

Beauty, Ever Ancient, Ever New:  
The Philosophy of Beauty of Plotinus and St. Augustine

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## **Abstract**

The aesthetic theory of Plotinus and St. Augustine have much in common in their understanding of the beautiful. The pagan mysticism of Plotinus and his reliance on the Platonic tradition allowed him to develop an ascensional aesthetic theory. Plotinus' theory maintains the objectivity of beauty alongside other transcendental properties of being. The soul, first understanding the lower beauties of the sensible world, ascends to higher beauties such as the virtues, noble conduct, and the soul, and finally to the Supreme Beauty of the One. Beauty on Earth is a reflection of the Beauty of the One.

Augustine's aesthetics is also ascensional, and there is clear evidence of the inspiration he received from Plotinus. Objective beauty is again defended here. Augustine's thought on beauty encourages the soul to ascend from the sensible things of the world—which are not evil or unworthy of attention—towards intelligible beauty and finally to God. The dynamic is very similar to Plotinus, but what makes the essential difference in this system is the Incarnation and Augustine's faith. He equates Beauty with God and as such the Son of Man is also Absolute Beauty. This difference in the aesthetic theory of Augustine allows one to actually reach the Beauty for which all men long.

This difference in Augustine's philosophy of beauty should be given the notice it is due by the Church today. The importance of beauty in a world of ugliness is more urgent for the modern world than in times past. Catholics should recognize the essential role beauty plays in encouraging the mind's ascent to God.

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## Introduction

In the Church of Santo Tomé, in Toledo, Spain, is a monumental work by one of the greatest representatives of Spanish Renaissance painting— Doménikos Theotokópoulos, or El Greco. The painting is divided into two scenes. The lower depicts the miraculous burial of the Count of Orgaz by two saints, who according to legend came from Heaven to bury the holy man. The townsmen of Toledo stand in awe at the scene before them. Yet some look upward towards the heavens and the second division of the painting. There, Christ sits in glory surrounded by the heavenly court with the Blessed Virgin resplendent at his right and an entreating St. John the Baptist at his left. Below Christ—connecting the two scenes—is the barely perceptible soul of the Count of Orgaz approaching his Lord accompanied by angels. It is a beautiful work, worthy of the name masterpiece. The richness of its colors, the delicacy of the features, the excellent composition, the expert application of the paints, and the piety evident in the execution all in some way contribute to its beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Why can this painting be called beautiful? Is it simply the accumulation of the aforementioned attributes that makes such a thing beautiful? Perhaps it is only beautiful to an art critic who recognizes the superior artistry of El Greco or to the man of faith who delights in its depiction of the Lord in His glory and the attainment of the Beatific vision by a holy soul. Would the average man enter the ornate Baroque church of Santo Tomé and be struck by the beauty of the painting—or would he be indifferent to it or even find it ugly? We so often have disagreements on the nature of beauty that we have for the most part agreed as a society that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Beauty is

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<sup>1</sup> Doménikos Theotokópoulos, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586, in Santiago Alcolea, *El Greco* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2007), 37.

subjective—a matter of personal preferences, taste, or feelings—and is by no means an absolute. If a man finds *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* to be less beautiful than a kitschy stock photo of a galloping horse surrounded by ethereal light, then that is what beauty is for him.

One who would have disagreed with such an assessment is depicted in the lower division of El Greco's painting. According to legend, the two saints that came to bury the holy count were St. Stephen and St. Augustine. Augustine, the great Father of the Latin Church, in his own time asked a question pertinent to this difficulty raised by subjective beauty. As a youth, while he lounged about with some of his companions, he tells us that he asked them, "What then is beautiful? And what is beauty?" He detailed this conversation in one of the most treasured works in not only Christian, but Western Literature: the *Confessions*. These questions gave rise to a work of Augustine's much less well-regarded—in fact it no longer exists: *De Pulchro et Apto*, or "On the Beautiful and the Fitting." This work represented Augustine's youthful thoughts on what we mean when we call something beautiful, although the older bishop of Hippo seems to treat them with some indifference in the *Confessions*. He imparts to God that only "You know" how many books there were, "for I do not remember."<sup>2</sup>

The initial youthful enthusiasm he had for exploring the beautiful had been inspired by what Augustine had found in the works of another author, Plotinus. This philosopher would prove to be of great importance for the early philosophy of Augustine, as this predecessor is largely held to be the progenitor of the Neoplatonists. Their adherence to the philosophy of Plato and their exploration of new ideas would act as an

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<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.13.

inspiration for the young Augustine and as a further impetus to throw off the dour, dualistic Manicheism of his youth. Among the works that Augustine would have encountered in his early foray into Neoplatonism would have been one of the tractates of Plotinus' *Enneads*—the compendium of the philosopher's works. This tractate that he likely encountered was the Sixth Tractate of the First Ennead, "On Beauty." We see a great deal of similarity between the two philosophers on this subject, and both found it to be a topic of serious inquiry. Beauty, for them, was not in the "eye of the beholder." It is objective and constant. Moreover, beauty in the world around us is a reflection of a much greater beauty—the Supreme Beauty. We can once again turn towards the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* to see a depiction of that Beauty for which Augustine longed. The soul of the nobleman ascends into Heaven, there to be received by Him who is Beauty Itself—God, here represented in Christ.

The beauty of things in the world around us, namely sensible beauties like the aforementioned painting, music, or the human body, are immediately apparent to us. We can pass judgment on them, and can all experience them through our perception. But what of those things we cannot sense? How do we recognize the beauty of the virtues or the soul? If we cannot understand the beauty of sensible things, or reject it, in a sense we reject higher beauties as well, eventually coming to reject the objectivity of beauty and Beauty itself. There is an objective Beauty, and He has revealed Himself to us. How can we say "beauty will save the world"<sup>3</sup> if we do not recognize that beauty is a reality in the world around us? As the poet John Keats exclaims:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," —that is all

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<sup>3</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* trans. Constance Garnett, (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 351.

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.<sup>4</sup>

How can we equate beauty with truth or goodness for that matter if we are only willing to accept a real Truth and ignore a defense of the objectivity of beauty? There is an objective beauty, for it is “a reflection of God, a reflection of His own infinite beauty, a genuine value, something thing that is important-in-itself, something that praises God.”<sup>5</sup>

We shall endeavor in the following to describe the aesthetics of two philosophers in the Classical tradition—Plotinus and St. Augustine. The pagan mysticism of the former and the zealous Christianity of the latter will be shown to have had monumental effects on their understanding of beauty. Theirs is an ascensional aesthetic—beginning with lower beauties, we ascend towards superior beauty to the most perfect of all beauty, the Supreme Beauty. It is an objective aesthetics that concerns itself with what makes something beautiful rather than arguing the existence of beauty. Plotinus’ reason and mysticism led him towards an understanding of the beautiful. Augustine’s reason charged with a restless love for God drew him to Beauty. We will finally examine how the modern Catholic Church might approach this question of beauty. I shall argue that the pagan philosophy of Plotinus brought him to an understanding of beauty, and that we as Catholics have a much greater obligation to defend beauty and embrace it as Augustine did as we possess the revelation of Beauty Himself. The challenge of the Church in the modern world is daunting. Nevertheless, even in the midst of this ugly world of the prosaic, the beauty of the Bride of Christ can shine forth as a means to lead those besmirched in the world’s dreariness towards the Beauty for which all men ought to long.

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<sup>4</sup> John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *Seven Centuries of Verse: English and America* ed. A.J.M. Smith, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 373.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Aesthetics*, vol. I, trans. Brian McNeil (Steubenville, OH: The Hildebrand Project, 2016), 2.



## Chapter I – The Philosophy of Beauty of Plotinus

All that we have of the philosophy of Plotinus comes to us through his *Enneads*, a collection of writings compiled and edited by Porphyry, his greatest student. His student began this edition of what he hoped would be the definitive version of his master's works with a Life of the philosopher. He began this biography with a statement that captured the mysterious and almost mystical character of Plotinus.

Plotinus, the philosopher our contemporary, seemed ashamed of being in the Body, so deeply rooted was this feeling that he could never be induced to tell of his ancestry, his parentage, or his birthplace.<sup>6</sup>

We do not know much of his life or his origins outside of what is given to us by Porphyry in this brief biography, but it is thought that he probably lived from 205 to 270 A.D., living and working in Roman Egypt and in Rome itself. Even though his life is largely shrouded in mystery, his philosophy represents one of the most important in the thought of those in the late Roman Empire that can be defined as Neo-Platonism. Plotinus—a veritable founder of this philosophical movement—and other philosophers of his time looked to the example of Plato and subscribed to his understanding of reality.

### *Plotinus' Thought*

Reality for the Neoplatonist rests in the One, from which all else emanates. The purpose of their system “was to develop and disseminate a personal understanding of theology and metaphysics, begun by the great Athenian philosopher Plato almost a

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<sup>6</sup> Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work*, 1.1.

century before, which would result in an understanding of higher reality.”<sup>7</sup> Plato’s separation of reality between the two worlds of the Ideas and the Sensibles was the foundation upon which Plotinus based his own understanding of reality, and will be seen to have informed his own philosophy of beauty. Using the example of beauty, Plato posited that those things in the world that we experience as beautiful are beautiful because they share in the Form of Beauty, which exists in a world of Ideal Forms. In that world are all the perfections of those things we experience in this world, and is as such the true reality. Plotinus used this Platonic idea as a foundation for his philosophy, but diverged from it in various ways. Therefore, in order to understand Plotinus’ philosophy of beauty, it is necessary that various elements of his thought be defined. His “Divine Triad” of the One, the *Nous*, and the Soul are essential in understanding what he means when speaking of the beautiful.

The One is absolutely simple, transcendent, and completely unknowable. It is occasionally tempting to substitute “God” for the term “One,” so often used in the *Enneads*. Plotinus does himself sometimes refer to a god, but this cannot be viewed in the sense of the Supreme Being and Creator that we know from Christianity, nor can it be considered in the traditional sense as Being itself. The One can be viewed as being in a sort of Trinity or “Divine Triad” with the *Nous* and the Soul. This Trinity can be viewed “like the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit of Christian tradition” and it can be “argued that the Godhead of Plotinus consists of the One, the *Nous* and the Soul, or the One-in-Many. Unlike the Christian notion of God, “It is not the Creator; its scarcely even to be

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<sup>7</sup> C. Wayne Mayhall, *On Plotinus* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth-Thompson Learning, 2004), 2.

rightly called the First-Cause: its lonely majesty rejects all such predication of action.”<sup>8</sup> Plotinus frequently refers to this One in his writings on beauty especially as the source of beauty and Beauty itself.

The *Nous* can be translated from Greek as the Intellectual-Principle and Intelligence itself—though this English classification is somewhat inadequate. The *Nous* of Plotinus exists in that same realm proposed by Plato—the world of Ideal-Forms. However, he diverges from Plato in that he posits that the Ideas come from this *Nous* and are the thoughts of God.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the *Nous* has also been called the Divine Mind or Divine Intelligence. Underlying this notion of a divine mind is a sense that there is a mind that acts as a force or artisan in the Cosmos. The One cannot function in this way—it does not even know itself and is completely unknowable, and the Soul will be seen to be lesser than the Intellectual-Principle. The *Nous* then fills this role in Plotinus’ Divine Triad, and is the emanating source of Ideas.

The third part of this Divine Triad is the Soul, or All-Soul. While the *Nous* has two roles “that of upward contemplation of the One and that of ‘generation’ towards the lower,” so does the Soul have its own two acts. It “contemplates the Intellectual-Principle and ‘generates’ in the bounty of its own perfection the lower.”<sup>10</sup> The Soul for Plotinus is a “cosmic force that unifies, organizes, sustains, and controls every aspect of the world.”<sup>11</sup> An individual Soul does not depend upon a body, nor is it a body itself. It is immaterial, and since it itself is not a body, it can be immortal. The All-Soul possesses

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen MacKenna, introduction to *The Enneads* by Plotinus (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), xxiv.

<sup>9</sup> Mayhall, *On Plotinus*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> MacKenna, introduction to *The Enneads*, xxv-xxvi.

<sup>11</sup> Dominic J. O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 17.

a particular relationship with individual Souls in that it “includes, and is, all the souls: the human soul is, therefore, the All-Soul.”<sup>12</sup> As such, when “Soul” is encountered in his discussion on beauty, it can be assumed that Plotinus is referring to the individual human soul or spirit that is in some way in communion with the All-Soul and thereby the Divine Triad.

### *The Inspiration of Plato*

Plotinus’ complex philosophy builds upon the thought of Plato in many ways, especially regarding his predecessor’s views on the One and the theory of the two worlds. While Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists diverged from Platonic thought in other ways, his theories on beauty owe their foundation to the ideas of Plato. Plato addressed the question of beauty in several of his dialogues, and remained committed to the objectivity of beauty. Furthermore, he connected Beauty as a form of the Good, setting up a dynamic that is prevalent throughout Plotinus’ aesthetical philosophy. For both Plato and Plotinus, “the superiority of the beauty of spiritual things to the beauty of the visible and audible is emphasized” even while “both philosophers explicitly acknowledge the latter in its value.”<sup>13</sup>

In Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates tells of his encounter with a wise woman, Diotima who says much concerning the beautiful. She defines it, saying

First, it always *is* and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one

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<sup>12</sup> MacKenna, xxvii.

<sup>13</sup> Hildebrand, *Aesthetics*, 83.

thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here and ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others.<sup>14</sup>

When Plato attempts to describe beauty, he defines it as something immutable and the same for all who encounter it. It is eternal and never changing. Something will not be beautiful to one person and ugly to another, nor will something be beautiful in one place and ugly somewhere else. There is an objective beauty, primarily because Beauty is an Ideal-Form, so all other manifestations of beauty reflect this complete and perfect form of Absolute Beauty. Plato's concept of the Ideal of Beauty can be gauged in the following:

Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change.<sup>15</sup>

Beauty is not synonymous with a beautiful face, a majestic eagle, or a sunset. Beauty exists as an Ideal Form, and anything that is beautiful participates in the loveliness of the Ideal. This is how Plato sets about defining Beauty. However, Plato in another dialogue, the *Greater Hippias*, lists an assortment of unsatisfying definitions for the beautiful as examples of the difficulty of conceptualizing Beauty. Plato throughout this dialogue “emphasizes the difficulty involved in formally grasping the nature of beauty.” It is easy for man to recognize beauty, but it is another matter entirely to “reason out its essence.”<sup>16</sup> This mysterious nature of beauty will likewise be addressed in the philosophy of Plotinus.

For Plato, the Good and the Beautiful are connected. In his dialogue, *Lysis*, he calls the beautiful a “friend.” It “bears a resemblance, at any rate, to something soft and

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<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 211a-211b.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Francis J. Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 139.

smooth and sleek, and maybe that's why it slides and sinks into us so easily, because it's something like that. Now I maintain that the good is beautiful.”<sup>17</sup> This firstly captures the multiple aspects of beauty, but more importantly it posits a relationship between the Good and the Beautiful. In his construction of the ideal state in the *Republic*, Plato advises that the young be brought up surrounded by beauty, as “gracelessness, bad rhythm, and disharmony are akin to bad words and bad character, while their opposites are akin to and are imitations of the opposite, a moderate and good character.” Being surrounded by the beautiful produce of expert craftsmen and artists, they will grow in virtue, as “something of those fine works will strike their eyes and ears like a breeze that brings health from a good place, leading them unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason.”<sup>18</sup> Platonic Beauty is akin to the Good, and this will continue in Plotinus's views concerning beautiful virtue.

For both Plato and Plotinus, there is a degree of difference in the beauty exhibited by a painting and the beauty of a virtuous act. A hierarchy exists for what we can call beautiful, and spiritual beauty is greater than material and physical beauty in this dynamic. The example Plato gives is of love for a person. One begins with recognizing the beauty of a body, but soon finds that all physical things are more or less the same. Another's soul is far more unique and beautiful, so the lover will progress beyond that love of material things to love of things spiritual. To make a beautiful soul, there must be virtue and right action, so he must soon embrace a love for the beauty of “activities and laws.” From this he will come to a love of knowledge and wisdom that will eventually lead him to an understanding of Beauty. Upon this path

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Lysis*, 216d.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 401a, 401c.

One goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs; from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful.<sup>19</sup>

There is an ascension in Plato's conception of beauty. One must ascend from lower beauties to greater beauties—not dismissing these lower material things as in any way evil and to be despised, but recognizing that there is a perfect Beauty beyond in the world of Ideal-Forms from which all other beauties receive their loveliness.

### *Beauty in the Enneads*

Plotinus's thoughts on beauty are mostly defined in the Sixth Tractate of his First Ennead. He begins simply with those things that we know to be beautiful through our senses. The beautiful "addresses itself chiefly to sight," though we experience beauty through hearing as well, "as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music." Plotinus frequently demonstrates this beauty in the "combination of words" in the many elegant and insightful phrases throughout the *Enneads*. Surrounded by tangible beauty in the material world, he asks what "is it that gives comeliness to material forms and draws the ear to the sweetness perceived in sounds?" If we understand what it is in material forms that draws us to them and makes us feel pleasure in sensing them, then we will understand a basic quality of beauty.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 211c.

<sup>20</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.1.

There are two parts to this initial quest for an understanding of the beautiful, and the second aspect is by far the most valued in Plotinus' theory. There is, firstly, the beauty exhibited by those things that we explore with the senses—the beautiful object and the pleasing sounds. Additionally, there are also those things that individuals who can contemplate above the senses recognize—that beauty “in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellects.” But most importantly, there is the beauty we find in the virtues. Considering this beauty, he asks, “What is the secret of the beauty there is in all that derives from Soul?”<sup>21</sup>

This Sixth Tractate can be divided into four sections and in these Plotinus first combats competing philosophies of beauty and presents his own. He firstly rejects and argues against the commonly held Stoic view of the beautiful—that it is primarily based on symmetry. Next, Plotinus responds with his own thoughts on the nature of beauty. Thirdly, he outlines the relationship between beauty and the Soul. Finally, he emphasizes the beauty of the One, and our own longing for unity with that Principle that is one of the primary elements of his entire philosophy. In this way he develops—in beautiful prose of his own—what we mean by Beauty.

Plotinus first deconstructs a commonly held view in his time of what makes something beautiful. He generically claims that “almost everyone declares that the symmetry of parts toward each other and towards a whole”<sup>22</sup> is what constitutes beauty for the beholder. It would be reprehensible for Plotinus to make such a broad statement if it were not for the fact that he immediately sets out to demonstrate the flaws in such a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



belief. The Stoics “declared that beauty depends on measure and proportion.”<sup>23</sup> This they called *symmetria* and held it to be the highest principle of beauty. Plotinus argues, however, that if beauty only exists in symmetry, then the only beautiful things are those things that are whole—that are complete. Compounds—since beauty only exist in the symmetry of parts, and not in the parts themselves—become the only things of beauty. Plotinus rejects such an assumption, and insists that “beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details,” and the “law must run throughout.” He gives the example of a musical composition wherein even individual notes have beauty of their own. Turning to less tangible things, Plotinus pointedly asks whether we can find symmetry in “noble conduct, or excellent laws, [or] in any form of mental pursuit?” Beauty exists in all the virtues, but there is no element of symmetry that could be applied to a virtue. Here, Plotinus quite succinctly rejects the Stoic notion of symmetry as the only indicator of beauty, and can henceforth set forth his own views on aesthetics.<sup>24</sup>

Plotinus sets out clearly his own interpretation of what is entailed by beauty in this way, saying:

Our interpretation is that the Soul—by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest Existences in the hierarchy of Being—when it sees anything of that kin, or any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight, takes its own to itself, and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of all its affinity.<sup>25</sup>

Because the Soul has this “affiliation” to the One—to the “noblest Existences”—it immediately recognizes anything that is likewise affiliated with the Principle. It is delighted by it, just as the Soul is delighted by those things it finds comely and pleasant

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<sup>23</sup> Wladyslaw Tartarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, ed. J. Harrell (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 188, accessed April 14, 2018, Ebscohost.

<sup>24</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.1.

<sup>25</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.2.

to see or hear. Our relationship with the One is what inspires us to recognize something as beautiful. However, for Plotinus, the One is so beyond the dreariness of this world, that it seems improbable that the “loveliness of this world” could have any likeness to the “splendours of the Supreme.” It is only through a relation and a communion with Ideal-Form that the beauty we experience in this world reminds us of the glorious One.

If the beauty of this world is but a reflection of the One, then those things that are ugly by necessity would have no relation to the One. This is what Plotinus proposes—that ugliness is “isolation from the Divine-Thought.” Ugliness resists the patterns of the One, does not conform to reason, and does not cede to Ideal-Form. Just as the One is Absolute Beauty, so too can there be an Absolute Ugly—something so far removed from the One so as to be completely isolated from it. Plato too defined ugliness as a sort of defect in form or a deficiency—as “the useless and shameful.”<sup>26</sup> Ideal-Form is this necessary component that brings all things into a harmonious relationship. It counteracts this ugliness and confusion with order and unity. We must see the Idea as “a unity, and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may.” This unity supplied by Ideal-Form is then the prerequisite for beauty.

Beauty, rather than resting solely on the whole or its parts in material objects, can be found both in the parts as well as the whole. The object in itself is beautiful, Plotinus concludes, “by communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine.” Plotinus uses the example of an architect and a house. He asks, “On what principle does the architect, when he finds the house standing before him correspondent with his inner ideal of a house, pronounce it beautiful?” The beautiful material object is like this house

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<sup>26</sup> Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, 251.

in question, a house with “all of its individual parts assembled by the expert craftsman, right down to the single beautiful stone which when placed with many others of its kind form the walls of this house.”<sup>27</sup> The beauty of the house extends to its parts, and is noted by perception. The preceptor sees the Ideal-Form present in this object, and furthermore,

seeing further stamped upon the common shapes some shape excellent above the common, it gathers into unity what still remains fragmentary, catches it up and carries it within, no longer a thing of parts, and present it to the Ideal-Principles as something concordant and congenial, a natural friend.<sup>28</sup>

This thing, united to the Ideal-Principles, is recognized like a friend. We know it and are familiar with that especial character that it possesses. It reminds us in its beauty of the One, in which all is unified. The compact unity of beauty in the house or object is a reflection of the unity that is exhibited by the One.

Objects and material things can be beautiful—and this Plotinus willingly grants. Nevertheless, he claims that there are “earlier and loftier beauties than these.” They cannot be seen or heard or are perceptible to any of the senses. Only the Soul can recognize these mysterious beauties. A blind man who has never beheld a beautiful object cannot comment upon the grace of physical things. These “loftier” beauties are likewise inaccessible to those who possess a different handicap—indifference to virtue, nobility of life, and knowledge. Only those who see with the Soul and recognize the beauty in noble conduct, virtue, and knowledge will delight in the recognition of beauty and feel a sense of “wonderment and a delicious trouble.” The Soul will delight as much in the things that are unseen as it will in the things that are seen. Plotinus lists those things that the Soul delights including those things,

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<sup>27</sup> Mayhall, *On Plotinus*, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.3.

that you find in yourself, or admire in another, loftiness of spirit; righteousness of life; disciplined purity; courage of the majestic face; gravity, modesty that goes fearless and tranquil and passionless; and shining down upon all, the light of godlike Intellection.<sup>29</sup>

The Soul experiences the emotions that love engenders in beholding these unseen entities, but Plotinus rightly asks what makes these things beautiful to us. Again he resorts to the antithesis of the beautiful—the ugly.

Plotinus presents the image of an ugly Soul. It festers in all sorts of vice and injustices. It is despicable in its lusts and pettiness. This ugly Soul is deplorable as it revels in the material world and ignobility. What is recognized here by other Souls is that this ugly Soul has been invaded and outraged by some foreign element “soiling it, so that, encumbered with all manner of turpitude, it has no longer a clean activity or a clean sensation.” The ugly Soul is beset with something that distorts his “native comeliness.” The Soul is changed—it falls and is set upon by something alien and foreign to what is naturally part of it. This ugliness can only be banished by the Soul in question and only through rejecting the impure vices and filthy corruption that it has hitherto embraced. It is not natural to the Soul, which has as part of its nature a true beauty based on high virtue and nobility of character.

This concept of beauty moves beyond a merely physical beauty, but rather can be called transcendental. The remainder of the Sixth Tractate is spent describing this transcendental beauty and how the Soul can understand it and embrace it. The Soul too can be beautiful, especially in regards to Intellection—“the Soul’s beauty, a graciousness native to it and not foreign.” Plotinus goes so far as to say that the “Soul’s becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God.” The Soul’s increasing connection

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1.6.5.

with the One causes it to have more and more qualities of the Divine—the source of all Beauty and Goodness. In a dramatic claim, Plotinus even calls Beauty the “Authentic-Existents” and that any ugliness is in fact in opposition to existence. This Beauty of the One is greater than physical beauty; than even the beauty of actions and virtues. It is a beauty that makes all things beautiful, as they all in some way reflect the One. Nowhere is this more laudable than in the Soul, a very “fragment . . . of the Primal Beauty,” which can make beautiful “all things whatsoever that it grasps and moulds.”<sup>30</sup>

In order to proceed further, Plotinus must now follow the path of so many other philosophers and equate Beauty with the Good. The Good is the highest desire of any Soul—all desire it, but only some will take this path towards attainment. It is something that the Soul recognizes as beautiful—Plotinus does not bother to explain why, he merely says that anyone who has seen the Good will understand what he means when he calls it beautiful. The Soul longs to be united with “the Source of Life and of Intellection and of Being,” namely, the One. The Absolute Beauty that is the One diminishes all other physical beauties for the one who has contemplated it. Such is the unfathomable beauty of the One that those who love it become beautiful themselves, and also “worthy of love.” This is the goal—the summit of the Soul’s striving. The material beauty of a sculpture, a fine melody, the virtue of justice, and even a Soul are only reflections of the Absolute Beauty. We are stirred to love them in our realization that they share some part of the incredible and unparalleled beauty of the One—the ultimate object of our love.<sup>31</sup>

In order to contemplate this Absolute Beauty, the individual must leave behind previous attachments to the world around him. He must turn his eyes away from material

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 1.6.6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1.6.7.

beauty, knowing them only to be “copies, vestiges, [and] shadows,” of the Beauty that he pursues. There must be withdrawal and detachment from the world of material things and into the self. The individual is returning to his Fatherland, where he will find what Plotinus rather alarmingly calls, “The Father.” This is reached by using an inner sight of which all are capable but few choose. This inner sight is reached through practice in recognizing beauty. We begin with material beauty—with art, music, and human forms. We learn to recognize beauty in these, and can then progress towards seeing beauty within noble activity and the virtues. Lastly, we learn to see beauty in the Soul.<sup>32</sup>

Before he can understand the beauty in the Soul, the beholder himself must too learn to recognize his own loveliness. This is achieved through perfecting the Soul. Plotinus advises the pursuer of Beauty to “cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your statue.”<sup>33</sup> This perfected nature, this Soul without blemish, is what can behold the One and Absolute Beauty. None with any sort of vice can find it, not to mention look upon it. Plotinus concludes the tractate by advising all who love beauty, suggesting “let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and Beauty.” Only such a person will realize why the Soul delights in beholding beautiful things and feel that sense of longing from an encounter with true loveliness.

In the Eighth Tractate of the Fifth Ennead, Plotinus attempts to answer the question of how one can come to behold Absolute Beauty that he elaborated upon in the earlier tractate. Here he will unfold “how the Beauty of the divine Intellect and of the Intellectual Cosmos may be revealed to contemplation.” In this tractate, he first looks to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1.6.8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1.6.9.

the examples posed by material beauties in the arts and in nature. Their beauty, he argues, “derives from form which is itself more beautiful than they.”<sup>34</sup> Plotinus gives the example of a sculptor and his statue. The stone itself is not what makes the statue lovely, but rather the statue is beautiful by “virtue of the Form or Idea introduced by the art.” In many ways, the idea of the statue in the mind of the artist has greater beauty, because as every artist knows, the idea in the mind of the creator must overcome the stubbornness of whatever material is used in order to represent the original idea. That idea is limited by the material and some elements must be sacrificed. In opposition to the negative view of art as defined by Plato—who fluctuates between criticizing arts like poetry but also declaring it to have a positive influence on the development of virtue—Plotinus grants that the arts “are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects: for . . . these natural objects are themselves imitations.” Nature is but an imitation of those ideas of the Intellectual-Principle. Of course, not all art is merely imitation of Nature and artists create from their own imaginations quite often—something which Plotinus makes note of. He gives the example of the famous statue of Zeus at Olympia, which the sculptor Pheidias must have sculpted using his own idea of the god’s majesty and beauty. It is not an imitation—especially since Pheidias could not have copied the real Zeus, having never seen the god—but rather an outpouring of his imagination and creativity.<sup>35</sup>

Just as in the example of the statue, the beauty of Nature is not inherently within natural beauties, but stems from some other source. The source is superior in beauty to the product. As such, “if material beauty is produced by form, and materialization means

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<sup>34</sup> O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.8.1.

weakening of beauty, then form in itself is more beautiful than the perceptual beauty that it produces.”<sup>36</sup> This is clearly evident in material things as in art and nature, but this may not be so clear for immaterial beauty, such as the beauty of the intellect.

Plotinus’ ascensional aesthetics encourages the Soul to proceed from lower beauties of the sensible world to the ultimate beauty of the One. We rejoice in beautiful things because we recognize in them a reflection of Absolute Beauty. We long for that Beauty and strive to be reunited with the One. It is a way few take and only the perfect can reach. The aesthetic experience comes from the divine, and there is something of that divine in each encounter we have with beauty. Beauty, “is of the Divine and comes Thence only.”<sup>37</sup> This complex but exalted view of the beautiful demonstrates the importance which Plotinus ascribes to beauty in his philosophy.

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<sup>36</sup> O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads*, 96.

<sup>37</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.8.13.



## Chapter II – The Philosophy of Beauty of St. Augustine

St. Augustine lived at a time of great transition and upheaval. This upheaval brought about “two great severances.” One was the separation of the West from the Classical tradition of the last thousand years. The other was the separation of the Eastern Church and its theological wisdom from the Western Church, set upon by the Barbarian hordes. Augustine, it is claimed, “prevented both severances—the severance of Western Europe from the Classical Tradition [and] the severance of the Western Church from its intellectual sources.”<sup>38</sup> Augustine certainly has an unparalleled position in the development of the Western Church and the Western world in general, and we can certainly credit him with the trajectory of Western Christian philosophy and theology for much of the history of Christendom. He stands as a giant among the Fathers of the Church, and rightly deserves the attention and study of Christians. As such, we can certainly regard what he has to say about beauty to be of importance for the Christian tradition and the later efforts made by Christian philosophers and theologians concerning beauty.

One need only compare the mystical language of the writings of both Plotinus and then St. Augustine to see the degree to which Augustine was inspired by Plato and the Neo-Platonists. In the First Tractate of the Fifth Ennead, Plotinus speaks of the path we must take to reach the Intellectual-Principle:

Admiring the world of sense as we look out upon its vastness and beauty and the order of its eternal march, thinking of the gods within it, seen and hidden, and the celestial spirits and all the life of animal and plant, let us mount to its archetype, to the yet more authentic sphere: there we are to

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<sup>38</sup> F. J. Sheed, foreword to *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Translated by F. J. Sheed (London: Sheed & Ward, 1943), v.

contemplate all things as members of the Intellectual—eternal in their own right, vested with a self-springing consciousness and life—and, presiding over all these, the unsoiled Intelligence and the unapproachable wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

There is a clear upward ascent from the sensible world in its beauty to that still greater beauty of the eternal Intelligence and its wisdom. Such an upward ascent was also made by two souls in love with God in one of the most memorable sections of Augustine's *Confessions*. Here, in Ostia, he sits with his mother, Monica, and talks with her of things of God. He recounts this beautiful episode in their lives:

And our conversation had brought us to this point, that any pleasure whatsoever of the bodily sense, in any brightness whatsoever of corporeal light, seems to us not worthy of comparison with the pleasure of that eternal Light, not worth even of mention. Rising as our love flamed upward towards that Selfsame, we passed in review the various levels of bodily things, up to the heavens themselves, whence sun and moon and stars shine upon this earth. And higher still we soared, thinking in our minds and speaking and marveling at Your works: and so we came to our own souls, and went beyond them to come at last to that region of richness unending, where You feed Israel forever with the food of truth: and there life is that Wisdom by which all things are made, both the things that have been and the things that are yet to be. But this Wisdom itself is not made: it is as it has ever been, and so it shall be forever.<sup>40</sup>

Again, the journey begins amidst the sensible things of this world and ascends towards the incomparable beauties of an eternal Wisdom. This is a general trend of Platonic thought, but this represents only one example of the philosophical relationship between Plotinus and St. Augustine. We shall find later how their philosophies of beauty compare.

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<sup>39</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.1.4.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.

There are some facets of Augustine's philosophy that require some consideration before Augustine's thought on beauty can be examined. Firstly, we must detail his view of the human person. Rather importantly for Augustine, the human person "is a rational substance consisting of mind and body . . . a soul that is not body, and a body that is not soul."<sup>41</sup> His conversion from Manicheism resulted in a total rejection of the Manichean teaching on the evil of the body as used by the soul. The spiritual soul is united to the body, and is not evil simply because matter is itself not evil. The soul is superior to the body and "constitutes the inner man as the body makes up the outer man."<sup>42</sup> The person as a soul and a body perceives objects through sensation. Changes in the body through sense knowledge are noted by the soul. Sensation occurs "when the observing soul, dynamically on guard throughout the body in the exercise of its vigilance, is vitally attentive to the change suffered by the body." The intellect which resides in the immaterial soul interprets this change and perceives. Importantly, "sensation belongs not to the body but to the soul through the body."<sup>43</sup>

St. Augustine's philosophy emanates from his deep and intense love for God. His theology is inextricably bound to his philosophy, and if we are to understand his thought on beauty, there must be a consideration of his views on man's relationship with God. Sacred Scripture reminds us that God has created man in His image and likeness (Gen 1:26). This image is most clearly seen in man's rational soul, while "the rest of created,

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<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate [On the Trinity]*, 15.7.11.

<sup>42</sup> Eugène Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960), 148.

<sup>43</sup> Emmanuel Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 5-6.

animate life, which does not possess reason, is therefore like the body of man; a vestige or likeness of God.” Man’s rational soul, however, is in the image of God and is unlike these vestiges and likenesses found in the human body and in other creatures because “it is nearer to God in its capacity to respond to his call, to turn to him, and thus to be formed (or be made beautiful) by Him, and to know Him.”<sup>44</sup> God has revealed himself to man in Jesus Christ, but he continues to reveal to the rational soul through illumination. Man’s intellect is divided between *ratio inferior*—knowledge based on sense perception—and *ratio superior* or that knowledge which is concerned with the Ideas in the mind of God. An example of one of these ideas is beauty. God’s divine illumination allows us to do more than simply perceive, it allows us to judge. It is “experience and not illumination [that] tells us what a perfect arch or a man is; illumination and not experience tells us what a perfect arch or a perfect man ought to be.”<sup>45</sup> Illumination is man’s ability to judge that which he perceives, and recognize God at work in the world around him.

### *The Question of Beauty*

Augustine recounts in his *Confessions* a conversation he had with friends as he was undergoing his conversion. He asked “Do we love anything save what is beautiful? What then is beautiful? And what is beauty? What is it that allures us and delights us in the things we love?”<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately for us, he does not answer these questions here, but rather wrote about them in his lost work *De Pulchro et Apto*. As previously mentioned,

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<sup>44</sup> Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 141.

<sup>45</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1960), 90.

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.13.

his musings on the beautiful and fitting gave him little joy or interest—so little that he seems indifferent to the loss of the whole work. Even if we do not have this complete work, we can see answers to this question throughout his other writings, for “as a philosopher, theologian, and bishop,” these “questions . . . were to remain with Augustine throughout his life.”<sup>47</sup> It is by sifting through these works that we can come to understand how he answered these profound questions.

In one of the first works dedicated solely to St. Augustine’s aesthetics, Emmanuel Chapman wrote about his subject’s musings on beauty:

[Augustine is] always aware of beauty that is found differently in every realm of being—sensible and intelligible beauty, the beauty of art and nature, of all created things, the universe as a whole and its Creator, the beauty of man in his body, his soul and the virtues which give his soul life, the beauty of justice, truth, wisdom, and God Who is Supreme Beauty—aware, in a word, of beauty on every level of existence.<sup>48</sup>

Augustine’s encounters with beauty span from the sensible object to God as Beauty Itself. As such, we shall divide Augustine’s aesthetics between his sensible aesthetics and his intelligible aesthetics. The sensible would be those things we experience in the material world and discover through our senses. This is where Plotinus begins in his treatment of the beautiful, and as Augustine embraces the upward ascent to Beauty that Plotinus described, we too can begin here with Augustine. In his writings, Augustine “always proceeds from without to the soul within, and from the soul within to God above the soul.”<sup>49</sup> Beginning with the object in reality, we will examine its beauty. From here we will move to the perceiver of the object—the individual—and determine why the body is beautiful, as well as why he regards something as beautiful. Then we shall move to those

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<sup>47</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Chapman, *Saint Augustine’s Philosophy of Beauty*, 45.

<sup>49</sup> Chapman, 103, n.2.

intelligible beauties—the virtues, good conduct, and Truth, for example. Finally, we shall have ascended to the greatest of all beauties, to God himself.

Augustine is not clear on what in an object's properties makes it beautiful. In *De libero arbitrio*, he invites Evodius to “examine the beauty of bodily form,” and claims that “everything is in its place [in that form] by number.” Even movement can be beautiful because of number.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, in *The Confessions*, he remarks that unity is the essential property of a beautiful object, “because the body, of whose members are beautiful, is much more beautiful than the individual members by whose harmonious arrangement the whole is completed, although taken one by one these members are beautiful.”<sup>51</sup> Altogether, Augustine claims number, unity, form, similitude, diversity, equality, rhythm, proportion, order, totality, and contrast all in some way are the essential properties of beauty.<sup>52</sup> However, Matthew J. Hayes argues that these various properties are only ways in which an aesthetic object reaches unity, and thereby beauty. Harmony between parts and unity is made possible through these other properties. Sensible objects “become beautiful, by being symmetrical, proportional, equal, etc.”<sup>53</sup> Order, for example, “brings about beauty by bringing about unity in a sensible object.”<sup>54</sup> Augustine claims that “everything is beautiful that is in due order.”<sup>55</sup> In a rather unusual passage following this declaration, he describes how even a worm through proper order has an established unity that is beautiful. Despite what may seem a multiplicity of aesthetic properties in the object, it is unity that defines the beauty of an object for Augustine.

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<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* [On Free Will], 2.16.42.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 13.28.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew J. Hayes, “Beauty’s Resting Place: Unity in St. Augustine’s Sensible Aesthetic (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 2003), 17-18.

<sup>53</sup> Hayes, “Beauty’s Resting Place,” 238-239.

<sup>54</sup> Hayes, 255.

<sup>55</sup> Augustine, *De vera religione* [On True Religion], 41.77.

### *Augustine and Sensible Beauty*

In his *Confessions*, Augustine recounts with evident grief his youthful attachment to “fleeting beauties” or “lower beauties.”<sup>56</sup> It is certainly easy when reading this text in particular to see the post-conversion Augustine as disgusted with all material beauties and the sins of his past. This is reasonable in the light of his realization of the awesome beauty of God and his newfound love for his Creator. Nevertheless, it is not entirely accurate to portray Augustine as incapable of seeing beauty in sensible things. In his writings even after his conversion, there is evidence of his own fascination for the beauty evident in sensible things. Rather, as Augustine “entered more profoundly into the mystery of the Incarnation . . . his appreciation of contingent and passing beauty was not diminished but became more profound.”<sup>57</sup> Examples of his appreciation for sensible beauties can be found in his earlier text, *De Ordine*. He uses the example of a beautiful mosaic floor to demonstrate God’s overriding order in the universe:

The situation is akin to that of one who, confined to surveying a single section of a mosaic floor, looked at it too closely, and then blamed the artisan for being ignorant of order and composition. In reality it is he himself who, in concentrating on an apparently disordered variety of small colored cubes, failed to notice the larger mosaic work. The apparent disorder of the elements really comes together into the unity of a beautiful portrait.<sup>58</sup>

We see here the importance of unity in the sensible object’s beauty. Later, in the same text, he describes in lurid detail his encounter of a cock fight. Even in something so violent and distasteful to modern sensibilities, Augustine could find “the beauty and

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<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 2.2.3., 4.13.20.

<sup>57</sup> Chapman, *Saint Augustine’s Philosophy of Beauty*, 103, n.2.

<sup>58</sup> Augustine, *De Ordine [On Order]*, 1.1.2.

harmony of nature.” For whatever reason—a reason unknown even to him—beauty could be found in “their intent heads stretched forward, hackles raised, might thrusts of beak and spur, [and their] uncanny dodgings.”<sup>59</sup> There are few things more earthy and opposed to the traditional senses of beauty than a rowdy local cock fight, yet Augustine could see something beautiful at work here.

The aesthetic experience is the intelligence taking delight in what it beholds. It is a “delightful contemplation”—a “concurrence of joy and a vision, intuitive knowledge with delight.”<sup>60</sup> Using the example of the mosaic, we can say that Augustine found delight in its unity and composition. Augustine’s concept of the person enters here, as his Platonic view of man as a soul with the use of a body demands that it is the intelligibility of the soul that recognizes in the object some “agreement with man’s nature.”<sup>61</sup> It is primarily delightful not to the senses, but to the mind, which recognizes and contemplates the beauty of the aesthetic object. This object is “essentially the object of intelligence, because what contemplates in the full meaning of the word is the mind. The intelligence knows delight.”<sup>62</sup> This delightful contemplation is the individual intelligence’s reaction to the aesthetic object, and this experience can be brought about from the simplest melody, to an El Greco painting, to an individual person, to the virtue of justice, to God Himself.

Scholarship on Augustine’s sense of the beautiful has largely—with some exceptions—argued that he had a fairly negative view of sensible things. They would argue that the indifference Augustine seems to show in the *Confessions* over the loss of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1.8.25.

<sup>60</sup> Chapman, *Saint Augustine’s Philosophy of Beauty*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 9.



his early work *De Pulchro et Apto* is indicative of his new lack of “interest in the beauty of objects seen and heard.”<sup>63</sup> His personal distress at his former attachment to worldly things prior to his conversion and his new understanding of God in His munificence would lead him to despise and reject all material things as evil or not worthy of consideration. Robert J. O’Connell argues that while the early Augustine demanded that “created beauties, whether natural or artistic, must consent to be placed in service, reduced to objects of use rather than of genuine enjoyment,” a “new, and in a ways superior aesthetic view, showed signs of dawning on the older Augustine.”<sup>64</sup> O’Connell would argue that Augustine’s other-worldly focus and impatience for that Beauty beyond this life made him despise earthly things and reject their beauty. A more enlightened theory, he would argue, would have eventually surfaced. Nevertheless, Augustine’s thought is typified by a condemnation of lower beauties as traps that “so powerfully function to lure the soul at the beginnings of its ascent . . . enticing the pilgrim soul from the unrelenting labor of its homeward Odyssey.”<sup>65</sup>

O’Connell suggests a different theory was at work in the older Augustine largely because he sees a conflict between the Augustine who despises earthly beauties but could write something of such artistic beauty as his *Confessions*. Matthew J. Hayes, arguing that Augustine had a positive view of sensible beauty, asks that instead of seeing “a battle between Augustine’s theory and practice,” we should “rethink Augustine’s theory to account for his practice.”<sup>66</sup> The beauty that is found in the *Confessions* is a prime example of this sensible aesthetics according to Hayes, who gives a strong argument for

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<sup>63</sup> Hayes, “Beauty’s Resting Place,” 3.

<sup>64</sup> Robert J. O’Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 145.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>66</sup> Hayes, “Beauty’s Resting Place,” 31.

Augustine's appreciation for sensible beauty. This view is shared by Carol Harrison, with an especial focus on the theological foundations of his aesthetic theory. She sees Augustine's treatment of sensible beauty as something "present by God's grace in his revelation in the temporal realm and which inspires fallen man's love and delight, thereby bringing him to knowledge of their source."<sup>67</sup> I will hold to this view of Augustine's view of sensible beauty. His ascensional mindset and seeming impatience with the things of this world does not necessarily mean that he does not regard sensible things as having beauty. His regard for intelligible incorporeal beauty does not imply a hatred for lower beauties or a denial of their aesthetic value. It could even be argued that an understanding of their beauty acts as a means to understand higher beauties, and eventually the Divine Beauty. In *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine gives us hope that in coming to know the beauty in sensible things, we may come to a knowledge of greater beauties:

Whatever delights you in corporeal objects and entices you by appeal to the bodily senses, you may see is governed by number, and when you ask how that it is so, you will return to your mind within, and know that you could neither approve nor disapprove things of sense unless you had within you, as it were, laws of beauty by which you judge all beautiful things which you perceive in the world.<sup>68</sup>

Sensible beauty and judgment of it leads to an understanding of objective beauty. By first understanding that there is an objective beauty in sensible objects, we can grasp the existence of "laws of beauty."

Augustine's only completely aesthetic work is his dialogue *De musica*. This was only part of a larger undertaking concerning all the arts, which he mentions in his

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<sup>67</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation* 53.

<sup>68</sup> Augustine *De libero arbitrio* [On Free Will], 2,16,42.

*Retractiones*, in order “to reach things incorporeal through things corporeal and to lead others to them.” However, he adds that he was “able to complete only the book on grammar-which I lost later from our library-and six books, On Music, pertaining to that part which is called rhythm.”<sup>69</sup> This text as such represents not only his only complete work concerning beauty, but also another indication of his theory concerning the ascent from corporeal to incorporeal things. This is clearly indicated in this section from Book VI:

Let’s not, then, be envious of things inferior to ourselves, and let us, our Lord and God helping, order ourselves between those below us and those above us, so we are not troubled by lower, and take delight only in higher things.<sup>70</sup>

We must not despise corporeal beauties and reject them, but not delight in them. We cannot allow ourselves to be unduly distracted by these things, at the expense of higher intelligible beauties.

*De musica* can be divided into two sections. The first five books treat on “secular verse forms,” while Book VI is an “inquiry on unchangeable harmony and eternal perfection.”<sup>71</sup> These first five books are, as such, mostly expositions on the inherent number and mathematics of music, verse, and rhythm. The very arrangement of the books is indicative of Augustine’s theory of beauty. He begins with a complex but articulate dialogue on music for its own sake, in the style of a wise grammarian and rhetorician. By Book VI, he is through with focusing on such things and rejects the liberal education of the Classical world that would have prized such things. He moves

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<sup>69</sup> Augustine, *Retractiones*, 1.5.3.

<sup>70</sup> Augustine, *De musica [On Music]*, 6.11.29.

<sup>71</sup> Robert J. Forman, *Augustine and the Making of a Christian Literature: Classical Tradition and Augustinian Aesthetics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 15.

from the study of a sensible beauty to Beauty itself. His earlier question that he recounts having asked in the *Confessions*—do we love only the beautiful?—is addressed in Book

VI. Augustine declares:

M. Say, then, we can only love beautiful things, can't we? For, although some people seem to love ugly things, those the Greeks commonly call *saprophiloi*, it is yet a matter of how much less beautiful they are than those things whose foulness his sense is offended by.

D. It's as you say.

M. These beautiful things, then, please by number, where we have shown equality is sought. For this is found not only in that beauty belonging to the ears or in the motion of bodies, but also in the very visible forms where beauty is more usually said to be.<sup>72</sup>

In *De musica*, Augustine expands on his perception of what makes for sensible beauty. He does not maintain a negative view of material beauty as has been claimed. Before we can bridge the gap between corporeal and intelligible beauty which Augustine hoped to define in this work, we must examine another part of the aesthetic experience—the individual person.

### *The Person and Intelligible Beauty*

We have shown that Augustine viewed the experience of the beautiful as “delightful contemplation” on the part of the perceiver. The object is deemed as possessing beauty and the individual recognizes some connection with this object's beauty in the mind. This being is extraordinary in that it can observe itself, and perceive its own beauty. Augustine praises God that He has given to the body of man “its origin, beauty, health, reproductive fecundity, disposition of members, and the salutary concord

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<sup>72</sup> Augustine, *De musica [On Music]*, 6.13.38.

of its parts.”<sup>73</sup> God has given to man a body that possesses beauty, and for this Augustine praises the Creator. However, the body is temporal—it decays and dies. The human person is not the body alone, and the person cannot be called beautiful based solely on the attractiveness of the body. Augustine says of the beauty of the mind in relation to the body that,

as the mind gives grace to the body, so it is God that gives grace to the mind. For it is only the mind that causes that in the body by which it is loved; when the mind has left it, it is a corpse at which you have a horror; and how much soever you may have loved its beautiful limbs, you make haste to bury it. Hence, the ornament of the body is the mind; the ornament of the mind is God.<sup>74</sup>

The beauty of the human person thus—without rejecting the aesthetics of the human body as an object and wonderfully made by God—resides in the mind, or the soul. Yet, we have much more to anticipate, for with the rising of Christ we have the Beatific vision to hope for, the beauty of which will be beyond any beauty we know in this life. In the Beatific vision, the discovery of bodily harmony will “then kindle rational minds in the praise of the great Artificer, there shall be the enjoyment of a beauty which appeals to the reason.”<sup>75</sup> There we shall experience a beauty beyond compare, which Augustine’s description of will soon be analyzed.

The body is corruptible and while Augustine avoids the condemnation of the body by the Manicheans or the indifference of the Platonists, his perception of the body still can occasionally seem dismissive. However, his view of the beauty of the soul remains constant. The soul is one of those intelligible beauties “accessible only to the mind.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei [The City of God]*, 5.9.

<sup>74</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on John*, 32.3.

<sup>75</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei [The City of God]*, 22.30.

<sup>76</sup> Hayes, “Beauty’s Resting Place,” 12.

Furthermore, the soul is superior to the body “owing to its closeness to the Divine and to Truth in the hierarchy of existence.”<sup>77</sup> As previously mentioned, “the comeliness of the body is the mind,” while “comeliness of the mind is God.”<sup>78</sup> Yet, man is fallen, and while this means the body is not in complete possession of the beauty that it will realize at the resurrection, this also means that we possess a fallen soul. Nevertheless, Augustine contends that the soul is “the most beautiful of God’s creation.” The soul, “by turning towards itself and thence to the source of that beauty, it will find beauty much more directly than in its works and effects.”<sup>79</sup>

In *De quantitate animae*, Augustine lists the seven acts of the soul from the lowest to the highest. They are, in order of least to greatest: “first, Animation; the second, Sensation; the third, Art; the fourth, Virtue; the fifth, Tranquility; the sixth, Approach; the seventh, Contemplation.”<sup>80</sup> Examining each in detail, we shall see how each stage of the soul has its own relation to beauty. The first—animation—is the act by which the soul gives the body form and keeps it alive. The soul, “preserves the apt arrangement and proportion of the body, not only to delight the eye but to grow and generate.”<sup>81</sup> This is not particular to the human soul alone, but can even be applied to plants—as such it is the first stage. The second stage is sensation, by which the soul through the body receives knowledge based on touch, taste, sight, etc. We have already shown how beauty can be discovered through the sensing of beautiful things. However, this stage is also not particular to the human soul but is also an attribute of animals.

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<sup>77</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 15.

<sup>78</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on John*, 32.3.

<sup>79</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Augustine, *De quantitate animae* [*On the Magnitude of the Soul*], 35.79.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.70.

The next stages are all particular to the human soul. The third degree—art—is composed of the soul’s ability to compile knowledge and apply it. Augustine exults in the fruits of human labor, “the flowing streams of eloquence, the varieties of poetry; the thousand forms of imitation for play and jest, the art of music, the accuracy of measurements, the study of numbers, the speculating on things past and future from the present.”<sup>82</sup> The fourth degree—virtue—leads the soul beyond the confines of the material world. It “dares to think that the good of the world is not its good and to distinguish and despise the counterfeits of its own power and beauty.” It now comes to a different facet of the beautiful—a much greater beauty. This is the beauty of virtue, wherein the soul becomes “the cause of its own delight.”<sup>83</sup> The practice of virtue and virtue itself represent the beauty to be found in this stage. The fifth degree—tranquility—is the result of the practice of virtue. Here the soul is “freed from all disease and cleansed of all its stains.” Here it “conceives in every ways how great it is and, when it has grasped that truth, then, with certain unbounded and incredible confidence, it advances toward God that is, to the contemplation of Truth itself.”<sup>84</sup> Onwards to the sixth degree—approach—the soul ascends further. It is not content in its tranquility, but has a “yearning to understand what things are true and best.”<sup>85</sup> This yearning can be for an understanding of what is absolute beauty. Elsewhere, in *De vera religione*, Augustine asks, “what, then, is more wonderful and beautiful than truth?”<sup>86</sup> It is here that the soul understands that deep longing for Truth and a recognition of its ultimate beauty.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 33.72.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 33.73.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 33.74.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 33.75.

<sup>86</sup> Augustine, *De vera religione* [*On True Religion*], 49.94.

The last degree of the soul, no longer a step but a “dwelling place,” there is the seventh stage—contemplation. This is the ultimate contemplation of God as the Supreme Being, and especially in the study of Augustine’s thought on beauty—Absolute Beauty. The soul here contemplates the truth, as “so great is the joy, so great the purity, the sincerity, and the certainty of faith that one at length comes to think that the previous knowledge he thought he had is really nothing.”<sup>87</sup> Here is an answer as to why Augustine may view sensible beauty in the manner he does. The soul that comes to contemplation of the Absolute Beauty that is God forgets the lesser beauties that he has experienced before. All pales in comparison with the source of all beauty.

These seven stages are further classified by Augustine in different terms, including in regards to the beautiful. The first is a stage “of the body” or “beautifully of another.” The second stage of sensation is “through the body” or “beautifully through another.” Art is “about the body” or “beautifully about another.” Virtue is the soul coming “toward itself” or “beautifully toward a beautiful.” The soul in tranquility is noble “in itself” or is “beautifully in a beautiful.” The soul no longer at rest but striving for more is coming “toward God” or coming “beautifully toward Beauty.” Finally, the soul in contemplation of God is “in God” and is now “beautifully in Beauty.”<sup>88</sup> In each of these stages, the soul finds and exhibits some sort of beauty. It is as the soul increases in degrees that the soul beholds greater and greater beauties, unto the greatest Beauty of all.

Augustine experienced in his own life this ascent to beauty. In his conversion, he turned away from the sensible beauties that he had once lusted for, to the beauty of the

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<sup>87</sup> Augustine, *De quantitate animae* [*On the Magnitude of the Soul*], 33.76.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.79.



Catholic Faith and by ascent to God. Augustine's *Confessions* has already been mentioned as a work of art and beauty itself. Nowhere is this beauty better realized than in his gorgeous and emotional passages on God. He asks the God he loves very simply "what is it that I love when I love You?" This love he recognizes is not for . . .

. . .the beauty of any bodily thing, nor the order of seasons, not the brightness of light that rejoices the eye, nor the sweet fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices: not manna nor honey, not the limbs that carnal love embraces. None of these things do I love in loving my God.<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, in some way he loves all those things through loving God. All those things—light, fragrance, food—are given to him in his soul through God. Those things given to his soul are described elsewhere in his *Confessions*, in likely the most famous and the most beautiful part of the entire work. It would be cruel to summarize or curtail such an expression of love for Beauty, as such, it is included in its entirety here:

Late have I love Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee! For behold Thou wert within me, and I outside; and I sought Thee outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that Thou has made. Thou wert with me and I was not with Thee. I was kept Thee by those things, yet had they not been in Thee, they would not have been at all. Thou didst call and cry to me and break upon my deafness: and Thou didst send forth Thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness: thou didst breathe fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and do now pant for Thee: I tasted Thee, and now hunger and thirst for Thee: Thou didst touch me, and I have burned for Thy peace.<sup>90</sup>

Augustine had concerned himself with lesser beauties and sensible aesthetics. Yet, those things with which he was enamored could not exist without their Creator. Their beauty could not exist without the beauty of this ancient and new Beauty. It is an eternal beauty that does not diminish or is lost with death and decay. The painting will be torn, the last strains of the symphony will echo through the hall and then be lost, the beautiful woman

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<sup>89</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.6.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 10.27.

will grow old and die, but the Lord of the Universe—who's Beauty unknowingly inspired the ancients and continues to inspire—will never diminish in His Beauty. Augustine may be accused of having a negative view of sensible beauty, and this may seem unfair and a condemnation of the world. However, in all things pertaining to Augustine's philosophy we must view his thought in the light of his intense love for God.

Augustine's complex aesthetics cannot be easily defined—largely because aspects of his thought on beauty are intertwined throughout his philosophy. However, we can discern from his vast oeuvre that he treated beauty with some seriousness. His ascensional aesthetics shares much with the Neoplatonist tradition, without rejecting the beauty of the sensible world. Unity has a place as the primary property of beauty for Augustine, and all properties of beauty somehow share in it. He upholds the superiority of intelligible beauty over sensible beauty, and divine beauty over all. We can glean from his writing that this was a man in love with Beauty—searching for it throughout his life, often in the wrong places. It is only when he responds to the God who loves him that he finds the Beauty for which he has searched all his life.

### Chapter III – The Neoplatonist and Augustinian Aesthetic

Sometime after his appointment as professor of rhetoric in Milan in 384, Augustine abandoned the Manicheism with which he had struggled for years. While he was able to throw off these beliefs, he was unable to ignore his “residual belief in Christ and an intuition that there was something more to being human than being a body.”<sup>91</sup> Augustine found inspiration in the writings of the Neoplatonists around the year 386. The writings of Neoplatonists, especially Plotinus, opened Augustine to the “discovery of the spiritual nature of God and the soul, and . . . the Plotinian philosophical method of interiority.” This discovery was dramatic not only for his life but also for the trajectory of Christian philosophy, as it opened the eyes of the future Father of the Latin Church “to a wholly new grasp of the teaching of the Catholic Church.”<sup>92</sup> Some claim that Augustine was converted to Neoplatonism before Christianity, as if to say that his great conversion was not to Catholic Christianity but to a Christianity based on Neoplatonic perspectives. This was not the impetus for his conversion, but we can certainly credit Augustine’s interest in Neoplatonist ideas as crucial in the development of his philosophy.

Augustine relates in the *Confessions* how he first encountered the writings that would have a profound impact on his thought. He thanks God that He “brought in my way by means of a certain man—an incredibly conceited man—some books of the Platonists translated from Greek into Latin.”<sup>93</sup> Whatever the character of the man who introduced him to the Neoplatonists might have been, the works themselves were

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<sup>91</sup> Donald X. Burt, *Augustine’s World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), xxiii.

<sup>92</sup> James J. McEvoy, “Neoplatonism and Christianity: Influence, Syncretism or Discernment?” in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Blackrock, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1992), 167.

<sup>93</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.9.

especially intriguing to him. It is likely that among these texts was the Sixth Tractate of Plotinus' First Ennead, "On Beauty."<sup>94</sup> Augustine, recovering from his dismal years with the Manicheans, was likely impressed by Plotinus' writings on beauty in part because his predecessor was asking the same questions he had asked his friends: "Do we love anything save what is beautiful? What then is beautiful? And what is beauty? What is it that allures us and delights us in the things we love?"<sup>95</sup> Plotinus opens his tractate with a very similar question, namely: "What is it that attracts the eyes of those to whom a beautiful objects is presented, and calls them, lures them, towards it, and fills them with joy at the sight?"<sup>96</sup> Plotinus' expansion beyond the world of material things and his exploration of intelligible beauty and the soul "confirmed what had already attracted him in the teaching of Ambrose and the ideas of Christians."<sup>97</sup> The beauty that Plotinus described awakened Augustine to new realities on what we mean by beauty and encouraged him to apply this to his own growing faith.

### *Similar Traditions*

The numerous similarities between the philosophies of Plotinus and Augustine are certainly worth in-depth study. However, the focus here shall only be how the two men perceived beauty, and how the single most important difference in their philosophies is integral to how we ought to view beauty today. Firstly, both Plotinus and Augustine upheld the objectivity of beauty, never even supposing that beauty is a subjective entity.

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<sup>94</sup> Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1950), 167.

<sup>95</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.13.

<sup>96</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.1.

<sup>97</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 6.

Their aesthetics were also ascensional, in that lower sensible things could be ranked below higher beauties of intelligible forms and eventually to the Supreme or Absolute Beauty. Furthermore, their views on the transcendental properties of being aligned, as in how they conceived of the composition of things of beauty. Their final similarity to be examined will be their concept of ugliness—perhaps a neglected topic but nevertheless important for understanding what makes something ugly or lovely. While there are also differences between their two lines of thought on what constitutes beauty, for the purpose of this study, the absence of God from Plotinus’ thought and the difference this makes for Augustine’s philosophy will be the single difference explored. This difference is of monumental importance to Augustine’s philosophy of beauty and can be used to show the difference between those who can conceive of beauty without a belief in God and the Incarnation, and those that do.

Plotinus and Augustine were both “firm believers in the objective reality of beauty.”<sup>98</sup> While Plotinus does remark early in the Sixth Tractate that “the same bodies appear sometimes beautiful, sometimes not,” but nowhere does he presume that those things we perceive as beautiful do not possess properties of beauty.<sup>99</sup> Its participation in the Ideal of Beauty is unquestionable. It is rather the individual’s inability to see it that is at fault here. Beauty is never subject to the tastes of the individual—it cannot if beauty is recognized by man as a reflection of the One. This would constitute a challenge to the beauty of Absolute Beauty that is the One. Augustine likewise maintains that there is an objective beauty. Beauty is subject to “laws of beauty by which you judge all beautiful

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<sup>98</sup> Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, 85.

<sup>99</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.1.

things which you perceive in the world.”<sup>100</sup> Similarly to Plotinus, we cannot conceive of beauty as being anything other than objective, as God is Himself Beauty. Sensible beauties direct us upwards to greater beauties and eventually to God. We cannot acknowledge God as the Supreme Beauty while ascribing beauty in sensible things to be purely subjective and according to the taste and whims of the perceiver. The consideration of a subjective sense of beauty is simply not even addressed by either Plotinus or Augustine, nor any of their successors in the Scholastic tradition.

The encounter that we may have with a thing of beauty, whether it is Raphael’s *La Disputa del Sacramento*, Beethoven’s Choral Symphony, or even a tulip bulb in the yard of a neighbor, each can be classified as an aesthetic encounter. The beauty of such sensible things are acknowledged by Augustine and Plotinus. However, these lesser beauties pale in comparison to greater intelligible beauties. The beauty of the virtues and the soul far outstrip the loveliness we encounter in the world around us. We must rise higher, past these things to the source of the virtues and the soul. For Plotinus, it is “the unsoiled Intelligence and the unapproachable wisdom.”<sup>101</sup> For Augustine, it is that “Wisdom by which all things are made, both the things that have been and the things that are yet to be,” namely, God.<sup>102</sup> The language used by both philosophers is one of ascent—of reaching for something higher and beyond us. How we reach this “Wisdom” whose beauty is beyond compare, however, is different in the two systems. Plotinus’ soul seems to have an assertiveness and self-assurance that it can ascend under its own power. The Plotinian soul can perfect itself through careful practice and stripping itself

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<sup>100</sup> Augustine, *De libero arbitrio [On Free Will]*, 2.16.42.

<sup>101</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.1.4.

<sup>102</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.

of all vices. Augustine differs greatly. Man cannot ascend except through the grace and divine assistance of God. He is distracted in this life by lower beauties, making idols out of them and disregarding the path to Beauty. Only by turning to God as the Supreme Beauty and submitting to His loving assistance can we reach Him.

Plato considered “that the good is beautiful.”<sup>103</sup> This goodness and beautifulness are the extent of his transcendental properties of being. Essentially, all things that have being are good and beautiful. They are interchangeable properties.<sup>104</sup> Plotinus and Augustine both were drawn toward these Platonic principles. Plotinus maintains, “Everything has something of the Good, by virtue of possessing a certain degree of unity and a certain degree of Existence and by participation in Form.”<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, beauty is intertwined with being, as he boldly asserts, “Being is desirable because it is identical with Beauty; and Beauty is loved because it is Being.”<sup>106</sup> We can then summarize Plotinus’ transcendental properties of Being as the one, the good, and the beautiful. Augustine keeps to this same categorization, but adds truth. This property so essential to Aristotelian properties of being—which neglects beauty—is defended by Augustine, writing “things are true in so far as they have being.”<sup>107</sup> Augustine’s addition of truth as a transcendental property of being allows for beauty to be called true insofar as it has being.

Things are beautiful for Plotinus if they possess form and unity. Things that are considered ugly are ugly because they are deficient in form, while beauty participates in

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<sup>103</sup> Plato, *Lysis*, 216d.

<sup>104</sup> Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, 239.

<sup>105</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1,7,2.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 5.8.9.

<sup>107</sup> Augustine, *De vera religione [On True Religion]*, 36.66.

that form. Furthermore, things are beautiful in that they have unity—as the construction of a house is beautiful through the unity of its parts. The Ideal-Form of Beauty “gathers into unity what still remains fragmentary, catches it up and carries it within, no longer a thing of parts, and presents it to the Ideal-Principle as something concordant and congenial, a natural friend.”<sup>108</sup> Augustine, as has been previously shown, includes unity as one of this principles of beauty. Among those other principles are number, proportion, and form to name a few, but it has been shown that the most encompassing principle of beauty for Augustine is unity. The one, is thus, a principle of both being and the beautiful for Plotinus and Augustine.

Just as truth is opposed to falsity and goodness is opposed to evil, so too does beauty have an antithesis. Ugliness, even more than beauty, can seem entirely subjective. The ugliness of the modern world in its utter practicality, utility, and pride is lost on some, just as the beauty of nature, the virtues, and the arts are lost on others. Nevertheless, just as there is an objective beauty in the aesthetics of Plotinus and Augustine, there is an objective ugliness. Ugliness for Plotinus is “the privation of form” as well as “the contrary of the beautiful” and suggests that “the beautiful is to the ugly as the pleasant is to the unpleasant.”<sup>109</sup> Things that are ugly are deprived of that all-important form. Augustine, concerning ugliness, contends that “we can only love beautiful things.” No one, he insists “loves those things whose foulness his sense is offended by.”<sup>110</sup> Augustine too sees the beautiful as the opposite of ugliness, and ugliness to be a deformity of the thing. The natural beauty of a thing by virtue of its

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<sup>108</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.3.

<sup>109</sup> Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty*, 251.

<sup>110</sup> Augustine, *De musica [On Music]*, 6.13.38.



being is subverted, resulting in ugliness. Both agree that there is something objectively ugly, and that we cannot be drawn to it, but are rather repulsed by it.

### *The Incarnation and Its Impact*

Plotinus, while undoubtedly mystical and different in his religious sensibilities from the organized state religion of the Roman Empire, was clearly a pagan. Despite his thoughts on the “Divine Triad” and his unusual granting of the sobriquet “Father” to the One, we know that he had great disdain for the Christianity that was gaining momentum among his contemporaries. Plotinus’ project was for the revitalization of the Classical tradition represented by his illustrious predecessor, Plato. With the Roman Empire in the onerous progress of its slow decline, Plotinus looked to the past as a means to return the ideas of his contemporaries to the rich treasury of the Platonists. He could not have an interest in the new ideas of Christianity, as it represented a break from that tradition. Furthermore, many of the Christians he encountered belonged to the heretical Gnostics, which defied Platonic philosophy. According to Porphyry, these Gnostics “fooled many, themselves fooled first,” for “Plato according to them, had failed to penetrate into the depth of Intellectual Being.”<sup>111</sup> Porphyry compiled his master’s work into a treatise entitled “Against the Gnostics” in opposition to their “arrogant and perverse reading of Plato.” While it is clear that he condemned the Gnostics, “it is possible . . . that he criticized Christianity, with which he could hardly have had much sympathy.”<sup>112</sup> This is shown by the anti-Christian writings of Plotinus’ most dedicated pupil, Porphyry.

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<sup>111</sup> Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work*, 1.16.

<sup>112</sup> O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads*, 8.

The pagan Plotinus' theory of upward ascent towards Absolute Beauty recognized an ultimate goal for the soul in its encounter of the beautiful. The soul must "cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your statue."<sup>113</sup> There must be an act on the part of the soul to reach that beauty for which he hungers. Plotinus' method is not accessible to the many, and it involves a decisive action on the part of the soul who ascends to the One under his own power and practice.

There must now be a consideration of the Christianity of Augustine and how this effects his views on beauty. Firstly, "the parting of the ways between Platonism and Christianity is the Incarnation of the Word and the doctrine of the mediation of Christ."<sup>114</sup> This is especially true regarding their philosophy of beauty. Beauty itself—God—became incarnate. To use the terminology of the Platonists, the Ideal-Form of Beauty became flesh on Earth in Jesus Christ. All that has hitherto been said of Augustine's views on beauty are meaningless without Christ at their center. Only Christ, "in the union of his divinity and humanity," is the source that "defines and gives meaning to Augustine's ideas on beauty."<sup>115</sup> Christ is "beautiful above the sons of men," as a man, but even more so is beautiful as the Incarnation (Ps 45:2). He represents a bridge between the sensible beauties of this world, the intelligible beauties of the virtues and the soul, and the Divine Beauty of God. Augustine in a sermon on Psalm 44 extols the beauty of Christ, crying out,

He was beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth, beautiful in the womb,  
beautiful in the hands of his parents, beautiful in his miracles, beautiful in

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<sup>113</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.9.

<sup>114</sup> McEvoy, "Neoplatonism and Christianity," 167.

<sup>115</sup> Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 192.

his scourging, beautiful in his inviting to life, beautiful in his not caring for death, beautiful in laying down his life, beautiful in the receiving back, beautiful on the Cross, beautiful in the tomb, beautiful in heaven.<sup>116</sup>

Augustine's ascent towards the Beauty ever ancient and ever new is facilitated by God's grace and the love he has come to have for his Creator through the Revelation provided by Jesus Christ. This is not the proud reason of Plotinus and the Neoplatonic tradition. It is wild and restless love for a Beauty that he has longed for all his life. Lesser beauties have dogged him, greater beauties have led him on, but it is only Beauty itself revealed by Christ that has won his love. He has recognized beauty in sensible things—in mosaics and melodies—but like Plotinus he has come to realize that in each beautiful thing there is a reflection of a greater Beauty. Their views on beauty have much in common, but it is the Incarnation that makes all the difference in the upward ascent of the Soul towards Beauty. Plotinus was incapable of reaching Supreme Beauty under his own power according to his Platonic views. We can believe that Augustine was able to behold Beauty itself and beholds Him now.

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<sup>116</sup> Augustine, *Errationes in Psalmos [Expositions on the Psalms]*, 44.3.

## **Conclusion: Beauty, the Modern World, and the Church**

The modern world is not a beautiful place. One need only look at the typical suburban street in the United States. The asphalt road is webbed with cracks and hastily placed tar. Grass stubbornly clings to the curbs between the street and a plethora of businesses and buildings designed first and foremost for convenience and attracting the attention of passing motorists. The odd tree is placed so as to provide some sense of nature's presence. Convenience and utility are supreme. Consider the last time you noticed the ever-present network of telephone poles and electric wires that have become part of our vistas. We are desensitized to such mundane things. To put it bluntly, we are surrounded by ugliness. Perhaps this is an unnecessarily pessimistic assessment of a fairly ordinary part of daily life, as suburbs do not need to be beautiful. However, this is the attitude that the modern world would apply to much of what we experience.

Why does something need to be beautiful? Why should the beauty of the world we inhabit be a primary concern? Most of our buildings are not constructed for beauty—they are designed for comfort or utility. Most of our music is not designed to elicit delight in loveliness—it is written as a product to be consumed or for some to find pleasure. Our literature is written not for the love of the art of writing and for beautiful composition—it is composed largely for popular consumption or to convey a belief. The visual arts have become the realm of the elite—an elite that enjoys works by artists who do not attempt to convey beauty but their own feelings, imaginations, and egos. For some, beauty is no more than a “luxury for the elite in society.”<sup>117</sup> How grievous this

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<sup>117</sup> Hildebrand, *Aesthetics*, 7.

opinion must seem for the man who understands that God is Beauty itself and that some might view this as simply a luxury of the rich.

It is easy to believe the modern world despises beauty, as it is rarely considered. We have condemned the aesthetic experience to be based on the feelings of individuals. The subjectivity of beauty is paramount. We may recognize the objectivity of goodness, perhaps of truth, but few now defend the objectivity of beauty. The “eye of the beholder” has the last word on what beauty is. We have many able opponents of relativism concerning the good and true, but few would defend objective beauty with equal determination. Yet, if we are to define the one, true, good, and beautiful as the transcendental properties of being, we must be as willing to defend the objective nature of beauty. We can just as easily turn the good into the work of human emotion, and truth into the product of individual feelings if we are also willing to define beauty as subject to the sensitivity of man.

The Catholic Church has long been the inspiration and custodian of great beauty. She is beautiful in her art, in her churches, in her sacred music, in her texts, and in her members. Even more so, she is beautiful in her teachings, in the virtues of the souls that profess the Faith, and in the souls she sees to the salvation of. God is the Beauty which inspires all of these things. The sorrow of Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, the majestic Baroque exuberance of Melk Abbey, the exquisite harmonies of Victoria’s *Officium Defunctorum*, and the loveliness of the *Song of Songs* all reflect in some way the incomparable beauty of God. What we recognize as beautiful in the world around us through our senses shares in the beauty of our Creator. In one of his Easter sermons, Augustine invites us to observe the world and do the following:

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everywhere, question the beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air; their souls hidden, their bodies evident; the visible bodies needing to be controlled, the invisible souls controlling them; question all these things. They all answer you, 'Here we are, look; we're beautiful.'

Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable?<sup>118</sup>

The craft of human hands is indeed beautiful. Catholics have contributed greatly to the beauty of our cultures. Yet, when we are inclined to reject these beauties, we need only look at the natural world. Here are the beauties made by a craftsman of unequalled skill. God the Creator has made a universe of stunning beauty and wonder. We stand in awe of its vastness and its minute detail. The beauty of a Sequoia forest holds no less fascination for us than the moons of Jupiter. The beauty of the Provencal countryside has the same divine source as a sunset on the South China Sea. From the glorious effusions of color of a supernova to the iridescent wings of a beetle, the wonderful beauty of God's Creation can be beheld. Who are we to consider beauty to be unnecessary when God Himself creates in such a marvelous and lovely way?

For some time, various movements have made an attempt to diminish the importance of beauty in the life of the Church. Things of beauty are a distraction from contemplating God. They are honored in a way bordering on idolatry, and they must be removed so as to encourage us to approach God. This at best indifference and at worst outright destruction of beauty "terribly impoverishes human existence, and indeed

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<sup>118</sup> Augustine, *Sermons*, 241.

damages and undermines it.”<sup>119</sup> We are indeed surrounded in the modern world with images beyond the capacity of an individual to consume. The motivation of those that strip the Church of what may be considered distractions are undoubtedly well-intentioned. After all, God is best found in silence. However, if we are to consider God as Beauty, we ought to examine the ascensional aesthetics as exhibited by Plotinus and Augustine. How can we begin to understand the beauty of higher things, and eventually the beauty of the Almighty if we ignore and give no credence to the beauty apparent in the things around us? God’s beauty is present in all things that exhibit beauty. His beauty is in beautiful art and music just as it is in the virtues and the human soul. The lesser degree of beauty does not require that it be shunned, rather, it acts as a preliminary means to understand beauty. The man who appreciates sensible beauty—but does not linger in his appreciation so as to become idolatrous—is capable of understanding to a greater degree the beauty of incorporeal things and the beauty of the Creator.

The pagan Plotinus clearly had a fascination with beauty, and his complex system previously described is a testament to the seriousness with which he treated it. The Christian ought to be inclined to treat beauty with equal if not greater seriousness, for he has Revelation and Sacred Scripture to show him the magnificence of Beauty. It is the duty of a Christian, especially a Catholic, to regard beauty with seriousness and be firmly committed to its objectivity. The Incarnation of Beauty that is Christ makes all the difference for the aesthetics of Augustine. It should make all the difference for we who follow the Faith that he preached.

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<sup>119</sup> Hildebrand, *Aesthetics*, 3.

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