’ theory of beauty. It became a focal point and an original research perspective when analysing the problem of evil. At the end, I will point out five conclusions.

1. The pattern of beauty

Thomas introduces the subject of beauty already at the beginning of his most important scholarly achievement, the *Summa Theologiae*. In his view, beauty is a property and an individual quality of the second Divine Person – the Son of God. The Son as the Truth, the Word, the Wisdom, the Intellect and *Ars Patris* (the creative intellection of God the Father) is as beautiful as only God may be. The Son is beautiful, because He is the uncreated Image and Splendour of God. The Father is delighted with the Son, who responds to Him with that which He has been receiving eternally and through which He lives: Uncreated Love – the Holy Spirit.

The Father has made the Son a pattern of all creation. Even as an artist creates according to his concept, likewise God the Father has made everything in the Holy Spirit directly by His

Word. In the seventh chapter, I wrote that the Dominican spoke about three masterpieces of the Son of God. The first masterpiece of the Son as the Truth was the creation of the World. It was Him, who made all things true, good and beautiful. His second masterpiece was the enlightenment of men. Thanks to the Son, man is capable of desiring and learning to know the truth. Finally the third masterpiece of the Son was the renewal and redemption of men corrupted by sin. For Thomas, the Son of God is beautiful, because He is beauty as such. Beauty is another name of the Son of God. In this sense, beauty is not only a mere philosophical or even theological category anymore, but somehow it becomes a person as well. Facing beauty is then somewhat similar to approaching a human, who deserves our respect and reverence. Even as man must remain silent and bow before the mystery of another human being and their dignity, similarly we remain silent and bow before the mystery of beauty. The Son of God has left traces of His Divine Person and His Uncreated Beauty in the beauty of the whole created universe and in the beauty of every being.

The beautiful Son has taken on human nature and has become a Beautiful Man. The beauty of Divine nature met the beauty of human nature in one person – Christ. According to Thomas, during his earthly life Christ was beautiful both spiritually – full of life and righteousness – and physically. Indeed Christ was “the most handsome of all men” (Psalm 45:2). Seeing the beauty of the humanity of Christ helped Thomas view the death of Jesus on the cross in a new way. He spoke of “the most abominable death” and the “ugliness of the tree”. On Golgotha, beauty was crucified. *Cantus firmus* was cut by *contrapunctus*.

Christ has risen from the dead and His humanity – human soul and human body – has not only regained its former beauty, but has also become the cause, the pattern and the image of the future resurrection of our bodies. The beauty of His glorified body is the promise of beauty – perfection, harmony and splendour – that will be revealed in the bodies of all the saved.

The beauty of the glorified body of Christ is present also in the beauty of His Mystical Body, namely the Church. Thomas has written a lot about the nature of the Church. He noted that the Church is marked by fullness which is the fullness and perfection of the grace of Christ. The Church and Jesus share the same common “heart” and that, according to Thomas, is the Holy Spirit. The Church, in turn, is also characterized by harmony which manifests itself in a variety of gifts, charisms and services. Through faith and love, the faithful cooperate in consonance – with each other and with God himself. Finally, the Church also has splendour. Thomas noted that it is the splendour of beauty that attracts Christ, for in the Church, He sees His beloved one that has “no speck or wrinkle” (Ephesians 5:27). The Dominican was not afraid to use in his writings love or marriage metaphors to describe the relation of Christ and the Church. Despite what some scholars claim, our theologian did not avoid images like the ones found in the Song of Songs. He interpreted one of the Beloved’s utterances: “I caught him, would not let him go” (Song of Songs 3:4) as a prophetic promise of the final reunion of a beautiful man with the beautiful God.

In light of the aforementioned insights, we may now present possibly the most accurate theological definition of a beautiful man. It is “Jesus Christ”. It is in Him, where the genesis, the exemplar, the material and the fulfilment of the beauty of each human person lies. The explanation and the meaning of the whole universe can also be found in Him. This truth is the foundation, which Thomas’ entire theology of beauty rests upon.

Let me add one more interesting remark. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, the most frequently cited (20 times) Bible passage is as follows: “Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Matthew 11:27). These words must have been imprinted in Thomas’ heart and memory in a particular way. In light of these words, we may also understand better what Thomas meant when giving his readers the

following piece of advice: “The more men want to grasp the secrets of God’s wisdom, the more they should strive to get closer to Jesus”¹. Thomas stayed very close to Jesus.

2. A new criterion of beauty?

Presumably Thomas’ greatest achievement in the field of aesthetics was pointing out three objective beauty criteria: *integritas, proportio, claritas*. This so-called objective definition proves to be a useful tool in dogmatic studies as well – it became evident when we discussed various theological issues, starting from protology through Christology and Mariology up to ecclesiology and eschatology. However after I raised the theme of evil being the counterpoint to the theology of beauty, another quality of beauty has been unearthed and revealed.

Thomas was a careful reader of the Book of Genesis and noticed that the paradise tree of the knowledge of good and evil must have been unquestionably beautiful. It was a gift from God and the only thing in the whole newly created world that man was not allowed to use, unless for love and contemplation. The tree was an exclusive property of God and was supposed to remain intact. The tree’s inviolability not only emphasized its beauty, but also served as a means of protection. The first consequence of the human original sin was the violation of this inviolability and the second – after the fruit was picked – the annihilation of the beauty of the tree of knowledge, the devastation of its integrity, harmony and splendour. Beauty has become the first “innocent victim” of human vainglory.

Without a shadow of a doubt, beauty is not to be used in the same way as other goods. We subconsciously feel that beauty belongs to a different realm; it is surrounded by a kind of elusive, yet at the same time very real, “sacrum” or “taboo” which we must not cross. Although beauty is inviolable, it does not mean it is unreachable; although it is indeed unusable, it is in no way useless. Beauty is to be contemplated and not consumed. It seems wrong and inappropriate when beauty is used for a purpose other than selfless joy. Human dignity – man’s inherent spiritual beauty – is a great example here. There is no doubt that human dignity must not be violated – man must never be used and treated as an object². A human person is par excellence inviolable and unusable. We may even say that the beauty of man is “sacred”. Each violation of human dignity, each objectification of a human person, provokes feelings of anger, which are – as I explained in the seventh chapter – a natural reaction to contempt and scorn aimed at the inherent beauty.

Inviolability pertains to works of art as well. A given piece of art may well meet all the criteria of the objective definition of beauty and yet at the same time, after it becomes violated, abused and used against its own purpose, may not be perceived as truly beautiful. One could say that it has somehow lost its “protective layer” – something that is proper to beauty. A beautiful painting can be therefore scorned, if used as a cloth covering a hole in a roof; a beautiful epitaph may be used as a pavement slab; a beautiful symphony may be played at an extermination camp in order to obscure screams of the murdered; a beautiful work of art may become a trashy souvenir when copied and replicated by the dozen.

Without its proper inviolability and sacrosanctity beauty is vulnerable and subject to disintegration, dissonance and decline of splendour – up to the point of becoming kitsch. Truly inviolable beauty, on the other hand, makes man fall silent in a solemn delight. Hence should there not be a place for yet another quality – inviolability (*inviolabilitas*) – among the objective criteria of beauty? This remains an open question.

¹*In Ioh.*, XIII, l. 4 (n. 1807).

² See: *In Sent.*, III, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4, q1a 1, resp.

3. Evil – beauty violated in six aspects

What does beauty tell us regarding evil and ugliness? The answer is simple, it would say that there should be no evil and no ugliness. The universe, angels and men were created perfectly beautiful. In the beginning of creation, God's goodness was overflowing in abundance and gave birth to fullness, harmony and splendour.

The "first dissonance" in the harmony of the created world was brought by an angel. The second one came from a free decision taken by man. Why have humans decided to sin? Thomas' answer is short and simple: because they could. Influenced by the fallen angel, the first men took a decision to do something literally "without grace". And it was exactly the sin of angels and the sin of men that strummed the first "false chord" of the malevolent *contrapunctus*. It was then, that evil and ugliness came into existence.

Thomas stated explicitly that "the good has no need of evil, but, rather, the converse"³. We could go one step further and say that "the beauty has no need of evil and ugliness, but, rather, the converse". It is ugliness that has a need of the beauty of angels and men in order to exist and to reveal itself. From the standpoint of theology of beauty, evil – in light of the objective definition of beauty – is nothing else than violated beauty, detuned and wounded in its original integrity, harmony and splendour. Analogically, when we take the subjective definition of beauty into account, evil is the renouncement of beauty, it is the turning of one's back on it, spiritual blindness and a life deprived of truth and good.

Evil however is not satisfied with "preying" upon good, but has its own "greater goals" – it wants to imitate beauty and make use of its powers of influence. For even as the experience of beauty triggers feelings of joy, pleasure and delight that liberate the viewer, likewise encountering evil brings grief, disgust, terror and enslavement. Beauty is open to others and wants to give itself freely, whereas evil destroys and locks a man inside his own self. Evil is therefore the lack of beauty that should rightly belong to an existing being and it is an act against such original beauty.

Still it must be underlined that evil can never destroy beauty entirely – it cannot reach the point of absolute ugliness. Let us repeat once again: without good and beauty there can be no evil and no ugliness. *Cantus firmus*, even obscured and seemingly prevailed by *contrapunctus*, still has an ineradicable ability to renew itself and reveal its beauty once again.

In this very book I invited the reader to take a "polyphonic" view on evil. The problem of evil is worth taking into consideration because of only one thing – because it poses a real threat to the existence of everything that according to us may and should be beautiful.

My book comprises six chapters and each one includes an overview of one type of evil and suggests its origin. In other words, I presented six revelations of ugliness in the history of the world, angels and humans. The first three kinds of evil were singled out based on their origin. The three subsequent types refer to harmful consequences of evil. Such a simple division (into evil committed and evil suffered) helps avoid a fundamental error of equating these two kinds of evil and treating them in the same way. Thomas strongly insisted that evil *par excellence* is only a deliberate and voluntary act of breaking the law and inflicting harm – so being responsible for the occurrence of evil; whereas the experience of suffering and of evil done by somebody or something else may be regarded as "evil" only in a broad, not to say colloquial, sense. Let me once more reiterate the statement made by the Dominican:

³ SCG, III, c. 146 (n. 3195). English translation: New York: Hanover House, 1955-57; Edited, with English, especially Scriptural references, updated by Joseph Kenny, O.P. Online source, viewed 2020/10/05: <https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles3b.htm#146>

“punishment is not an evil, but to deserve punishment is”⁴. Nonetheless in all the six discussed instances of evil committed and evil suffered, regardless of whether we talk about a criminal or a victim, original beauty is somehow violated – it loses its innocence and becomes “determinate” in a way.

With regard to evil committed, the one which yields suffering and injustice, I pointed out its three main origins: nature, the world of fallen angels and free decisions made by humans.

Natural evil (*malumnaturalis*) can be labelled as “evil” only metaphorically. It refers to all natural, physical and biological processes that are regarded as evil by people, who lose some goods because of them. Natural processes may and often do have objective beauty – take a volcano eruption, a storm or an avalanche, which delight their spectators (when observed at a safe distance). In natural evil one can discover a kind of **beauty in the process**.

Demonic evil (*malumdaemonis*) originated from the sin of rational beings – the angels. They appropriated their original beauty and imprisoned it inside their subtle immaterial selves. **Appropriated beauty** is concentrated fully on itself. It results in egoism, false pride and envy – being sad and irritated because of the well-being of others. This is the shortest description of a demon or demonic evil which is aimed directly at humans. A demon but also any man yielding to the devil's temptation sees only their own beauty and claims that they themselves are its only source and sense. Beauty that has been appropriated and separated from others is a mocking travesty of the Uncreated Beauty which gives itself away and spills over others in abundance.

Evil of guilt (*malumculpae*) may be assigned to humans only. A beautiful man was nude in paradise, but felt no shame. After encountering the demon and committing a sin, he began to be not only nude, but also exposed. Without the light of grace he was standing ashamed and defenceless when facing the ugliness of his own guilt. Although he remained beautiful, for nothing is able to remove the image of God, the human beauty was indeed exposed by the evil of guilt and had to be concealed from the eyes of others. Deliberate and voluntary evil committed by humans brings disgrace, a spiritual ugliness. Hence evil exposes and degrades the evil-doer. Instead of the light of God, a villain begins to exist, as Thomas put it, in the shadow of his own sin – the “opaque fabric” that blocks supernatural light. Thomas stated briefly: “Evil uglifies us”⁵. **Beauty exposed** calls for somebody to save and restore perfection, harmony and splendour – it calls for a Saviour.

Evil however is not only the harm we inflict on others, but also the suffering we personally experience. Thomas used only one expression for this type of evil suffered – evil of punishment, whereas in this book I suggested to divide it into three categories.

Evil of misery (*malummiseriae*) is the “heritage” from our first parents, or – as Thomas described it – a penal consequence of the original sin. Innocent man reigned over the world of nature, whereas man crushed by guilt lost his control and became part of the world of nature, cursed to cope with the elements, swayed by whim. The original gift of splendour faded. The gift of righteousness was replaced with disharmony of senses and desires. All that was left of the gift of immortality was mere longing. The one who had everything and was the son of a King has become a beggar – from the very first breath doomed to suffering, labour pains, dangers, hardships, fatigue, diseases and at the end: the last breath, death and decay of the body. All man can do in such a situation is reflect upon the misery of the world and the human fate. Even if we remember in our life about the existence of beauty, it is always **beauty wearied** waiting to be comforted and supported. Thomas advised those affected by the evil of misery to practise patience and another virtue, already forgotten in our days, that is longanimity.

⁴ ST, I-II, q. 87, a. 1, ad 2. English translation: The Summa Theologiæ of St. Thomas Aquinas; Second and Revised Edition, 1920; Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province; Online Edition Copyright © 2017 by Kevin Knight. Viewed 2020/10/05: <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2087.htm>

⁵ ISA, a. 4 (n. 55).

Scandalous evil (*malumscandali*) is evil beyond words and apprehension. The label of evil of punishment seems to be misplaced here, as this category pertains to the suffering of somebody we love and who is utterly defenceless. The spectator of such an evil can do nothing but helplessly assist the suffering one. Scandalous evil cannot be analysed in any way; the search for its rational causes and rational objectives is doomed to fail. There is only one answer a believer can receive from God – Jesus Christ Crucified. The Beautiful God and the Beautiful Man, in the person of Christ, was betrayed, humiliated and nailed to the cross. On one hand, **crucified beauty** depicts the greatest scandal in the history of the world, but on the other, reveals the love of God for people to the greatest extent. A man can contemplate and take delight in the masterwork of Christ. Let us now quote more words of Thomas that are worth remembering: “nothing can provoke love more than to know that one is loved”⁶.

The **evil of punishment** (*malumpoenae*) draws a response and waits for an appropriate answer. For beauty refuses to fall silent and do nothing in face of evil. The body responds with pain and grief, the will sees this type of evil as an unwanted punishment, while the reason asks instantly: Why me? Pain, punishment and secret – the three great challenges that need to be met by the sufferer. In line with the interpretation of Thomas, it is crucial to realise that God is neither “surprised” by the occurrence of evil, nor does He restrict himself to restoring the original state only. God is not “helpless” against the sources of evil (nature, demons, humans), neither is He “unaware” of its consequences (misery, scandal and pain). Nothing can escape the knowledge and the will of God. And since He keeps guard over everything, man can believe that current suffering is not meant to weaken his beauty, but rather to strengthen it and temper even as steel and glass are tempered by heat and then rapidly cooled down. God will not let **tempered beauty** experience any significant loss and let evil prevail. This optimism and confidence of Thomas bears resemblance to the promise which Christ himself made in the Gospel: “not a hair of your head will be lost” (Luke 21:18).

At the end of all days, when a New Heaven and a New Earth will come, this human beauty, now foreworn, crucified and tempered, will then be revealed and left only with one attribute – **beauty glorified**.

4. Suffering as God’s Secret

Other people’s suffering is a mystery to us. We never know why somebody else, and not us, is experiencing pain and grief. Of course one may always identify some reasonable causes, for instance carelessness that results in an accident, an unhealthy lifestyle which leads to an illness or a deprived man who harms an innocent one. However, such reasoning may be readily called into question, as it is plain and simple that negligence is usually inconsequential, many addicts live to a ripe old age, and not all criminals succeed in carrying out their foul schemes. Likewise, an ill man experiencing direct pain is not able – even supplied with scholarly arguments – to explain why he is suffering just now and not at any other point of his life or why must he suffer in such a way, in such a form and in such condition. A believer may think of another possible reason for suffering, which is “the punishment of sins”. However such a notion may be easily challenged with a casual observation: public sinners live in good health, while the virtuous ones endure hardships; criminals enjoy good health and luxury, while sick children spend their lives at a medical ward. Finally Christ himself weakened such an argument,

⁶ DRF, c. 5. English Translation: REASONS FOR THE FAITH AGAINST MUSLIM OBJECTIONS (and one objection of the Greeks and Armenians) to the Cantor of Antioch By Saint Thomas Aquinas, O.P. Translated by Joseph Kenny, O.P.; St Francis Magazine, Vol. 6, No. 4 | August 2010
Online source, viewed 2020/10/05:
http://stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/7_SFM%20August%202010.pdf

when He replied to the disciples asking him about the reason behind the blindness of a certain man: “Neither he nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him” (John 9:3).

Hence the suffering that I endure myself or the one experienced by others remains a mystery. However it is a mystery only for the human mind, as for God it is rather a secret, for He knows the solution, the origin and the ultimate ending of this story. A theologian, who draws upon the Revelation and Tradition, may only state humbly that God uses diverse means in His actions towards people and that there can be no one comprehensive answer. Thomas indicated no less than seven theological justifications of the human suffering: punishment, punishment-cure, teaching, protection from sin, personal development, showing the glory of God and a trial. Suffering should not always nor straight away be viewed as a way of punishing sins. God can choose from an array of other reasons that are concealed from the eyes of men. Nonetheless the main “motive” of God’s activity remains certain and constant – His kindness.

Therefore, can a suffering person learn to know the secret of God? Yes, but there is only one way to achieve that – the secret must be revealed by God himself. It is a matter of revelation, of personal encounter between God and the sufferer. Whoever tries to take God’s place or play the role of His “advocate”, becomes an intruder and a liar, for the secret of God is revealed without any human mediation. A sufferer – like Job or Paul – is free to approach God and call Him. Paul won a hearing and was assured: “My grace is enough for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

5. Co-creation

There can be no creative process without a struggle. No masterpieces are “born without pain”. Creative activity is of a deeply human nature; it is an action in which a man must confront the challenge, strive to form the material and work to create a thing capable of conveying his concept. This artistic metaphor may be equally applied to the problem of suffering a man must deal with. Although suffering is surely evil and illogical, it may become, according to Thomas, a useful “material” and a “chance” to give birth to something good.

When Christ began to produce His third masterpiece – the redemption of man, there was only one “material” He could use – the weakness of the human nature with all the evil and ugliness involved. This weakness was adopted by Christ and became the opening of a creative work, whose ultimate beauty was then revealed in Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. His masterpiece is so fascinating for one more reason. If Christ was creating and suffering in the human body, then in Him and through Him every human person inherits the Divine “power of creation” – the ability to transform ugliness into beauty. Whoever is fascinated with Christ may become an active co-maker of His masterpiece. The glory and the light that surrounded Christ on the cross, now surround those, who believe in Him and together with Him “suffer the agony of creation”. “It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church” (Colossians 1:24).

Evil is not gone from the world of man, for the laws of nature and the free will of men and angels are not gone either. However, a fundamental change has occurred thanks to Jesus – suffering ceased to be only a “deadly weapon”, a destroyer of men, but has become a “useful material” that can be used for creation or, to put it better, co-creation with Christ. For in Christ the intangible and impenetrable mystery of suffering has become something tangible and has been overcome. “Put your finger here; look, here are my hands. Give me your hand; put it into my side” (John 20:27). Through Jesus, a man may approach one’s own suffering, touch it and begin to “create” in it.

Co-creating with Jesus means that nobody suffers alone. “The Church is – according to Thomas – a fullness of Christ”, so Christ and those who suffer are perfectly united. And even

though it is true that the masterpiece of redemption has only one author – Jesus Christ, man was not created to be merely a spectator and a “connoisseur” of the Divine artistry. Rather he is invited to share the experience of Christ, which is above all “the experience of the same love”. He took the cross not to suffer more, but to love more.