Introduction

Since the onset of the Romantic era, as Charles Taylor has pointed out,\textsuperscript{1} artists have seen themselves to be uniquely gifted interpreters of reality; as Shelley declared, they have become for us moderns the unacknowledged legislators of the world.\textsuperscript{2} But they had not always occupied such an authoritative role. In Taylor’s analysis, this exalted position was an indirect result of the scientific revolution, which had disenchanted the world, thereby reducing existence to mundane material causes. This reductionist metaphysics deprived both artists and art-lovers of a common vocabulary for transcendent reference; as a result, it became necessary for artists to create, on the basis of their own insight, a new and “subtler” language to discern and communicate higher truths. These were truths that were accessible only to the genius of the artist, who in turn had the responsibility to impart them to others by means of his creative expression.

However, as the innovations of Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud eviscerated Romantic spirituality and eroded the significance of human rationality, bringing into question the very existence of tran-
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...scendent truth, the subtler languages of artistic genius were turned completely inward: renouncing any notion of higher truth, they now sought to acclaim as genius the naked impulse of the artist. Thus, in the last century, reflecting the increasing ugliness and irrationality of modern life, artistic genius came to identify itself with the subrational, a subtler language of meaninglessness and despair. To the extent that art continued to communicate any meaning at all, it was the utilitarian propaganda of a political broadsheet; more often, though, its subtle language, instead of articulating a transcendent and hidden truth, was employed to portray the unspeakable irrationality of the ugly, communicating only the artists’ contempt for whatever remained of traditional value.

That we have reached a nadir in this devolution of art can be seen in two recent essays from opposite ends of the intellectual spectrum. In an essay in *New Republic* revealingly entitled “Liberals Are Killing Art: How the Left became Obsessed with Ideology over Beauty,” Jed Perl argues that art has forsaken its higher purpose of communicating truth, its “celebration of unfettered metaphor and mystery and magic,” in favor of a purely utilitarian and politicized mode of propaganda, becoming merely a “comrade-in-arms” to “some more general system of social, political, and moral values.” Moreover, this “erosion of art’s imaginative ground . . . is taking place in the very heart of the liberal, educated, cultivated audience—the audience that arts professionals always imagined they could count on.” Thus, in Perl’s estimation, it is the liberal audience for art that is turning art in an irremissibly illiberal direction, betraying all higher truth and making art serve only political ends. The left’s need to politicize everything has caused the decline in the relevance of art that, in the end, undermines art’s ability to communicate anything of real value at all.

On the other hand, contemporary art that eschews overt politicization has fared no better, for it often revels in the idiosyncrasy of kitsch, or even debases itself in the exaltation of ugliness. Beauty has been sacrificed to cleverness, but once again this repositioning of art despairs of communicating the vital higher truths man naturally
seeks. This trend is well illustrated in the review published in the New Criterion of a retrospective dedicated to Jeff Koons at the Whitney Museum of American Art. As the article notes, “Koons is famous for industrially produced pop imagery such as inflatable hearts and balloon dogs, all of it turned out on a large, sometimes gigantic scale in cheerful, candy-box colors and polished to a high, reflective sheen.” While it may sound improbable that this sort of work would merit a retrospective occupying three whole floors of a major New York institution, the article offers an apologia of a sort: “Distasteful as it may be to bestow such an accolade on someone who traffics so brazenly in the shallow, the banal, the meretricious, and the cheap, he really is the most important artist of our time. Koons is the avatar of a new kind of art and a new kind of art world, both of which he helped to create.” Surveying the works, from stacked vacuum cleaners to pornographic self-portraits of the artist with an adult film star (which the catalogue excuses with the assertion that it is art because it is “an extremely risky and vulnerable form of self-portraiture”), we soon understand the significance of Koons’s artistic career: “his unremitting effort to delegitimize the high in order to elevate the low to an equivalent stature.” This debasement of art represents the reductio ad absurdum of the artist’s rejection of art’s traditional role as a mode of revelation for transcendent truths that enlighten and edify mankind.

Both of these reactions to contemporary art reveal a discontent, a recognition that something has gone wrong. They articulate a sense that art needs to be relevant for man, but its relevance must be more than merely pragmatic. That is, it must represent a truth that resonates with man’s search for meaning; yet that truth cannot be mundane or utilitarian, or even wholly logical, else science and philosophy would be adequate to the task—indeed, they would be more appropriate than any artistic representation, given their clear, discursive nature. Thus, Taylor’s point about art’s need for subtler languages must not be ignored, for the truth communicated in beautiful objects is of a radically different order than the truths of math and science, and even of philosophy. The complementary nature of
these two modes of truth is well captured by Thomas Aquinas when he comments, “Now the reason why the philosopher is compared to the poet is that both are concerned with wonder.” Philosophy and art are both intelligent responses to the marvelous, yet they respond in different ways: the philosopher by discerning the truth of abstract universal principles, and the artist by celebrating the beautiful order in concrete particulars.

In this article, I will argue that the failure of the contemporary artists lies in their ignoring this affinity between truth and beauty. This affinity is best understood in grasping the nature of beauty as a transcendent, which affirms the convertibility of beauty with the true and the good. Beauty, as so understood, appeals simultaneously to the intellect and the will. It appeals to the intellect in that beauty calls for a contemplative appreciation; yet, it results not in cognitive certainty, but in the satiation of the appetite characterized by joy. I will argue that the reason that beauty has this unique dual quality is because the beautiful object possesses an excess of intelligibility: as a result, while beauty transcends human abstractive powers, the orderly perfection of the object is nevertheless connaturally recognized. The intelligibility of this gratuitous orderliness in creation is intuited as a manifestation of the goodness of the Creator, and so inculcates a complacent sense of joy. Indeed, as even contemporary critics have come to recognize, even if obscurely, artworks lacking any embodiment of gratuitous order, and the concomitant implicit implication of a transcendent source of order, deprive the human soul of a sense of meaning and purpose, frustrating both the understanding and the will. For this reason, the ersatz art that can now be found abundantly in our galleries can only leave man restless for that experience of beauty that alone satisfies his heart’s longing for a transcendent joy even in this world.
Defining Beauty

In spite of my insistence on truth, I admit that the most evident fact about beautiful entities is that they are pleasing; there is an immediate sense of pleasure associated with the experience of beauty. It is for this reason that Aquinas brings up the question of beauty in his discussion of the good: if both beauty and goodness are pleasing, then how are they distinct from one another? Now, while it is likely that Aquinas ends up viewing beauty merely as a species of goodness, later Thomists, especially Jacques Maritain, have used Aquinas’s definition to establish beauty as a transcendental property of being in its own right. However, Aquinas’s attempt to distinguish goodness and beauty gives us the definition of beauty that will be so provocative for later Thomists: beauty is that which pleases when seen.

Beauty and goodness 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, for goodness properly relates to the appetite (goodness being what all things desire); and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen.

There are two important points to draw from this definition. First is the cognitive nature of our experience, which is what ties beauty to truth. This attention to the cognitive dimension is necessary, for if we focus solely on the experience of pleasure, the door is open to a relativistic reading inasmuch as different observers might gain pleasure from different things. Is beauty, then, merely in the eye of the beholder? If this were true, it would seem to sanction the cynicism of contemporary artists like Koons. Thus, the cognitive aspect points to our receptivity to form, which underlies the objective nature of beauty as a mode of truth.
The second important point is Aquinas's insistence that beauty and goodness are fundamentally identical in being pleasing to the will, differing only logically or notionally. This means that beauty is a transcendental property and so, like all transcendentals, is grounded in being. It is therefore, again, understood to be an ontologically objective property that causes pleasure. This objective foundation in reality is what enables the cognitive awareness of beauty. However, to appreciate this critical insight more fully, let us first consider the nature of the transcendentals.

Transcendental properties—traditionally, unity, truth, goodness, and beauty—are those aspects of being that belong to all things just because they are beings. In contrast to predicates, which mark out some division of being as indicating a determinate kind of being, transcendental properties are said to be convertible with being, since they apply to all entities in all categories of being.10 Ironically, though, this explanation has the confounding result that it is impossible to properly define a transcendental property, for to define something is to delimit a property as a specific kind of being, especially as denominated by Aristotle’s categories (e.g., blue, or tall, or living, or human). This problem arises because one cannot properly define the ground of the transcendentals, being itself: to define being would require that we name a finite quality, but being is not limited; it is, as has been frequently noted, not a genus, since all genera are subdivisions of being itself.11 In the same way, then, one cannot properly define the transcendental properties that are convertible with being.

How, then, are the transcendentals distinguished from one another? The transcendental properties are said to be those properties of being itself that are manifest when it is understood under a certain logical condition (affirmation, negation, relation); thus, they differ from being, and from one another, only insofar as each one focuses our attention on a particular notional aspect of all existent being. But, as all differences are solely notional, each property is convertible with the others. It follows that they do not represent kinds of being, but merely conceptual aspects attendant on the nature of
being as existent; but as being, as unlimited, cannot be defined properly, neither can these conceptual aspects.

One consequence of the impossibility of defining the transcendental properties is that they are best identified by us, and distinguished from one another, by reference to the aspect we thematize when considering our experience of being. This is possible because being, as act, presents itself to us in a variety of ways, and this is evident in the various effects that being has on us. The differences in these effects allow us to derive the properties all beings have: as the mind can be adecated with any being, we recognize truth as a transcendental; as desire is elicited in the will, we recognize the presence of the good; and as man experiences joy when contemplating being, we recognize beauty.

Critically, though, transcendental properties are ontologically objective properties of being. Our reaction, therefore, is not purely subjective, but must correlate to some objective quality of being that provides the grounding for this reaction. The objective quality that motivates and justifies each of these reactions is the metaphysical principle of being as the act of existence. Thus, truth is grounded in the intelligibility of act (as opposed to the obscurity of potency); it is this intelligibility of act that allows for the adecation with the mind, for as Aquinas frequently argues, something is knowable inasmuch as it is in act. On the other hand, it is a universal principle that actuality perfects potency; the good is grounded in this perfection of being, a perfection that the will desires to gain possession of. Accordingly, in similar fashion, there must be an objective character of being as act that evinces joy when contemplated.

In analyzing the nature of beauty, Aquinas will argue that that objective character is constituted by the presence of three conditions: “For beauty includes three conditions, integrity or perfection, 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.” Now, as Aquinas emphasized in the definition of beauty cited earlier, being is communicated
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by form, the principle of actuality for the substance. It is clear, then, that each of these objective characteristics is the result of the formal cause of the entity, in particular the power of the formal cause to order matter, to structure matter so as to make it intelligible. This is evident with integrity and harmony, in which matter is ordered and made whole by the form so that from the potency and obscurity of matter is educed order and meaning. Thus, beauty has an immediate sensuous appeal because of this integrity and harmony. But, as I will argue, the actuality of form is especially related to clarity, or radiance, a unique mode of intelligible presence attributable to beauty. It is therefore this intelligible ordering of matter by act that is the common foundation for truth, goodness, and beauty: the reception of form makes the thing intelligible; the perfection of form (as embodied in second act) makes it desirable; and contemplation of the order educed by form gives rise to joy.

It might be objected that contemplation of form is an act of the intellect, and so we have not yet adequately marked out what distinguishes beauty from truth. Strictly speaking, the intelligibility of any substance is captured in the transcendental property of truth, in which man grasps the form and comes to know the world as it really is: “First perfection [i.e., act] is the form of each thing, and that by which it has its act of existing. . . . The note of truth in things results from first perfection; for it is because a thing has a form that it imitates the art of the divine intellect and produces knowledge of itself in the soul.” Thus, it is the reception of the form in the intellect that constitutes the adequation of mind and thing, that is, the truth. But note that in this explanation, Aquinas also makes reference to that by which the formal cause itself is constituted: the act of the divine intellect. In fact, in defining the truth, Aquinas is clear that truth can never merely be the adequation of human mind and thing (for that would again open it up to the vagaries of relativism, as each perspectival adequation is of necessity unique). Rather, truth must first be defined by the adequation of the thing to the divine intellect, by which the being and truth of the thing is constituted: “Natural things
are midway between the knowledge of God and our knowledge: for we receive knowledge from natural things, of which God is the cause by his knowledge. Hence, as the natural objects of knowledge are prior to our knowledge, and are its measure, so, the knowledge of God is prior to natural things, and is the measure of them."\(^\text{18}\)

This transcendent and primary mode of truth is embodied in the Divine Ideas, the exemplars by which God creates forms.\(^\text{19}\) To the extent to which the form is speculatively adequated to man's mind, we grasp truth in all its objectivity; yet to the extent to which that form points back to its being practically constituted by a Divine Idea, a more radical mode of adequation to the Divine mind is present. This more radical mode of truth is always obscure to man, due to man's reliance on sense experience through which we come to know truth only indirectly and imperfectly.\(^\text{20}\) But what I would argue is that this means that there is, so to speak, an \textit{excess of intelligibility} in every object we come to know.\(^\text{21}\) Aquinas himself seems to concede this when he makes the perplexing claim that man never really knows the essence of a fly.\(^\text{22}\) Because there is a mode of truth that can never be made present to sensation, from which man abstracts universal essences, there is always some aspect of every substance that remains unknown to us; but this is due not to the unknowability of the object, but because the source of being in which that truth resides transcends the limitations of man's cognitive powers.\(^\text{23}\) Thus, every form made present to human experience in the ordering of the material world simultaneously represents an excess of intelligibility that eludes man's rational analysis.

Nevertheless, it is not the case that man is completely unaware or unaffected by this. We experience being as actively present for us.\(^\text{24}\) While man may not be able to conceptually grasp this transcendent intelligibility, it seems evident that there is in man a \textit{connatural} recognition of this superabundant intelligibility that elicits wonder; our connatural receptivity to the radiance of form instills joy. This is beauty: a connatural knowledge of that transcendent intelligible order. Connatural knowledge is the non-conceptual receptivity to
being that enables man to know a truth, even in the absence of conceptual knowledge. Aquinas introduces the idea by noting: “Now rectitude of judgment is twofold: first, on account of perfect use of reason, secondly, on account of a certain connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge.”25 The clearest example of this is the way in which virtue gives connatural knowledge of the morally good act even for those who are utterly innocent of the theoretical understanding of the natural law.26 Aesthetic experience is similarly connatural: man can recognize the orderliness of form not only by abstract cognition of essences, but also in the immediacy of sense experience. As sense experience is tied to man’s affective powers, the sensitive reaction to a particular and concrete instantiation of orderliness gives rise to joy, which is an appreciation of the good achieved in matter by that form.27 Thus, in the same definition of beauty cited above, Aquinas comments: “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.”28

It is because of our connatural receptivity to beauty that I believe we can best identify this excess of intelligibility with the notion of claritas, or radiance of form, which Maritain argues is the most important element of the definition of beauty.29 This radiance is the intelligibility of order even at the level of sense perception, the refulgence of act that reveals itself in the orderliness of the matter itself. Recall that philosophy and poetry both begin in wonder: while the philosopher aims to reduce act to the intelligibility of abstract, universal principles, the artist’s wonder celebrates the exuberant harmony of the world realized by act by accentuating the mysterious-yet-intelligible radiance shining through in every concrete, particular experience of orderliness in the world.30

Moreover, this intelligibility of the form at the level of sensation signals the participation of the concrete matter in the transcendent creative act of the Divine Idea; though resistant to abstraction, man
has a natural appreciation for the radical giftedness of this order and harmony, and the way in which it points to a more profound order of meaning. We know that matter in itself tends to dissolution and disorder; to experience integrity, proportion, and radiant intelligibility in defiance of this material tendency reveals the abiding supernatural source of order in the natural world. The contemplation of the good of order, in turn, elicits joy, a quiescent resting in the good of creation itself.  

Thus, because of the joy elicited by the excess of intelligibility, beauty has the power to call forth a sense of ecstasy, a communion with a higher truth that is not purely intellectual. This recurrent theme in philosophy since Plato\textsuperscript{32} is precisely what the cynical purveyors of modern art have rejected; it is also why modern art has relegated itself to insignificance. Art is significant not because it is clever or politically galvanizing, but because its beauty transforms the world. Beauty’s excess of intelligibility spiritualizes matter. It is for this reason that, as Augustine clearly saw,\textsuperscript{33} the beautiful naturally draws the mind to God. Indeed, the recognition of beauty in this world is an habitual part of a religious view of reality, for through it we see that God’s providential ordering and goodness are present ubiquitously.\textsuperscript{34} It is because of the excess of intelligibility that beauty can provide a foretaste of the Beatific Vision, for it draws the mind from this world to its cause. It is this experience that so moved Simone Weil at Solesmes in 1938, where she found “a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words.”\textsuperscript{35} In similar fashion, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has commented on the inescapable centrality of two modes of beauty at the heart of the Catholic tradition:

The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb. Better witness is borne to the Lord by the splendor of holiness and art which have arisen in the community of believers than by
the clever excuses which apologetics has come up with. . . . If the Church is to continue to transform and humanize the world, how can she dispense with beauty in her liturgies, that beauty which is so closely linked with love and with the radiance of the Resurrection?\textsuperscript{16}

The forcefulness of this exhortation rests on the fact that beauty is transformative because it points to a higher truth. Beauty causes joy, though, because that truth cannot be articulated in the logical abstractions of philosophy. Rather, the truth is numinously present and grasped connaturally; in the intuition of the gratuitous orderliness of the world, we discern that there is more to existence than science can ever capture. Given this power of beauty, art should not leave us speechless because it fails to live up to reason; rather, it should leave us astounded and awed because of its ineffable excess of intelligible being, an excess that alone in this world satisfies man’s thirst for the infinite.\textsuperscript{37}

Notes

7. See \textit{Summa Theologica} I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since the good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms the desire; while the
notion of the beautiful is that calms the desire, by being seen or known. Consequently those senses chiefly regard the beautiful, which are the most cognitive, viz., sight and hearing, as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds. But in reference to the other objects of the other senses, we do not speak of beautiful tastes, and beautiful odors. Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty: so the good means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the beautiful is something pleasant to apprehend.


9. See ST I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.

10. See *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 4, ad 1: “Second. some [predicates] are said to add to being because the mode they express is one that is common, and consequent upon every being. This mode can be taken in two ways: first, in so far as it follows upon every being considered absolutely; second, in so far as it follows upon every being considered in relation to another.” Translation from *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt (1954; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).


12. See *De Veritate*, q. 1 and a. 1. For an analysis of this derivation of the transcendental properties, see Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*.

13. ST I, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3.

14. See, for example, ST I, q. 5, a. 2 and q. 87, a. 1.

15. ST I, q. 5, a. 1.

16. ST I, q. 39, a. 8.

17. *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3 (contrary difficulties). In the same way, second act, or operation, is the note of goodness, for it is this teleological perfection of being that every substance naturally inclines to: “But the note of goodness in things results from its second perfection, for this goodness arises from the end.”

18. ST I, q. 14, a. 8, ad 3; cf. *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 2.

19. See ST I, q. 15, a. 1: “As then the world was not made by chance, but by God acting by His intellect . . . there must exist in the divine mind a form to the likeness of which the world was made. And in this the notion of an idea consists.”

20. See ST I, q. 84, a. 5; cf. ST I-II, q. 93, a. 2.

21. See Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O’Connor (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 57–67, esp. at 60: “Because Being is created, that is to say creatively thought by God, it is there ‘in itself’ light, radiant, and self-revealing—precisely because it is. Accordingly, for St. Thomas, the unknowable
can never denote something in itself dark and impenetrable, but only something that has so much light that a particular finite faculty of knowledge cannot absorb it all.”


23. See STI, q. 1, a. 1: “Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light.”


25. ST II-II, q. 45, a. 2; cf. ST I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3: “Since judgment appertains to wisdom, the twofold manner of judging produces a twofold wisdom. A man may judge in one way by inclination, as whoever has the habit of a virtue judges rightly of what concerns that virtue by his very inclination towards it. Hence it is the virtuous man, as we read, who is the measure and rule of human acts. In another way, by knowledge, just as a man learned in moral science might be able to judge rightly about virtuous acts, though he had not the virtue.”


28. See STI, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.


30. This point is forcefully made by Maritain in *Art and Scholasticism*, 23nn1: “By ‘radiance of the form’ must be understood an *ontological* splendor which happens to be revealed to our minds, not a *conceptual* clarity. . . . [The] ‘form’ at the heart of things, [does] not necessarily designate something clear and intelligible to us, but rather something which, although clear and luminous in itself, intelligible in itself, often remains obscure to our eyes, either because of the matter in which the form in question is buried, or because of the transcendence of the form itself. . . . In truth, to say with the Schoolmen that the form is in things the proper principle of intelligibility, is to say at the same time that it is the proper principle of mystery. . . . To define the beautiful by the radiance of the form is in reality to define it by the radiance of a mystery.”

31. ST I-II, q. 23, a. 4.
And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other. . . . Starting from individual beauties, the quest for the universal beauty must find him ever mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung . . . until at last he comes to know what beauty is.


The erotic nature of this is brought out in *Phaedrus*, 248a1–257b6. This Platonic ascent to beauty is interestingly recapitulated by Plotinus in *Ennead* 1.6, and integrated into the Christian tradition by Pseudo-Dionysius in *The Divine Names* c. 4. For an analysis of the ecstatic nature of this movement, see Josef Pieper, *Divine Madness: Plato’s Case Against Secular Humanism*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

32. See *Symposium*, 200d–212c, esp. 210e5–211c6:

Augustine completed his conversion to Christianity with the famous affirmation, “Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee” (*Augustine, Confessions* X.27, trans. F. J. Sheed [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993]).


36. In fact, in a paradoxical tribute to the power of art to communicate transcendent meaning, many contemporary atheists have moved to substitute art for religion, arguing that it can adequately re-enchant the world in the wake of the death of God. A catalogue of the myriad ways in which intellectuals have tried to replace religion with art is found in Peter Watson, *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014). Some elements of this argument were presented in a different context in my editor’s introduction to *A Piercing Light: Beauty, Faith, and Human Transcendence* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).