

Aquinas' Neoplatonist Aesthetics¹

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Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) was in the first place a theologian; he was also one of the greatest philosophers who ever lived. He employed philosophical reflection both as a propaedeutic to theology and to elucidate the truths of revelation. He was greatly indebted to the classic philosophers, especially Aristotle, but also – indirectly – to Plato, who inspired many of his deepest teachings. While he was familiar with many newly translated texts of Aristotle, his knowledge of Plato was indirect, channelled mostly through the neoplatonism of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. From both, particularly the latter, he derived many elements for his theory of beauty.

Plotinus (204 – 270)

Many of Aquinas' views on beauty are already present in Plato and Aristotle, mostly filtered through the writings of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. I will begin with Plotinus, author of the first systematic treatise on beauty in classical philosophy and an important source for all Neoplatonist thinkers, including Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. It is significant that the treatise on beauty was chronologically the first of his *Enneads*, an indication that beauty was for him the primary reality and centre of the universe.

Plotinus' entire spiritual endeavour was directed towards the mystical union of the soul with the transcendent One, equally defined as transcendent Good and Beauty. Man's ultimate destiny was 'the flight of the alone to the Alone' (φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον).² Sharing Aristotle's view regarding the empirical foundation of knowledge, Plotinus regarded beauty in the sensible world as an adumbration of transcendent Beauty.

Plotinus agreed with Plato and Aristotle that beauty is perceived primarily through sight and hearing, but referred also to the beauty of intellect and virtue. His treatise begins:

Beauty is found for the most part in sight, but it is found also in hearing, both in the composition of words, as well as being found in music; indeed in all aspects of music, for both melody and rhythm are beautiful. And for those proceeding upwards from sense perception there are beautiful ways of life, actions, dispositions and items of knowledge as well as the beauty of the virtues. And if there is any beauty beyond even these, it will itself make it manifest.³

Plotinus faithfully sums up the traditional definition of beauty: 'It is said by virtually all that symmetry of the parts to each other and to the whole with the addition of fine colour is the cause of visual beauty, and that for visible things and in general all other things being beautiful is being symmetrical and measured.'⁴ However he rejects this definition as inadequate. If symmetry alone were the criterion for beauty, simple things could not be

beautiful; in Plotinus' conception, unity is a prior characteristic of beauty: the more unified an entity, the more beautiful. Whatever is utterly simple is most unified of all. Moreover, to define beauty as symmetry is to suggest that only what is composed of parts could be beautiful; this implies paradoxically, however, that none of the parts can be beautiful, only the whole. This would lead to the absurd suggestion that a beautiful object could be entirely composed of ugly parts. According to Plotinus, the parts must also be beautiful; symmetry alone does not constitute beauty: 'One must say that being beautiful is something other than and beyond proportion, and that proportion is beautiful because of something else.'⁵

According to Plotinus, beautiful sense objects cause spiritual delight by virtue of the luminous presence of form which is the source of their inner unity. There is deep kinship between the soul's cognitive power and the intelligible form given to sensation; both derive from the Soul, and ultimately from Intellect. Intelligible form is what is beautiful.⁶ Plotinus illustrates this by contrasting a lump of stone with a statue modeled after an idea in the mind of the master. The beautiful things of nature are likewise imbued with form, which is itself a sensible manifestation of Intellect. Plotinus remarks: 'Surely in each case [beauty] is form, which is the cause, which comes from the maker to the thing which comes into being.'⁷

Ultimately, 'Beauty is in that higher world and comes from there.'⁸ 'The greatest beauty in the world of sense is a manifestation of the noblest among the intelligibles.'⁹ The ordered beauty of the cosmos is caused by the soul's presence in the sensible world: 'Just as rays from the sun light up a dark cloud, make it shine, and give it a golden appearance, so soul entered into the body of heaven and gave it life, gave it immortality, and wakened it from sleep.'¹⁰

Augustine (354 – 430)

The authorities most frequently cited by Aquinas in reference to beauty are St Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, both in the tradition of Plato and Plotinus. While Pseudo-Dionysius stressed harmony and clarity, Augustine repeatedly emphasized the importance of number as the foundation of such key elements as harmony, symmetry and proportion.

Having relinquished Manicheanism, discovered Platonism and converted to Christianity, Augustine's love shifted from the attractions of the flesh to a desire for God. His aesthetics was influenced most profoundly by Plotinus, whose treatise *On Beauty* he discovered in his early thirties (385 AD). The Neoplatonist's theory of transcendent beauty chimed with his newly found theism and guided his mature search for divine beauty.

The definition of beauty proposed by Augustine in his early work *De Pulchro et Apto* was similar to that of Aristotle, namely that beauty is caused by integrity and proportion. The many formulations of the elements of aesthetic appreciation in Augustine may be reduced to

three: unity, order, and brightness. While he deals explicitly with unity and order – frequently under the guise of the related aspects of number, proportion and measure – he does not explicitly consider brightness. However he employs terms related to splendour, fulgence and brilliance with such frequency that it may be counted as one of his prerequisites for beauty.

For Augustine beauty consists primarily in harmony, i.e. the fitting proportion between parts suited to one another and which are mutually well ordered. Viewed in isolation parts may be unattractive, but together they form an ordered unity: ‘though the parts may be imperfect the whole is perfect’. Beauty therefore belongs primarily to the whole: ‘Every beauty that is composed of parts is much more praiseworthy in the whole than in any part’ (*omnis enim pulchritudo quae partibus constat, multo est laudabilior in toto quam in parte*).¹¹ This corresponds to Aristotle’s emphasis on τέλειον, adopted by Aquinas as *integritas*. For Augustine the constituent elements that coalesce in the beauty of the whole are the cognate elements of harmony, order and unity; the three are inseparable: harmony results from the pleasing order of parts within the unity of the whole. Augustine sometimes refers only to one or other of these coordinates, but the three belong together. His statements that ‘there is no ordered thing that is not beautiful’ (*nihil enim est ordinatum, quod non sit pulchrum*),¹² or that ‘unity is the form of all beauty’ (*omnis pulchritudinis forma unitas*),¹³ express different aspects of the same reality.

Besides Plotinus, one of Augustine’s greatest influences was Cicero, who cited two criteria for the beauty of the human body: proper proportion of limbs and ‘softness of colour’ (*quaedam apta figura membrorum cum coloris quadam suavitate*). St Augustine follows this verbatim: ‘For all bodily beauty consists in the proportion of parts, together with a certain agreeableness of colour (*partium congruentia cum quadam coloris suavitate*).¹⁴ Where there is no proportion, the eye is offended, either because there is something lacking, or too small, or too large.’¹⁵ The core idea of Augustine’s theory is that beauty is the harmonious relationship of parts. He illustrates this in a manner that is readily understood: ‘In the visible appearance of a man, if one eyebrow be shaved off, how nearly nothing is taken from the body, but how much from the beauty!—for that is not constituted by bulk, but by the proportion and arrangement of the members.’¹⁶

Augustine’s approach to beauty is all-embracing. There is a hierarchy of beauty rising from the lowliest inanimate physical object, through the scale of living things – plants, animals, humans –, surpassed by the beauties of the soul, its perfections and virtues, which point as a cipher to supreme Beauty itself. All levels have their appropriate place within the hierarchy regardless of individual defects or ugly particularities: ‘All have their offices and limits laid down so as to ensure the beauty of the universe. That which we abhor in any part of it gives us

the greatest pleasure when we consider the universe as a whole.’¹⁷ At the zenith is the divine plenitude of supernatural beauty. The origin and essence of beauty, from which all beautiful things derive, is divine Beauty. ‘All things are beautiful because you made them, but you who made everything are inexpressibly more beautiful (*et pulchra sunt omnia faciente te, et ecce tu inenarrabiliter pulchrior, qui fecisti omnia*).’¹⁸ Augustine echoes Plato, moreover, when he addresses God: ‘My father, supremely good, beauty of all things beautiful. O truth, truth!’¹⁹ God is the beauty from whom is all beauty.²⁰

Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500)

One of the most significant treatises in the entire history of western theology was composed by an unknown writer of the fifth century, who for authorial enhancement adopted the literary persona of first-century Dionysius the Areopagite, convert of Saint Paul. In his influential treatise *On Divine Names* the enigmatic writer contemplated the mystery of the unknown God and evaluated the language used to refer to the inscrutable divinity who transcends all thought and utterance. Another work, *Mystical Theology*, described the mystical union of the soul with the hidden divinity. These writings rapidly acquired universal esteem due to the presumed authority of the writer who as *primus inter patres* enjoyed quasi-apostolic authority. Not until the Renaissance was it discovered that the author of these rich treatises had drawn upon the writings of the neoplatonist Proclus (+485), hence could not have been the first bishop of Athens. The writings themselves, however, were genuinely profound and expertly penned, exhibiting an authority independent of their putative authorship. Aquinas, as all medieval authors, assumed Dionysius to be the disciple of St Paul and regarded his writings with great reverence. His most extensive comments on beauty occur in his commentary on the Pseudo-Areopagite’s treatise *On Divine Names*. He adopted from Dionysius the identity of divine beauty and goodness, and inherited the author’s emphasis on harmony and clarity as formal constituents of beauty.

Although Dionysius does not define beauty explicitly, it is clear from the important passage of *Divine Names* 4 that he regarded harmony and splendour as its most important characteristics. Other qualities of transcendent beauty are its plenitude and stability, both akin to the third characteristic listed by Aquinas, *integritas*.

Dionysius’ starting point and central intuition is that it is God’s essence to be the infinite plenitude of goodness and beauty. There is no distinction in him between Beauty and the Good. God’s beauty is identical with his goodness; both names are affirmed conjointly.²¹ Following the positive path of divine names, God is called Good because through goodness he creates the world, and Beauty because everything he causes is beautiful. Goodness and Beauty are together the primary names attributed to God. In Chapter 4 of *On Divine Names* Dionysius elaborates

upon the distinctive characteristics which these properties have in common, and notes their primary effects. God is through love the creative origin of all things, the source of universal harmony, and goal of all desire.²² Dionysius' aim is to praise God as transcendently good and beautiful, not to explain the human experience of beauty. Since, however, our knowledge of God can only be gained through perfections discerned in creation, and because our concept of beauty is given through experience, he refers to the beautiful effects of divine goodness; it is from these that we are led to affirm God's causal beauty. Dionysius also perceives beauty and goodness at the finite level as identical: 'There is nothing which lacks its own share of beauty, for as scripture rightly says, "Everything is good."' ²³

The infinitely Good, according to Dionysius, is not only 'beautiful' but is 'beauty' itself. The infinite Good-Beauty pre-contains 'supereminently within itself the fontal beauty of everything that is beautiful' (ὡς παντὸς καλοῦ τὴν πηγαίαν καλλονὴν ὑπεροχικῶς ἐν ἑαυτῷ προέχον).²⁴ In the simple and supernatural nature of all beautiful things, every beauty and everything beautiful causally preexist as one. Dionysius repeats his reference to harmony: divine beauty and goodness are the source not only of harmonious proportion within a beautiful individual, but of the harmonious unity that pervades the entire universe. 'From this beauty comes the existence of all beings, each beautiful in its own manner; from beauty come the harmonies, sympathies and communities of all things (διὰ τὸ καλὸν αἱ πάντων ἐφαρμογαὶ καὶ φιλίαι καὶ κοινωνίαι); beauty unites all things.'²⁵ When Dionysius states that transcendent Beauty is the cause of harmony, he has especially in mind the universal harmony among beings rather than the proportion between parts of a single individual – an aspect which, as we shall see later, was emphasized in his commentary by Aquinas.

In accordance with the path of positive naming (which rises from visible effects to their invisible source) Dionysius states that the transcendent Beautiful is called 'Beauty' because it confers beauty on all things, – on each according to its nature –, and because it is the cause of harmony and splendour in all things. The transcendent Beauty, he states, flashes forth its rays of beauty to all things, and in return calls all things together in unity towards itself. The supraessential Beauty is thus both the source and end of all creatures, their efficient and final cause.

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225 – 1274)

As his pupil in Cologne Aquinas transcribed Albert's commentary on Dionysius' treatise *On Divine Names* and was doubtless influenced by his master, who defined beauty as the 'splendour of form shining on the proportioned parts of matter' – a definition that included the important elements of splendour, form and proportion.²⁶ Aquinas' most elaborate treatment of beauty is also to be found in his commentary on *The Divine Names*. Dispersed throughout

many of his other works we find tangential remarks on beauty, *obiter dicta* in relation to diverse topics. Scholars have trawled his writings in an attempt to construct a Thomistic aesthetics.

Insofar as a comprehensive theory of beauty may be identified in Aquinas, it may be summarily expressed in the following assertions:

Pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent ('Those things are said to be beautiful which please when seen.')

²⁷

and

Ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur: integritas, consonantia, et claritas ('Three things are required for beauty: integrity, harmony, and clarity').²⁸

Integritas, Consonantia, Claritas

Dionysius had explicitly noted *consonantia* and *claritas* as the properties of beauty; Aquinas adds *integritas*. In his early commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, he omits integrity, but includes magnitude as stipulated by Aristotle. He states:

According to Dionysius, two things come together in the account of beauty, namely, consonance and lustre. For he says that God is the cause of all beauty insofar as he is the cause of consonance and lustre, just as we say that men are beautiful who have proportionate members and a resplendent colour. To these two the Philosopher adds a third when he says that beauty does not exist except in a sizable body; so that small men can be called well-proportioned and pretty, but not beautiful.²⁹

Aquinas' most explicit and extended remarks on beauty are to be found in his commentary on *The Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius, in which God is praised as identically the Good and Beauty. It is also his most profound treatment of the question, since he is dealing with the foundation of beauty, i.e. its origin in God and the relation between the divine plenitude of essential beauty and its limited participations in creatures. Beauty is affirmed as the original and ultimate reason and purpose for creation.

While Aquinas' commentary is an elaboration upon Dionysius' brief remarks, it is clear that he endorses the author's approach to beauty. The central element in their common teaching is the Platonically inspired theory of participation, according to which beauty is affirmed differently of God and creatures. God is essentially beautiful and is Beauty itself; creatures are beautiful through their participation in beauty. Aquinas explains that in God, who is first cause, 'the beautiful and beauty are not to be divided as if the beautiful is other than beauty, since the first cause alone through its simplicity and perfection comprehends the whole, i.e. all things, in one'. Thus while that which is beautiful, and the essence of beauty, are in creatures distinct, 'God comprehends both in himself as one and the same.'³⁰ The reason is that a beautiful

creature has only a limited share in beauty: it is beautiful, but is not the essence of beauty, whereas God is not only beautiful, but is himself the essential plenitude of beauty. In creatures that which is beautiful and beauty itself are distinguished as participant and participated: the beautiful participates beauty, but beauty itself is a participation in the first cause that makes all things beautiful.³¹

Having outlined that participation is the foundation of the relation between divine and creaturely beauty, Aquinas affirms: ‘A creature’s beauty is nothing other than the likeness of divine beauty participated in things.’ And later: ‘Created being itself (*ipsum esse creatum*) is a certain participation and likeness of God.’ Participation is the metaphysical ground of similitude: the participant resembles the participated, since the effect resembles its cause; in causing the being of creatures, God imparts a share of his beauty.

Aquinas refers to the two primary characteristics of beauty which Dionysius³² states are caused by God, harmony and clarity: ‘And he shows in what the meaning of beauty consists, when he adds that God so transmits beauty in so far as God is “the cause of harmony and brilliance” (*causa consonantiae et claritatis*) in all. Thus we call a man beautiful because of a fitting proportion in size and position, and because he has a bright and shining colour.’ Aquinas emphasizes the proportional character of beauty: ‘It should be taken proportionately in other things that each thing is called beautiful according as it has clarity of its own genus whether spiritual or corporeal, and in so far as it is constituted in due proportion.’³³ Aquinas explains that, according to Dionysius, God causes *claritas* because he imparts, as with a flash, to all creatures a share of his luminous ray which is the fountain of all light. The flashing emissions of the divine ray are participations in his likeness; it is these radiations that produce beauty in things.³⁴

To Dionysius’ briefest mention of *consonantia*, Aquinas adds profound elucidation, stating that God causes a twofold harmony in things: firstly by ordering (‘calling’) all creatures towards himself as end³⁵ and, secondly, by establishing mutual harmony among creatures towards each other. God gathers together all in all (*congregat omnia in omnibus*) towards himself as their common and final end. This is to be understood in terms of Platonist participation: ‘Higher things are in the lower by participation, and lower things in the higher through a certain excellence; thus all things are in all. Because all things are found in all according to a certain order, it follows that everything is ordered to the same final reality.’³⁶ A little later in his commentary Aquinas elaborates:

It has been said that harmony (*consonantia*) belongs to the nature (*ratio*) of beauty, hence everything pertaining to harmony proceeds from divine beauty. And so he adds that

through divine beauty there is concord (*concordiae*) among rational creatures in matters of intellect, for those who agree on the same opinion are in harmony. There is also friendship with regard to affection, and communion (*communiones*) with regard to action and external matters. Universally all creatures, whatever union they have, they have by virtue of the beautiful.³⁷

All harmony and concord among beings, their friendship, communion and unity, derive from the power of the beautiful. According to Dionysius divine beauty causes the existence of ‘all the substantial essences’ (πᾶσαι τῶν ὄντων αἰ οὐσιώδεις ὑπάρξεις),³⁸ not only in their unities or identities, but also in their differences and distinctions. Dionysius speaks of ‘communions of contraries’ and ‘non-mixtures of unified things’,³⁹ a *reconciliatio oppositorum* or unity of the similar and different. Even things that are dissimilar, Aquinas remarks, agree in some respect,⁴⁰ and ultimately all things lead back to the causality of the beautiful, exhibiting consonance, which is of the essence of beauty.⁴¹ Most fundamentally all parts of the universe, Aquinas notes, agree by virtue of their existence, which is the profound source of their affinity and unity. (*Omnes partes universi conveniunt in ratione existendi.*)⁴²

The beauty of the universe requires that there be diversity and gradation; a single being alone could not make manifest the infinite splendour of the Creator.⁴³ The universe constitutes an ordered and harmonious hierarchy, with due proportion and agreement among the various levels. Aquinas spoke of the ‘wondrous connection of things’ (*mirabilis rerum connexio*),⁴⁴ whereby the highest members of an inferior level touch the lower members of the next degree.⁴⁵ As harmony of sound results from a due proportion of number, the component parts of the universe are fitted together to result in a harmonious whole: ‘From all the parts of the universe one totality of things (*una rerum universitas*) is constituted.’⁴⁶ Aquinas asserts that the ‘highest beauty’ (*summus decor*) of things is the order among distinct grades among creatures, even suggesting that the perfection of the universe (*perfectio universi*) arises from the ordered unification of evil and good things.⁴⁷

The beauty of the universe consists in the harmony, proportion, order and mutual solidarity of beings infused with a shared desire for their unique and universal end. All creatures ‘conspire’ to produce universal concord and harmony, through due order and proportion.⁴⁸ The order of the universe (*ordo universi*) is for Aquinas ‘the ultimate and noblest perfection in things’ (*ultima et nobilissima perfectio in rebus*).⁴⁹ Thus while beauty is first experienced in the sensible appreciation of a physical body which presents itself to our senses with clarity and proportion, exhibiting its proper integrity or wholeness, the highest appreciation of beauty is contemplated in the universal harmony of all creatures as a unified universe. The beauty of the universe is more than that of individuals: it is their community. To

form such a community they must be adapted towards one another. As the harmony of music is caused by due numerical proportion, so also the order of things in the universe. There is profound solidarity and affinity among all beings because of their common participation in the first perfection of existence. Creatures together produce a diapason of universal harmony.

Aquinas brings his unique metaphysical insight to bear on Dionysius' statement that the existence (*esse*) of all things comes from divine beauty ($\pi\alpha\sigma\iota\ \tau\omicron\iota\zeta\ \omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\ \tau\omicron\ \epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$), by explaining *claritas* as the effect of *esse*, measured through the form of the individual being which partakes of the divine splendour:

Clarity is a feature of beauty, as has been said before. Every form, however, through which a thing has existence (*esse*) is a participation in divine brightness (*omnis autem forma, per quam res habet esse, est participatio quaedam divinae claritatis*). And he adds that individual things are beautiful according to their own nature, that is, according to their own form (*singula sunt pulchra secundum propriam rationem, idest secundum propriam formam*). Thus, it is obvious that the *esse* of all things comes from divine beauty.⁵⁰

We may conclude from his commentary on *The Divine Names* that for Aquinas the beauty of a being is identical with its act of existing; beauty is not merely an ornament shimmering on the surface of things but is their very existence. In Chapter 4 of his commentary Aquinas states: 'The beauty of the creature is nothing other than the likeness of divine beauty participated in things.'⁵¹ And in the following chapter he states: 'Created being itself (*ipsum esse creatum*) is a certain participation and likeness of God.'⁵² Divine beauty is the source of existence in all things (*ex divina pulchritudine esse omnium derivatur*).⁵³ A being's existence is its beauty; its beauty is its existence. Each being is an irradiation of the divine brilliance, participating in divine being and beauty.⁵⁴

Emphasizing the intimate connection between goodness and beauty, Aquinas refers to the importance of form: 'Nothing exists which does not participate in beauty and goodness, since each thing is beautiful and good according to its proper form.'⁵⁵ And again: 'A form is a certain irradiation coming forth from the first brightness; but brightness pertains to the essence of beauty.'⁵⁶ Etienne Gilson remarks, 'Everything is beautiful as having a form (through which it has *esse*), and this form is a sort of a participation of the divine clarity.'⁵⁷ The most important aspect or effect of beauty is brilliance or clarity. *Claritas*, or radiance, is the ontological splendour of form, which is the intelligible medium in which the actuality of existence is revealed. The ontological splendour of finite creatures shines through the brilliance of form. The bond between beauty and form may be understood in light of Aquinas' assertion in *Contra*

Gentiles that ‘form is nothing else than a divine likeness that is participated in things’, citing Aristotle that form is ‘something divine and desirable’.⁵⁸

Aquinas emphasized the role of form as the ground of intelligibility, i.e. the intelligible clarity of the individual. Intellectual cognition is achieved through the assimilation of the intelligible form. So much Aquinas had in common with Aristotle, but he disagreed with Aristotle’s doctrine that form or essence (εἶδος, *essentia*) is the deepest principle of actuality within the individual. Aquinas maintained that it is form which determines essence, but that of itself essence is powerless to be; it requires a deeper actualizing principle in order to exist. Form is the inner principle that determines what a thing is in its essence, but is itself in need of its own act of existing (*esse*) which causes it to be. Form is the instrumental medium through which the individual receives existence (hence beauty) according to a particular mode, but has of itself only potency towards existence. Aquinas deepened Aristotle’s notion of actuality beyond that of form to affirm the actuality of existence, the act of being, *actus essendi*, which is denoted by the verbal infinitive, ‘to be’, Latin *esse*. Whereas for Aristotle the deepest level of actuality is a thing’s form, determining its essence (*what* it is), for Aquinas the most profound and intimate actualizing principle is its act of being (*actus essendi*), which makes something be: not *what* it is, but in the first place to *exist*. It is this primordial, originative, existential act, which is for Aquinas the real origin of a thing’s *claritas*. He notes that ‘the very actuality of a thing is as it were its light (*ipsa actualitas rei est quoddam lumen ipsius*)’.⁵⁹ Form, according to Aquinas, is the actualizing principle of essence, determining the material potency to be a certain *kind of thing*; it is the mediating principle, the measure through which a being receives its existence.⁶⁰ It is itself in turn, however, in need of actualization by the more primordial actuality of existence, the *actus essendi* or *esse*, which is the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections.⁶¹ Aquinas’ theory of existence as primary participation and perfection was greatly influenced by Neoplatonist metaphysics, and in particular by Pseudo-Dionysius.⁶²

Esse, or *actus essendi*, is the radical source of beauty in all respects, since it is the cause of integrity, clarity, and harmony in each entity, and in the universal totality of beings. In his *Commentary on the Sentences* Aquinas stated: ‘The integrity of a thing follows upon its primary perfection which is its very existence.’⁶³ It endows each individual with its interior unity and organic wholeness. It is the original *claritas* conferring the radiance of actuality, i.e. beauty as the luminous splendour of being. Diversified throughout a multiplicity of forms, it is the root of universal harmony among creatures, since existence is what all things have in common.

Commenting on Dionysius, Aquinas provides the radical reason for the very existence of the universe, namely God's love of his own beauty. A finite cause, he explains, acts in order to acquire something that it lacks, whereas a perfect cause acts out of love for what it possesses. The passage reads:

An agent cause acts by virtue of a desire of the end, because it is an imperfect agent and does not yet possess what it desires. However, it pertains to a perfect agent to act out of love for what it possesses, and for this reason Dionysius adds that Beauty itself which is God, is the efficient, moving and supportive cause, 'by love of its own beauty'. Since God possesses his own beauty, he wishes to multiply it as far as possible, namely through communication of his own likeness.⁶⁴

Elaborating further on the causality of divine beauty, Aquinas explains that God is not only the efficient, but also the final and exemplary cause of all things. He is efficient cause because he gives to all things their *esse*, moving and preserving them in existence. God is final cause of the universe since 'all things are made so that they may imitate divine beauty in some way'. (*Omnia enim facta sunt ut divinam pulchritudinem qualitercumque imitentur.*)⁶⁵ He is also exemplary cause, 'for all things are distinguished in accord with the divinely beautiful, and a sign of this is that no one cares to make an image or representation, except for the sake of the beautiful'.⁶⁶ Aquinas touches here on the deepest reason for artistic creation, which he applies analogically to the creation of the world by the infinite artist. God creates the universe in order to share his beauty, and to draw us into the mystery of that gift. For Dionysius and Aquinas, divine beauty is the origin and purpose of creation: out of love for his beauty God multiplies it through the communication of his likeness. He makes all things, that they may imitate divine beauty. As Jacques Maritain remarks, 'There cannot in fact be any purely "gratuitous" work of art—the universe excepted.'⁶⁷

¹ For a more extensive treatment of the topic see Fran O'Rourke, 'Beauty from Plato to Aquinas' in *Ciphers of Transcendence. Essays in Philosophy of Religion in Honour of Patrick Masterson*, ed. Fran O'Rourke (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2019), pp. 64 – 109.

² *Ennead* VI 9 [9] 11. 51.

³ I 6 [1] 1. 1–6, trans. Andrew Smith (Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2016), p. 45.

⁴ I 6 [1] 1. 20–5, trans. Smith, p. 46.

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- ⁵ I 6 [1] 1. 38–40, trans. Smith, p. 47.
- ⁶ I 6 [1] 6. 11–32.
- ⁷ V 8 [31] 2. 14–15, trans. Andrew Smith, (Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2016), p. 46, modified.
- ⁸ V 8 [31] 13. 22, trans. Smith, p. 68, modified.
- ⁹ IV 8 [31] 6. 23–4, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), vol. 4, p. 417.
- ¹⁰ V 1 [10] 2. 20–2, trans. Lloyd Gerson (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 535.
- ¹¹ *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 1, 21, 32, trans. Ronald J Teske, SJ, *Saint Augustine. On Genesis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), p. 80.
- ¹² *De Vera Religione* 41, 77.
- ¹³ *Epistula* 7.
- ¹⁴ Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* IV, 31. See *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J.E. King (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 358–60.
- ¹⁵ *De Civitate Dei* 22, 19, trans. Marcus Dods, in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine II*, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 640, slightly modified. See *Epistulae* 3, 4: Quid est corporis pulchritudo? Congruentia partium cum quadam coloris suavitate.
- ¹⁶ *De Civitate Dei* 11, 22, trans. Dods, p. 163.
- ¹⁷ *De Vera Religione* 40, 76, trans. John H.S. Burleigh, Augustine, *Earlier Writings*, (London: SCM, 1953), p. 264.
- ¹⁸ *Conf.* 13, 20, 28, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 289.
- ¹⁹ *Conf.* 3. 6, 10: Mi pater summe bone, pulchritudo pulchrorum omnium. O veritas, veritas. Trans. J.G. Pilkington in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine I*, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 33.
- ²⁰ *Liber de Diversis Quaestionibus* 83, q. 44: Quia omne pulchrum a summa pulchritudine est, quod Deus est.
- ²¹ See *On Divine Names* (= DN) 4, 7, 704B, 141–2; 4, 8, 704D, 147; 4, 9, 705A, 148; 4, 10, 705B–708A, 151–5); 4, 18, 713D, 185. References are to chapter, paragraph, *Patrologia Graeca* III, and Greek text in Thomas Aquinas, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus* (= *In DN*), ed. Ceslas Pera (Turin: Marietti, 1950).
- ²² Dionysius treats of beauty in chapter 4 of *On Divine Names*. See DN 4, 7–8, 701C–704D, 132–48; DN 4, 10, 705B–708B, 151–9.
- ²³ *Celestial Hierarchy* 141C, trans. Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius. The Complete Works* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987).
- ²⁴ DN 4, 7, 704A, 138, trans. C.E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 96, modified.

²⁵ *DN* 4, 7, 704A, 139, my trans. after Luibheid.

²⁶ Albertus Magnus, *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, ed. Paul Simon (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), Cap. 4, § 72, p. 182.

²⁷ *Summa Theologiae* (=ST) I, 5, 4 ad 1. For an alternative formulation see *ST* I-II, 27, 1 ad 3: *Pulchrum autem dicatur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet*. ('Beauty is said to be that, the very apprehension of which pleases').

²⁸ See *ST* I, 39, 8: *Nam ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur. Primo quidem, integritas sive perfectio, quae enim diminuta sunt, hoc ipso turpia sunt. Et debita proportio sive consonantia. Et iterum claritas, unde quae habent colorem nitidum, pulchra esse dicuntur.*

²⁹ *In I Sent.* 31, 2, 1, sol. and ad 4.

³⁰ *In DN* IV, v, 336.

³¹ *In DN* IV, v, 337.

³² *DN* 4, 7, 701C, 135.

³³ *In DN* IV, v, 339.

³⁴ *In DN* IV, v, 340.

³⁵ Aquinas cites Dionysius' etymological explanation of the word for beauty (κάλλος) deriving from the word καλεῖν, 'to call'.

³⁶ *In DN* IV, v, 340.

³⁷ *In DN* IV, v, 349.

³⁸ *DN* 4, 6, 704B, 143.

³⁹ *DN* 4, 6, 704B, 144.

⁴⁰ *In DN* IV, vi, 361: *Dissimilia in aliquo conveniunt.*

⁴¹ *In DN* IV, vi, 361.

⁴² *In DN* IV, vi, 364.

⁴³ *Summa Contra Gentiles* (=CG) 3, 97, 2724. (The final number refers to the paragraph in the Marietti edition, ed. Ceslas Pera (Turin: Marietti, 1961). See Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 261–8.

⁴⁴ *CG* 2, 68, 1453.

⁴⁵ *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, art. 2; *CG* 2, 91, 1775. See O'Rourke, p. 264.

⁴⁶ *In DN* IV, vi, 364, trans. James F Anderson, *An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), p. 97.

⁴⁷ *CG* 3, 71, 2469.

⁴⁸ *In DN* VII, iv, 733.

⁴⁹ *CG* 2, 45, 1228.

⁵⁰ *In DN IV*, v, 349.

⁵¹ *In DN IV*, iv, 337.

⁵² *In DN V*, ii, 660.

⁵³ *In DN IV*, v, 349.

⁵⁴ *In DN IV*, v, 340.

⁵⁵ *In DN IV*, v, 355.

⁵⁶ *In DN IV*, vi, 360.

⁵⁷ Gilson, *Elements*, p. 177.

⁵⁸ *CG 3*, 97, 2725.

⁵⁹ *In Librum De Causis*, lect. 6, 168. According to Aristotle the certainty of knowledge is grounded in actuality. See *Met.* 9, 10, 1051b25–32.

⁶⁰ *ST I*, 77, 6.

⁶¹ See the celebrated passage of *De Potentia* 7, 2 ad 9: Hoc quod dico esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum.

⁶² See Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, pp. 133 – 87.

⁶³ *In IV Sent.* 26, 2, 4: Integritas attenditur secundum perfectionem primam, quae consistit in ipso esse rei.

⁶⁴ *In DN IV*, v, 352.

⁶⁵ *In DN IV*, v, 353: Omnia enim facta sunt ut divinam pulchritudinem qualitercumque imitentur.

⁶⁶ *In DN IV*, v, 354.

⁶⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry* (New York: Scribner, 1962), p. 73. See *Art et Scolastique* (Paris: Rouart, 1927), p. 125: 'Il ne peut pas y avoir d'oeuvre d'art purement "gratuite", – l'univers excepté.'