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Transcendental Beauty and Culture

For the first time in history, science and technology seem capable of radically remaking and transforming not only human culture and civilization, but also human nature itself. Genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, cyborg implants (such as brain-computer interfaces), and other technologies will radically transform human life and civilization, if we allow it. But should we try to change human nature? Will such a new civilization be beautiful? Or will it a terror?

About 75 years ago, Étienne Gilson discussed similar concerns in an essay, titled, *The Terrors of the Year Two Thousand*.[1] It was both an indictment of the Western culture in his time (that is, mid-twentieth century) and a prescient vision of our continued cultural decline in the twenty-first century. In that essay, Gilson discussed how the loss of God, as noted by Friedrich Nietzsche, was at the root of significant cultural change in the West. For millennia, the men of the West had always believed in God or gods but now "all of a sudden, there is no longer one, or rather, we see that there never was one! We shall have to change completely our

[1] Étienne Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000* (Toronto: St. Michael's College, 1984).

every thought, word and deed. The entire human order totters on its base."[2]

With the loss of belief in God, Gilson notes that "everything that was true from the beginning of the human race will suddenly become false."[3] This loss of truth leads to a crisis with respect to what is good and what is valued. As Nietzsche held, once the truth of God's existence is no longer affirmed, humans must try to remake the world. But as Gilson notes, humans cannot create *ex nihilo*; all they can do in the absence of God is to destroy the current cultural order and reorder it according to their own secular values.[4]

Such cultural ordering and remaking naturally leads to the topic of the beautiful. Our modern secular culture tends to think of beauty as subjective (relative to taste), as witnessed by the tired old cliché that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The subjectification of beauty, however, is far more serious than it might seem. A subjective understanding of the beautiful effectively severs it from objective notions of the true and the good. This is a significant departure from major thinkers in both Ancient and premodern Europe, where beauty was understood to have a transcendental dimension.[5]

In the Christian Middle Ages, it was widely held that there was a hierarchy of forms—a scale of being—beginning with non-living physical things, rising to living physical beings, such as humans, and eventually culminating in God, who is most beautiful, or more precisely, who is Beauty Itself. For the thinkers of this period, this scale of being was not a matter of subjective opinion or cultural relativism. Instead, it was an objectively true scale that could be demonstrated and measured philosophically.

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[2] Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000*, 8.

[3] Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000*, 8.

[4] Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000*, 10.

[5] In the ancient world, Plato famously and influentially argued for transcendent beauty in his dialogue *Symposium*. See especially Diotima's arguments in *Symposium*, 210a–212b.

In the case of Thomas Aquinas, this scale of being is discussed in his *quarta via*, or fourth way of proving God.[6] After noting the existence of more or less perfect beings in the world, Aquinas argues to an uncaused cause that must possess being maximally. That is, the uncaused cause cannot possess being in a limited or participatory way. Aquinas goes on to argue that the uncaused cause must be identical to Being Itself.[7] In other words, this uncaused cause, or God, is not some kind of finite essence (such as a cat) that has being. Instead, God is a reality—the only reality—in which essence and being are identical. The identity of being and essence in God is related to Aquinas' teaching about Divine simplicity, which helps to explain why God is uncaused, and which leaves no room in God for any kind of composition.[8] As such, it leaves no room for any real distinction between truth, goodness, and beauty in God.

The identification of God with Beauty was only possible in a metaphysics that held that beauty is a transcendental attribute of being. The doctrine of the transcendentals is complex one that I cannot discuss in depth here.[9] But the main thrust of it is that transcendental attributes such as the true, the good, and the beautiful are identical in reality with being, even if they are conceptually distinct in our human understanding for epistemological reasons having to do with the weakness of human knowledge. If Aquinas' metaphysics is correct on these points, then we can draw the conclusion that what is truly beautiful is also good and true in an objective sense. In addition, God provides the ultimate and immutable foundation for these transcendental attributes.

Although Aquinas does not list beauty among the transcendental attributes of being, he does admit three things about

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[6] For the fourth way, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3, reply.

[7] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4, reply.

[8] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 7, reply.

[9] For a good overview, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, "The Transcendentals in the Middle Ages." *Topoi* 11 (1992), 3–10.

beauty that seem to confirm that it is a transcendental.[10] First, he identifies beauty with the good. Because good is a transcendental, this would seem to imply that beauty is a transcendental. However, it could be argued that beauty is redundant if it is identical to the good, and if that is so then beauty should not be listed as one of the transcendentals. Second, Aquinas clarifies that beauty differs conceptually from the good, which seems to overcome the redundancy objection and to justify the inclusion of beauty among the transcendentals. These two points are contained in the following passage from the *Summa theologiae*.

> Beauty (*pulchrum*) and goodness (*bonum*) in a thing are identical fundamentally; for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically (*ratione different*), for goodness properly relates to the appetite (goodness being what all things desire); and therefore it has the aspect of an end… On the other hand, beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind—because even sense is a sort of reason, just as is every cognitive faculty. Now since knowledge is by assimilation, and similarity relates to form, beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause.[11]

Third, Aquinas affirms that "God is goodness and beauty itself."[12] As we know from the previous excerpt above, Aquinas

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[10] For more on the controversy over beauty as a transcendental attribute of being in Thomas Aquinas, see Leo J. Elders, S.V.D., *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 136–144.

[11] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1, in *Summa theologiae: Prima Pars, 1–49*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 48.

[12] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II–II, q. 34, a. 1, obj.1, in *Summa theologiae: Secunda Secundae, 1–91*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the

has affirmed that "beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause." In addition, we know from the fourth way of proving God, and other passages, God is the extrinsic formal cause (exemplar cause) of all things.[13] Combining all of these insights, helps us to understand beauty in its transcendental dimension. That is, those things that are greater in resembling God will be greater in beauty. A human is more beautiful than a stone, because a stone only reflects God in a very limited way, whereas a human, as intelligent and free, is in the image of God.

Measuring Beauty

For Aquinas, the key to philosophical judgments about goodness and beauty concerns what he calls virtual quantity. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas distinguishes virtual quantity from dimensive quantity:

> Quantity is twofold. There is quantity of bulk or dimensive quantity, which is to be found only in corporeal things, and has, therefore, no place in God. There is also quantity of virtue, which is measured according to the perfection of some nature or form.[14]

God, as Being Itself, is the ultimate standard to which creatures, participatory beings, can be measured with virtual quantity. However, virtual quantity can also be used to make judgments in relation to proximate standards. For example, virtual quantity allows us to speak of one species of mammal as being more or less

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Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 347. On page 348, in his reply to this objection, Aquinas says "This argument is true of those who see God's Essence, which is the very essence of goodness."

[13] For some passages where Aquinas discusses God and exemplar causation, see *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 15, a. 3, reply, and I, q. 44, a. 3, reply.

[14] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 42, a. 1, ad 1, in *Summa theologiae: Prima Pars, 1–49*, 426.

good or beautiful than another species of mammal. To do this requires appreciating the distinction between a logical genus and a philosophical genus.[15]

The logician considers a mammal to be an animal that is a vertebrate (has a spine), is endothermic (warm-blooded), and produces milk to feed their young, etc. As such, when a Logician discusses a mouse or a man he uses the word mammal univocally. For the Logician a mouse and man qua mammal are no different at all—they are equally mammals; they do not vary by degree. This is because the logical genus is existentially neutral in that it does not consider how mice and men exist and act in the real, or extra-mental, world.

However, the philosopher considers the genus not as existentially neutral, but concretely and casually as a generator of species. That is, in the real world the different species of the genus Mammal possess mammal-nature with more or less perfection. So, for example a mouse is a mammal, but a mouse possesses a much lower level of perfection of mammal-nature than does a human being. This level of perfection is what virtual quantity is about, because virtual quantity is about the level of perfection of some nature or form. Aquinas explains how we measure virtual quantity in the following passage:

> "Virtual quantity is measured by the effects of the form. Now the first effect of form is being, for everything has being by reason of its form. The second effect is operation, for every agent acts through its form. Consequently, virtual quantity is measured both in regard to being and in regard to action: in regard to being, forasmuch as things of a more perfect nature are of longer duration; and in

[15] For the distinction between the logical genus and the philosophical genus, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 66, a. 2, ad 2, and I, q. 88, a. 2, ad 4. See also Peter A. Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics: Written in the Hope of Ending the Centuries-old Separation between Philosophy and Science and Wisdom* (Manitou Springs, CO: Socratic Press, Adler-Aquinas Institute Special Series, vol. 1, 2012). 146–147.

> regard to action, forasmuch as things of a more perfect nature are more powerful to act.[16]

Based on these criteria it is easy to understand why a human is a superior species of mammal as compared to a mouse. Unlike mice, humans are persons with immortal souls, and through their intellect and free choices can produce artifacts and cultural institutions that mice cannot. In addition, as I will discuss below, we can use virtual quantity to judge the level of beauty of a culture and to judge whether it is increasing or decreasing in beauty.

Measuring Cultural Beauty

Earlier, I argued that, based on the metaphysics of Aquinas, God is the ultimate standard to which judgments about beauty (and the good) can be made. However, this kind of argument does not have the cultural force it once had. Many contemporary philosophers reject both God and the view that humans have immaterial souls. Nevertheless, at first glance, it seems that even without considering God or the soul, we can make judgments about the beauty of cultures to the extent that they are in harmony with human nature.

That humans are persons, with both intelligence and the ability to make free choices, is still widely-held today. As such, we can judge whether a culture is beautiful by assessing how well its laws and institutions are in harmony with human nature. Philosophically speaking, this is a kind of natural law approach to judging a culture, but one without a metaphysical demonstration of God.[17]

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[16] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 42, a. 1, ad 1, in *Summa theologiae: Prima Pars, 1–49*, 426.

[17] For a classic text in this kind of new natural law theory, see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

For example, we can try to rank cultures by using virtual quantity to assess how well they protect and promote human freedom and flourishing. A totalitarian country, such as North Korea, ranks near or at the bottom considering its almost total suppression of its citizens freedom.

However, this kind of argument has serious weaknesses. When philosophers reject God and conceive of human beings in a purely physical or materialist manner it becomes difficult to defend an adequate notion of human freedom or human rights or objective ethics, as I have argued elsewhere.[18] In addition, the recent developments in science and technology I discussed at the beginning of this essay, have only complicated the problem. This is because it seems we have reached the point where we can change human nature and, by extension, civilization into whatever we want them to be. Gilson anticipated this:

> Can we picture what would happen in a world where we could not only turn out males and females at will, but select them and produce human beings adapted to various functions as do breeders with dogs or horses or cattle? In that future society which will know how to give itself the slaves and even the reproducers which it needs, what will become of the liberty and dignity of the human person?[19]

But if human nature itself can be changed then using human nature to measure a culture's beauty becomes a relative standard. That is, we can change the standard to be whatever we desire it to be. In contrast, what we need is an objective standard. Metaphysics alone with its demonstrations of God and the immateriality of the human soul can address these points from a philo-

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[18] See Robert A. Delfino, "The Problem of Justifying the Right to Freedom of Religion." *Journal of Dharma*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2006): 51–65, and "The Failure of New Atheism Morality." *Studia Gilsoniana*, vol. 4:3 (July–September 2015), 229–240.

[19] Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000*, 4–5.

sophical perspective. Scripture and divine law, can address them theologically. But when a given culture rejects or disregards God and the soul, then metaphysical and theological arguments lose their cultural force.[20] At that point, two temptations arise. Having conceived of humans in a purely materialist way, the first temptation is to use technology to fix the imperfections and things we do not like about human nature. The second temptation is to remake culture and civilization so that we can have something approaching a utopia. But to do that, first we must destroy the current order of things.

A Fateful Choice

Warning about such destruction, at a time when we lacked the scientific and technological advances required to remake the world, Gilson said the following:

> It is too soon yet to create, but one can begin to destroy. Man is thus occupied on all sides with that intoxicating joy which Nietzsche has just told us is as great as his power of destruction. Perhaps that is

[20] For more on this see, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Taylor defines our secular age not as one in which religious belief has vanished, but one in which many people hold that an exclusive humanist alternative to Christian faith is a viable option. As he expresses it, "a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable" (19). That is, it is possible to conceive of the universe as disenchanted and without any need for God or any transcendent reality. To live in this state of mind is to live in what Taylor calls the "immanent frame." This frame of mind reflects life in the contemporary Western world, which is lived in a social order constructed by humans and is more individualistic and less communal than it was in the past; it is a world that focuses on productivity and instrumental rationality, and values earthly goods and human flourishing. As Taylor says, "the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West [...]. Some of us want to live it as open to something beyond [e.g., to God]; some live it as closed. It is something which permits closure, without demanding it" (543–544).

> the answer to the poignant question which so many of us are asking ourselves: what does man want? Has he gone mad? Yes, in a sense, but only with the supremely lucid madness of a creature who would annihilate the obstacle which being places in the way of his creative ambitions. Such is the profound sense of our solemn and tragic adventure. Antichrist is not among us, he is in us. It is man himself, usurping unlimited creative power and proceeding to the certain annihilation of that which is, in order to clear the way for the problematic creation of what will be. We are then in the decisive moment of a cosmic drama. *Quis ut Deus?* It is I, says man. When we no longer want to be the image of God, we still can be his caricature! … As a child who amuses himself by breaking his toy for no reason at all, just to see what it is like inside, so man will have smashed the world. It is possible that another will then be born, but that is not certain; in the meantime, what is certain is that ours will be ended.[21]

Much has changed since Gilson wrote those words. Many in the contemporary world believe humans are merely physical beings and that we now have the science and technology to change radically both human nature and civilization. However, as Gilson cautions, we face an uncertain future. The potential for the destruction of all human life on this planet is real. Critics will suggest that the potential for greatness is also real. What is clear is that humanity is faced with a fateful choice that cannot be ignored, as every person has a stake in the outcome.

If history teaches us nothing else, we should proceed very slowly and cautiously because great empires can suddenly collapse and entire species can go extinct. Sometimes there are no second chances. As Gilson once argued, history is the laboratory of ideas and so eventually we will have our answer, even if no human is alive to discuss it. Writing in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, he said:

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[21] Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000*, 11–12.

> the history of philosophy is to the philosopher what his laboratory is to the scientist; it particularly shows how philosophers do not think as they wish, but as they can, for the interrelation of philosophical ideas is just as independent of us as are the laws of the physical world. A man is always free to choose his principles, but when he does he must face their consequences to the bitter end.[22]

Humanity is at a crossroads. Just as a fatal illness progresses in stages until finally culminating in death, there are also stages in cultural decline. The first stage is the loss of truth, especially the loss of God, as discussed of above. The second stage is the loss of the good, as evidenced by Nietzsche's proclivity to destroy and remake the world according to secular values that are invented by humans. The third and final stage, I argue, is the loss of beauty. It manifests as a kind of inversion. That is, it sees as ugly what was traditionally considered beautiful or vice versa. I believe it occurs last because, as Armand Maurer has argued, our awareness of beauty is a kind of non-conceptual knowledge akin to knowledge by connaturality.[23] As such, our awareness of beauty is rooted deeply within our nature; therefore, it is the most difficult aspect of our humanity to be "overcome" by ideology.

Perhaps that is cause for optimism. Prince Lyov Nikolayevich Myshkin, in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, thought beauty would save the world. But it can only be a beauty that is not divorced from what is objectively true and the good. It can, I would argue, only be that beauty which is rooted in the timeless and transcendent Beauty, which is God. Only such beauty can pierce through the secular philosophies and ideologies that have brought us to this fateful moment.

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[22] Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 95.

[23] Armand A. Maurer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983), 38.

Transcendental Beauty and Culture

SUMMARY

In this article the author discusses Étienne Gilson's essay, *The Terrors of the Year Two Thousand*, in relation to contemporary cultural decline in the West. Recently, science seems capable of radically remaking and transforming not only human culture and civilization, but also human nature itself, by using technologies such as genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and cyborg implants (such as brain-computer interfaces). But should we try to change human nature? Will such a new civilization be beautiful? Or will it a terror? Such cultural ordering and remaking naturally leads to the topic of the beautiful. Thomas Aquinas' view of beauty as a transcendental attribute of being that is rooted in God is discussed. Measuring the beauty of a culture by using Aquinas' notion virtual quantity is explained and contrasted with the relative standards used by contemporary secular philosophies and ideologies. Finally, the implications of the choice we need to make at this fateful moment are considered.

Keywords: Étienne Gilson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Aquinas, cultural decline, science and technology, genetic engineering, human nature, God, beauty, goodness, truth, transcendental attributes of being, metaphysics, exemplar cause, virtual quantity, logical genus, philosophical genus, natural law, human freedom, human rights, ethics

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