



WESTFÄLISCHE
WILHELMS-UNIVERSITÄT
MÜNSTER

The Dawn of the Invisible

**The Reception of the Platonic Doctrine on Beauty in the
Christian Middle Ages: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite –
Albert the Great – Thomas Aquinas – Nicholas of Cusa**

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Melanie Bender

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The Prisoner

Still, let my tyrants know, I am not doomed to wear
Year after year in gloom, and desolate despair;
A messenger of Hope comes every night to me,
And offers for short life, eternal liberty.

He comes with western winds, with evening's wandering airs,
With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars.
Winds take a pensive tone, and stars a tender fire,
And visions rise, and change, that kill me with desire.

Desire for nothing known in my maturer years,
When Joy grew mad with awe, at counting future tears.
When, if my spirit's sky was full of flashes warm,
I knew not whence they came, from sun or thunder-storm.

But, first, a hush of peace – a soundless calm descends;
The struggle of distress, and fierce impatience ends;
Mute music soothes my breast – unuttered harmony,
That I could never dream, till Earth was lost to me.

Then dawns the Invisible; the Unseen its truth reveals;
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels:
Its wings are almost free – its home, its harbour found,
Measuring the gulph, it stoops and dares the final bound.

Oh dreadful is the check – intense the agony –
When the ear begins to hear, and the eye begins to see;
When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again;
The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel the chain.

Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less;
The more that anguish racks, the earlier it will bless;
And robed in fires of hell, or bright with heavenly shine,
If it but herald death, the vision is divine!

(Emily Brontë)

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Chapter I

Introduction

“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”¹

≈

Since Christian theology concentrated its attention during the last decades of the twentieth century predominantly on ethics, on social ethics in particular, the aspect of beauty was neglected. Anastasios Giannarás accounts for this by claiming that “the science of beauty is incomprehensible today, because new values have taken its place.” Among these new values are newness, intensity, and strangeness.² Nevertheless, beauty offers an approach to reality that results in surprising alternatives to ideas such as responsibility, justice and truth – without ignoring them. They are rather viewed from a different angle, an angle from which the good does not merely present itself in the mode of moral duty, but as self-evidently attractive in itself.

Being a basic dimension of reality, beauty can open up a religiously relevant approach to life which suits modern times despite its unfamiliarity. In the past, ever since Plato, beauty had been of major interest for philosophy and for theology. One can even say ‘especially for theology,’ because the whole Neoplatonic tradition considered the beautiful either identical with or attributive of the divine principle. But the peculiarity of beauty is that it is a very tangible divine principle. It is transcendent and yet sensuously or, on a more abstract level, intellectually present to almost everybody. George Santayana calls beauty “a manifestation of God to the senses.”³ Thus, it can

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979) 39.

² Cf. Anastasios Giannarás, *Ästhetik heute* (München: Francke, 1974) 10.

³ George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty. Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Collier, 1961) 18.

be said that what Platonic and Christian theories on beauty have in common is that in this concept something invisible becomes visible – be it either sensuously or spiritually.⁴ Paradoxically, the invisible remains invisible while becoming visible. In the poem “The Kingdom of God” Francis Thompson expresses the apparent paradox well:

O World invisible, we view thee,
 O World intangible, we touch thee,
 O World unknowable, we know thee,
 Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.

This merging of visibleness and invisibleness turns beauty into an adequate approach to religion and theology. Beauty always seems to say more than it is, as Theodor Adorno once remarked.⁵ Owing to its symbolic character, that is, owing to the fact that there is in beauty a coincidence of the infinite sense-ground and finite form, the contemporary philosopher Günther Pöltner can argue that “an experience of beauty does not effect a blunting. It rather frees to new receptiveness.”⁶ This new receptiveness is not impeded by the fact that beauty is not totally visible. Its transcendent invisible level

⁴ Friedrich Schiller, for example, considers beauty a sensuous appearance of truth. Cf. Friedrich Schiller, “Die Künstler”: “What we experienced as beauty here, will once approach us as truth.” The Neoplatonic background of the natural scientist Werner Heisenberg becomes obvious in his definition of beauty as the “shining of the eternal splendor of the ‘One’ through material appearances.” Werner Heisenberg, “Die Bedeutung des Schönen in der exakten Naturwissenschaft,” *Der Teil und das Ganze* (München: Piper, 1969) 305.

⁵ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.7, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 122.

⁶ Günther Pöltner, “Die Erfahrung des Schönen,” *Theologie und Ästhetik*, ed. Günther Pöltner and Helmuth Vetter (Wien: Herder, 1985) 15-16. He adds that wherever the symbolic nature of beauty is no longer realized, beauty is in danger of being interpreted in a solely aesthetical sense, “for which a beautiful gleam becomes a mere sign that, finally, recedes to a subjective illusion.” In respect of the idea that everything in the world is a symbol cf. John Scotus Eriugena, who taught that the universe must be read as if it were a store of symbols of absolute Beauty pointing towards God in the form of images with an invisible nature, “by means of which divine providence calls the minds of men to the pure and invisible beauty of the truth which we love, and which all that loves moves toward, whether knowingly or unknowingly.” John Scotus Eriugena, *Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem*, ed. Jeanne Barbet (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975) I, 3. As a consequence, he understands every creature as a divine theophany. Cf. John Scotus Eriugena, *De divisione naturae* (Oxford, 1681, reprint 1964) I.III, c.19.

even enriches its visibleness. Accordingly, Jean-Luc Marion can state that “the gaze instills the invisible in the visible, not indeed to render it less visible but, on the contrary, to render it *more* visible.” He concludes that “therefore it is the invisible, and it alone, that renders the visible real.”⁷ The beauty of a visible reality does not have its origin in itself but in a transcendent creator. Moreover, visible beauty in a certain sense reveals its invisible origin or at least refers to it in order to draw man’s attention to his creator. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* takes up this referring character of concrete beauty frequently: “The beauty of creation reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator and ought to inspire the respect and submission of man’s intellect and will,”⁸ for man’s origin coincides with his end. The submission is brought about through a feeling of awe and marvel arising in an encounter with true Beauty – in Dante’s words:

And lo! all round about of equal brightness
 Arose a lustre over what was there,
 Like an horizon that is clearing up.
 And as at rise of early eve begin
 Along the welkin new appearances,
 So that the sight seems real and unreal,
 It seemed to me that new subsistences
 Began there to be seen, and make a circle
 Outside the other two circumferences.
 O truly sparkling of the Holy Spirit,
 How sudden and incandescent it became
 Unto mine eyes, that vanquished bore it not!⁹

The result of this awe and marvel is a desire to grasp and keep the twinkle of eternity. One wants to say to the moment “Stay now! You are so beautiful!”¹⁰ Since this is, however, not possible, one begins to strive for

⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 4.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995) 341.

⁹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*, transl. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Project Gutenberg, 1997) XIV <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1003>>.

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust I. Goethes Werke*, vol.1,14 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus, 1887) 82. Cf. Albert Camus, *Tagebuch Mai 1935 - Februar 1942* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1963) 13-14: “Beauty is unbearable. This eternity of the duration of a minute, which we nevertheless want to expand over all times, makes us desperate.”

more. Accordingly, Edgar Allan Poe is of the opinion that there is a sentiment for beauty in the form of an inextinguishable instinct within man. It causes an enchantment by forms, sounds, smells and feelings. Yet, man has to acknowledge that there remains something in the distance which he cannot attain: “We have still a thirst unquenchable,” which “belongs to the immortality of man,” as Poe puts it. “It is the desire of the moth for the star,” not being a “mere appreciation of the Beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above.”¹¹ This “unsatiable longing with regard to the beautiful (...) is the longing for the fulfillment of the promised,”¹² promised by the fact that the invisible determined to dawn in the visible.

The relevance which was attributed to beauty in the Platonic and Christian tradition did not cease even during the Enlightenment. Norbert Rath suggests that in the nineteenth century,

“beauty can be understood as a guarantee of immediacy in the more and more mediated society, as an autonomous refuge of meaning in a world threatened by a loss of sense, as a catalyzer of philosophical knowledge in a cosmos of knowledge more and more determined by individual sciences.”¹³

Around that time, beauty only changed its sphere of treatment. From the metaphysical concept of the Platonic and Neoplatonic-Christian tradition, implying that it is a quality of being with absolute Beauty in the form of an Idea or god as its origin and objective source, beauty was integrated into the field of aesthetics, the result of which was that its understanding became more subjective, hitting the peak of subjectiveness in Kant’s teaching. That beauty became an object of aesthetics, namely, insofar as it is

¹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol.14, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press, 1965) 273.

¹² Adorno, 128. He mentions a world-weariness in the context of the experience of the beauty of nature, since it is “exactly that which nature is not anymore or not yet,” as Hauskeller puts. Cf. Hauskeller, 395. According to Adorno, “natural beauty is the vestige of the non-identical on the things” under the spell of universal identity. “As long as it presides, no non-identical thing exists positively. Thus, the natural-beautiful remains as dispersed and uncertain as that which is promised by it. (...) The pain in the face of the beautiful – nowhere more incarnate than in the experience of beauty – is, at the same time, the longing for that which it augurs, without it unveiling itself.” Adorno, 114.

¹³ Norbert Rath, “Das Schöne. Von Kant bis zum 20.Jh.,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol.8, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1992) 1376.

related to human sensuousness and feeling, was an echo of a social change. Accordingly, Martin Heidegger suggests that “man and his free knowledge of himself and of his position among beings become the place of decision on how actualized being is to be understood and formed.”¹⁴ Augustinus Wucherer-Huldenfeld criticizes this development, since where man is concerned, beauty is restricted to a way of cognition, namely, of sensuously perceiving, the value of which is degraded below that of the cognition of truth.¹⁵ Something is beautiful then that has the ability to arouse the desired aesthetical feelings. Hence, “the question is no longer whether something *is* beautiful, but whether and how it affects me aesthetically, what kind of impression it makes on me.”¹⁶ Hans Georg Gadamer concludes that “in the face of the rationalistic orientation by mathematical laws of nature and its meaning for the mastery of natural forces, the experience of the beautiful and of art seems a sphere of utmost subjective arbitrariness.”¹⁷ Moreover, the Christian ideas in this context were secularized: Beauty as a divine procession turned into something present in and created by man, with the result that creation and creating are now predicated primarily of man. This development is the presupposition of the possibility of a philosophy such as can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche, who claims that “nothing is so conditional, let us say circumscribed, as our feeling for the beautiful. (...) Man believes the world itself is filled with beauty – he forgets that it is he who has created it. (...) Man really mirrors himself in things; that which gives him back his own reflection he considers beautiful.”¹⁸ But this subjective interpretation of beauty falls short of the richness of meaning that beauty can provide. The contemporary Pöltner shows how important it is in the case of beauty to distance oneself from the modern view that it is a merely subjective and deceiving sentiment. He finds a justification for this postulation in the fact that in the sense of a subjective reaction to corresponding cerebral stimuli, beauty could not be made comprehensible. It is rather a matter of man’s

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol.1 (Pfullingen: Günter Neske, 1961) 99.

¹⁵ Cf. Augustinus Karl Wucherer-Huldenfeld, “Sein und Wesen des Schönen,” *Theologie und Ästhetik*, 24.

¹⁶ Wucherer-Huldenfeld, 26.

¹⁷ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977) 20.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990) 89.

realization of a given entity. Beauty is a quality of being as well as of our realization. Hence, whenever we encounter something beautiful, we are not led away from reality and towards our own self, but have a deeper contact with it. Pöltner concludes that its glow is not illusive, but it announces beauty as “appearing presence.” Beauty implies that being is not simply being there, but being good, rendering free and happy.¹⁹ It brings a fullness of sense into life, which is answered by man in the form of marvel, that is, with the traditional beginning of philosophical and theological thinking.

These oppositional opinions demonstrate that the history of the philosophy of beauty did not abide by a linear Platonic view. Regional aesthetic theories have rather been dissolving a uniform notion of beauty since Nietzsche.²⁰ In the twentieth century, philosophical views on the beautiful, finally, branched out into the incalculable, as Rath notes,²¹ and are no longer restricted to a particular area of being. In addition to philosophy and artistic sciences such as literature, even the natural sciences “philosophize” on the topic. According to Michael Polanyi, “physics, though based on observation, relies heavily on a sense of intellectual beauty. No one who is unresponsive to such beauty can hope to make an important discovery in mathematical physics, or even to gain a proper understanding of its existing theories.” Intellectual structure in mathematics is “built up altogether for the sake of enjoying it as a dwelling place of our understanding.”²² Similarly, Werner Heisenberg claims to find beauty in natural sciences by considering “the beauty of nature reflected in the beauty of natural sciences.”²³

In spite of the plenitude of doctrines on beauty since the beginning of modern times, many modern and contemporary thinkers of several fields of knowledge still make continuous reference to Greek philosophy in this context, and to Plato, in particular. They continue adopting, revising or rejecting the latter’s doctrine on beauty – always depending on the respective philosophy of the time, for each philosophy of beauty mainly mirrors the established philosophy of its own time, without losing its connection to the root. Plato is the root of this book as well

¹⁹ Cf. Pöltner, “Die Erfahrung des Schönen,” 12-15.

²⁰ Cf. Rath, 1376.

²¹ Cf. Rath, 1383.

²² Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) 38-39.

²³ Heisenberg, 288.

as of the doctrine on beauty in general. In order to truly understand the topic, the best way is to go back and take a close look at its origin and development. The plenitude of contemporary aesthetical theories can hardly accomplish this precisely because of its plenitude. Yet, a thorough and nuanced analysis of the origin of the doctrine can provide, on the one hand, a starting-point in the search for truth, and, on the other hand, a possibility of understanding, evaluating and appreciating the meaning of beauty today. Since this is a theological work, the analysis cannot concentrate on the Platonic origin alone, but will focus mainly on its reception by important theologians of the Middle Ages, the apex of classical theological thinking. To my mind, it is, above all, a method which can provide contemporary theology with an understanding of beauty that reveals its relevance, importance and attraction for every age.

As a consequence of this concentration on the roots of the doctrine on beauty, this study is mainly concerned with an ontological understanding of the concept and less so with aesthetics in the sense of a theory on sensuous cognition related to practice or with the theoretical treatment of art. The constriction of the notion of beauty is a result of the degeneration of ontology during German Idealism, in the course of which philosophers became connected with Aristotle and his emphasis on art. Apart from the fact that the medieval theologians to be presented here lived before the genesis of this discipline, they were more influenced by the Neoplatonic tradition whenever the doctrine on beauty is concerned. In the ancient world, the fields of art and beauty were mostly dealt with separately. Plato (427-347 BC), with whom the first part of this work deals, rejected art and focused on the importance and truth of natural beauty, so that his philosophy on beauty is, above all, to be understood ontologically. The Greek word for beauty is ‘καλός,’ a polyseme, that is, a word with several different, yet related meanings. According to *Liddell & Scott*, the meanings can be divided into four groups: The first one designates the beauty of an outward form or of a person. It is added to a name in token of love or admiration. Secondly, ‘καλός’ is used in the sense of good or of fine quality, and refers to the aspect of auspiciousness of sacrifices. Thirdly, it has a moral sense and can be translated with morally beautiful, noble or honorable. Finally, it was sometimes used ironically, with the meaning of fair or specious. In

addition to an infrequent moral understanding of the concept, Plato had the first meaning in mind. His ontological attitude towards this topic basically coined the views on beauty in the Christian philosophical theology of the Middle Ages. Hence, Ernst Robert Curtius concludes poignantly that

“when Scholasticism speaks of beauty, the word is used to indicate an attribute of God. The metaphysics of beauty (e.g., in Plotinus) and theories of art have nothing whatever to do with each other. ‘Modern’ man immeasurably overvalues art because he has lost the sense of intelligible beauty that Neoplatonism and the Middle Ages possessed.”²⁴

Umberto Eco interprets the situation even more radically, when he emphasizes that modern aesthetics is “excessively narrow”²⁵:

“Contemporary aesthetics is interested in the extent to which our experiences of art determine our aesthetic experiences in general. For the medievals this problem did not arise. The suspicion that natural objects appear beautiful to us because of some analogy with art can be sustained only in a world without God. If God exists, aesthetic pleasure in an object does not require any reference to the products of human artistic endeavor; the object is rather a product of divine workmanship, and indubitably so.”²⁶

Notwithstanding such views, the dominance of the contemporary attitude towards beauty and art has resulted in the attempt of modern philosophy and theology to descry the popular notion of aesthetics in the philosophy of the old thinkers as well. It is my intention to proceed differently in order to evade a subsequent misinterpretation of the religiously fatal dominance of this view. Therefore, I will resume Plato’s original ontological approach in order to show how important it is for theological thinking. This procedure is in accordance with what Josef Wohlmuth argues for in his article on beauty in a manual on fundamental terms of theology, namely that “the discourse on illusiveness or truth of beauty and/or art not only concerns philosophical thinking (...), but also theology insofar as it has to represent the salvation of man and the world from all fatalism, and

²⁴ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) 224, note 20.

²⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 6.

²⁶ Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 226, note 5.

the appearance of God in Jesus as opposed to all human self-importance.” He continues by referring to Heidegger and Adorno in the sense that art should not become the only place of truth-revelation or of indebted reconciliation.²⁷

Plato’s understanding of the beautiful is highly influenced by the classical definition ‘χρῶμα καὶ συμμετρία,’ that is, color and symmetry. The latter concept originates in the Pythagorean theory of number as the fundamental principle in the cosmos. Accordingly, the Pythagorean Philolaus of Tarentum describes the relationship between nature and harmony in the following words:

“The being of things is eternal, and nature itself requires divine and not human intelligence. Moreover, it would be impossible for any existing thing to be even recognized by us if there did not exist the basic being of the things from which the universe was composed, namely, both the limiting and the non-limited. But since these elements exist as unlike and unrelated, it would clearly be impossible for a universe to be created with them unless a harmony were added, in which way this harmony did come into being.”²⁸

Apart from this formal and mathematical view of beauty, Plato holds a second and more important one, namely, the connection of beauty and love, inspiring man to strive for the true beauty of the Idea. Joseph Ratzinger shows that many theological clichés originate in an untenable interpretation of this philosopher. In his eyes, “the true direction of Plato’s thinking is totally misconceived insofar as he is classified as an individual and dualistic philosopher who rejects the earthly sphere and instigates people to a

²⁷ Cf. Josef Wohlmuth, “Schönheit/Herrlichkeit,” *Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol.5, ed. Peter Eicher (München: Kösel, 1991) 17. Adorno, for example, pleads for a reflection on natural beauty. By considering art a metaphor of revolution, which presupposes that one rejects a socially integratable meaning of art in order to attain a freedom which does justice to truth, he pleads for the mandatory reflection on natural beauty, namely, in the sense that art should imitate natural beauty. Cf. Hauskeller, 394. Wohlmuth demands that theological aesthetics must insist on the perceptibility of Jesus’ charisma. Furthermore, natural beauty should not be outplayed against artistic beauty, since “the eschatological ideal of the beautiful is not the abstract nunc stans of an unmoved mover, but the participation of creation in the Trinitarian fullness of life.” Wohlmuth, 24.

²⁸ Philolaus of Tarentum, “Fragment B62,” *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol.1, ed. Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz (Berlin: Weidmann, 1992) 408.

flight towards the afterlife.”²⁹ One of my ambitions is to support and justify Ratzinger’s attitude by means of the case of beauty, for this prejudice is mirrored in the accusation against Christians that their attention is diverted towards God’s kingdom, so that they do not have to take serious responsibility for life on earth.

The next part of my study will briefly treat Plato’s pupil Aristotle (384-322 BC), as well as important Neoplatonic thinkers. Their analysis is unavoidable, because the theologians of the Middle Ages to be presented here are not only directly influenced by Plato, but also by Platonic philosophy via this intermediate group. Aristotelism and its criticism of Platonism brings a whole new perspective to the question, which the medieval theologians try to reconcile with the Platonic tradition. This process already begins with Neoplatonism, so that it can be stated that this discipline “is based not only on a revision of Plato’s philosophy, but [that it] is a system that enfolds – apart from Platonism – all the main types of antique philosophy as well as religious streams of thought.”³⁰ The first Neoplatonist I will concentrate on is Plotinus (ca. 204-270 AD), who is still very close to Platonism itself, yet is less down to earth. The theology of Augustine (354-430 AD) is the most influential Christian Neoplatonic doctrine for later centuries. In his eyes, of all philosophers, Plato and his followers appear to come nearest to the Christian doctrine. He pleads for the thesis that the Incarnation is the only essential difference separating Christianity from Platonism.³¹ The last

²⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Kleine katholische Dogmatik IX. Eschatologie – Tod und ewiges Leben* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1977) 73.

³⁰ Hans Werner Hoffmann, *Nikolaus von Kues und Proklos. Eine Interpretatio Christiana* (Düsseldorf, 1998) 6.

³¹ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, transl. Edward B. Pusey (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1999) I.VII, c.9, n.13: “And therein I read, not indeed in the same words, but to the selfsame effects enforced by many and diverse reasons, that, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.’ That which was made by him is ‘life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness; and the darkness comprehends it not.’ And that the soul of man, though it ‘bears witness of the light,’ yet itself ‘is not that light; but the Word of God, being God, is that true Light that lights every man that comes into the world.’ And that ‘He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.’ But that: ‘He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to then: that believe on his name.’ This I did not read there.”

important philosopher for the question is Proclus (ca. 412-485 AD), whose philosophy shines through the whole of Dionysius' theology.

The basic text for the following parts of this study is the treatise *De divinis nominibus* by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500 AD), who integrated the Platonic world of thought into Christianity through his Neoplatonic studies. Since he was mistaken for Paul's pupil in the Middle Ages, he enjoyed the highest authority after Scripture, and as such he was consulted and interpreted. It is thus not surprising that both Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas wrote a commentary on this book, in which Dionysius treats the topic of beauty extensively. It will be interesting to work out differences and agreements between the two scholastics, especially because Albert was Thomas' teacher. The question will be how Albert influenced Thomas, at which points the latter distanced himself from his teacher and how he confronted and harmonized Dionysius' Neoplatonic doctrine on beauty with his own Aristotelism. Nicholas Cusanus, finally, did not compose a commentary on *De divinis nominibus*, but he did take over major parts of the Dionysian book in his sermon *Tota pulchra es, amica mea* – partly while integrating passages of Albert's commentary. To my mind, these four theologians are representative of the Middle Ages, because, first of all, they cover a time span of almost one millennium. Secondly, they count among the most influential thinkers of their respective time and the following centuries. Through them it becomes clear that traditional and valuable topics like beauty were not neglected by important thinkers, but also how manifold theology can be and how one doctrine developed through the centuries. It is my intention to analyze whether the understanding of beauty of ancient Greek philosophy and of medieval theology comes to a certain synthesis in the Cusan teaching owing to his independent treatment of beauty, on the one hand, and his confrontation with important philosophers and theologians of the past, on the other hand. The question is whether one can really go as far as Hans Urs von Balthasar does in his claim that “at the beginning of these two topics – ancient mediation and spirit-God-speculation – Nicholas of Cusa can be found, almost as an erratic block, tying together with a mighty hand the threads of the great occidental transmission – Greekdom and Christianity, past and future – to a node.”³² Or is it some other theologian who should

³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der*

rightfully receive the special role of mediator not only between Plato and Christianity, but also between the Greek and medieval past and contemporary theology?

Albert the Great (ca. 1200-1280 AD) concerned himself with *De divinis nominibus* in his lectures during the first few years after he had established the academy in Cologne (ca. 1250), that is, before his ultimate turn to Aristotelian philosophy. There exists a reportatio of this course of lectures by Thomas Aquinas known as *De pulchro et bono*. Albert is a typical scholastic commentator, meaning that, as he himself puts it, one writes foreign things and one's own things, while the foreign parts outweigh one's own parts, which function as a mere appendix to make the original part clearer.³³ Being a Christian philosopher or a philosophical theologian, he tried to interpret classical philosophers as well as to integrate them into Christianity. By doing so, he was faced with the contrast of the traditional Neoplatonic doctrine and the "modern" Aristotelian one. As Henry Osborn Taylor points out,

"everywhere conservative and anxious orthodoxy, especially at the universities, upheld Aristotle with a grip not to be loosed by anything which Platonism could offer. For indeed, philosophically, intellectually, scientifically, Platonism did not contain and could not offer, what the intellect of the coming time was to demand."³⁴

Albert now succeeded in constantly connecting the one with the other without effort, for example where light and harmony are concerned.³⁵ This did not always work out successfully, so that new problems arose in his attempt to solve old ones. Hence, Josef Bach concludes: "While Albert adopts the terminology of Neoplatonism instead of taking up a polemic attitude against its consequences, his attempt to harmonize goes maybe too far sometimes."³⁶ In opposition to Bach, Jan A. Aertsen argues that "Albert

Metaphysik (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965) 556.

³³ Cf. Wilhelm Perpeet, *Ästhetik im Mittelalter* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 1977) 81. Albert is cited here without a reference.

³⁴ Henry Osborn Taylor, "The Scholastic Aristotle, Platonism, and Nicholas of Cusa," *Thought and Expression in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Henry Osborn Taylor (New York: Ungar, 1959) 283.

³⁵ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 347.

³⁶ Josef Bach, *Des Albertus Magnus Verhältnis zu der Erkenntnislehre der Griechen, Lateiner, Araber und Juden. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Noetik* (Frankfurt/Main: Minerva,

considers a Neoplatonic work [namely, parts of Proclus' *Elementatio theologica*] the completion of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. His philosophy is at the same time Aristotelian and Neoplatonic – without his being consciously aware of it.”³⁷

On first glance, Thomas Aquinas (ca.1225-1274 AD) seems to have rather avoided the topic of beauty. In his writings, there is neither a question, nor an article referring to it in particular. When he does treat it, he seldom comments on it in a corpus. Thus, beauty almost only occurs in a comment to an objection, that is, in the response to somebody else's assertion, whom Thomas in his Scholastic duty had to correct. The other sphere where he refers to beauty is in his commentaries, such as on Dionysius' *De Divinis nominibus*, from which his complete doctrine of beauty is derived – with the notable exception of his understanding of cognition. What is even more striking is the fact that whenever he quotes a philosopher or a passage in connection with beauty, it is always a Neoplatonist or a Neoplatonic doctrine, mostly from Dionysius. Just once, he leaves this pattern to cite Aristotle, who, all in all, does not have his usually great influence here. The conclusion suggests itself that beauty is far too Platonic for Thomas and too little concerned with Aristotle's concrete universe. It is, therefore, not surprising that Thomas treats the topic in such a way that the metaphysical and transcendent conception of the Dionysian divine Beauty is often drawn down to the concrete and subjective life of human beings in Thomas' attempt to assimilate Neoplatonism in such a way that it fits into the Aristotelian system. According to the analysis of Francis Kovach, Thomas freed himself from Albert's influence after 1257-58, under the Neoplatonic influence of whom he had written his commentary on the *Sentences* – without ever quoting his teacher or critically dealing with him. Instead he tried more to integrate Aristotle into his theology. Consequently, the Aristotelian concept of proportion came to the fore, while clarity was neglected on the topic of beauty. With his own commentary on *The Divine Names*, the situation changed again and both philosophies together with both concepts were present and connected. At the same time,

1966) 19.

³⁷ Jan A. Aertsen, “Albertus Magnus und die mittelalterliche Philosophie,” *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 21 (1996): 124.

the passages on beauty increase in number with and after this commentary.³⁸

Nicholas Cusanus (1401-1464 AD) communicated the medieval view to the Renaissance. According to Hans Blumenberg, the peculiarity of Renaissance theology can be found in the “dissolution of the Scholastic rationality through an exceeding of the transcendence, the sovereignty, the seclusion and fertility of their God.”³⁹ Balthasar goes in the same direction by suggesting that the Cusan time is a renaissance of Platonic desire and not that of satiated worldliness.⁴⁰ Cusanus became acquainted with the texts of Albert the Great during his studies in Cologne in 1425.⁴¹ He read Plato, Philo, Proclus, Eriugena and Dionysius between 1432 and 1437.⁴² From among the Platonic writings, he knew the *Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*.⁴³ The occupation with the Areopagite, whom he calls “divine Dionysius,”⁴⁴ resulted in a consolidation of his Neoplatonism. He often referred to these philosophers simply as ‘Platonici,’ and frequently saw Plato himself in their light. Proclus’ commentary on the Platonic *Parmenides* is an example of such a kind. It made access to the Platonic philosophy possible, but offered at the same time a Neoplatonic interpretation, so that Cusanus even mentions the two Greeks in the same breath.⁴⁵ Plotinus’ thoughts

³⁸ Cf. Francis J. Kovach, *Die Ästhetik des Thomas von Aquin. Eine genetische und systematische Analyse* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1961) 55-70, where the commentary is called a “turning-point,” not only because of the increasing number of treatments, but also owing to their abstract and metaphysical nature in contrast to the more practical interpretation of beauty in the earlier works.

³⁹ Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1996) 559.

⁴⁰ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 575.

⁴¹ Cf. Hans Werner Hoffmann, 13.

⁴² Cf. David Luscombe, “Denis the Pseudo-Areopagite in the Writings of Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola,” *Néoplatonisme et philosophie médiévale*, ed. Linos Benakis (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997) 98.

⁴³ Cf. Michael Thomas, *Der Teilhabegedanke in den Schriften und Predigten des Nikolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1996) 16. Thomas also refers to Rudolf Haubst, who is of the opinion that Cusanus studied ten of the Platonic writings.

⁴⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998) c.XXXI, nr.94.

⁴⁵ Cf. Kurt Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues. Problemgeschichtliche Stellung und systematische Bedeutung* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) 188. Nicholas made “the connection between the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and the Platonic theory of a transcendent One which is beyond language and theology, as propounded by Proclus and

are communicated to him solely via Proclus and Dionysius apart from a few fragments which were available to him directly.⁴⁶ The question is now how Nicholas used the Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas in his theology. His ongoing search for a name for God offers an important hint. According to Gerda von Bredow, these names are not firm and definite terms, but instructions for a movement of thinking.⁴⁷ This implies that he never feels himself in the position of having acquired God's ultimate and true name, but a proper description of him at the respective stage of theological inquiry. As a result of his high regard for Neoplatonism, Cusanus can find in it an adequate tool with which he attempts to express abstract and divine concepts.⁴⁸ By doing so, he establishes concepts the only truth of which is based on faith. Truth is secondary in this procedure – although, of course, not totally negligible – a fact which might be an explanation for the many contradictions in his theology. Throughout his works and during his whole lifetime, he changed positions without explicit justification and without admittedly contradicting his former opinions.⁴⁹ This is also mirrored in his

the Neoplatonists.” Charles Lohr, “Metaphysics,” *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. C.B. Schmitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 556.

⁴⁶ Cf. Thomas, 17.

⁴⁷ Cf. Gerda von Bredow, “Gott der Nichtandere. Erwägungen zur Interpretation der cusanischen Philosophie,” *Im Gespräch mit Nikolaus von Kues. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1948-1993*, ed. Hermann Schnarr (Münster: Aschendorff, 1995) 52.

⁴⁸ A radical view of the role of Neoplatonism in the Cusan thinking can be found in William J. Hoye, “The Meaning of Neoplatonism in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa,” *The Downside Review*, January (1986). For Hoye, Nicholas was clearly a Nominalist who used traditional Neoplatonism as a mere language to express his Nominalistic strategies appropriately: “Neoplatonism is, from his viewpoint, not a kind of apprehension of reality, but rather a source of categories for formulating propositions. This work takes place in the abstracted, logical world of pure thought. The normative and nourishing ties to transsubjective reality through experience have been cast off.” Hoye, “The Meaning of Neoplatonism in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa,” 14-15. Cf. also H.G. Senger, “Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nicolaus Cusanus und seinem italienischen Umfeld,” *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, ed. Tzotcho Boiadjev, Georgi Kapriev and Andreas Speer (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000) 508: “For his [Dionysius'] doctrine on the divine realities, on his determinations and names seemed to be more notable to those who could no longer do anything with the Aristotelian and Scholastic doctrine and who rather self-confidently searched for a new science of the world, of behavior and action.”

⁴⁹ At this point, the modern influence of William of Ockham shines through. According to him, we do not know what God is and, therefore, put appropriate concepts in place of real knowledge. Cf. William of Ockham, *Scriptum in librum primum Sententiarum*

treatment of the topic of beauty, one of his name's for God. He deals with it extensively in the sermon from 1456 *Tota pulchra es, amica mea*, the leitmotif of the *Canticle of Canticles*. The topic appealed to him owing to the "fusion of the rational-mathematical, the aesthetic and the religious elements in the contemplation of the universe [in Plato's *Timaeus*]." ⁵⁰ In Giovanni Santinello's eyes, the whole of the Cusan thinking can be analyzed under the aspect of beauty ⁵¹: The sermon "is indeed a synthesis of all the problems of the Cusan philosophy from an aesthetical perspective, thereby giving rise to an aesthetical weltanschauung." ⁵²

Ordinatio, ed. Gedeon Gál and Stephen Brown (St. Bonaventure: Inst. Franciscanum Univ. S. Bonaventurae, 1967) I, dist.3, q.2.

⁵⁰ Raymond Klibansky, *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1939) 29.

⁵¹ Cf. Giovanni Santinello, *Il pensiero di Nicolò Cusano nella sua prospettiva estetica* (Padova: Liviana Editrice, 1958) vii.

⁵² Giovanni Santinello, "Mittelalterliche Quellen der ästhetischen Weltanschauung des Nikolaus von Kues," *Die Metaphysik im Mittelalter*, vol.2, ed. Paul Wilpert (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963) 679.

Chapter II

Plato's Doctrine on Beauty – The Longing for the Eternal

1. The Notion of Beauty

*“Beautiful things are difficult.”*¹

≈

According to Plato, beauty has to be understood in a purely ontological way, since an aesthetic view on the matter would attribute autonomy to beauty. His doctrine of Ideas says, to the contrary, that the beauty of beautiful objects is not autonomous and cannot be conceived without the Idea of Beauty. The Platonic parable in *Phaedrus* tells us that the soul, before entering the body to live its earthly life, has viewed true being (“τὰ ὄντα ὄντως”²) at some transcendental place and is now able to recollect Beauty owing to its special splendor there, whenever it comes across concrete beauty. It is the unconsciously striving nature of the soul to return to naturally beautiful being, reality itself. Obviously, Plato is strongly in favor of real beauty in contrast to artificial – so called – beauty. Thus, in Ernst Cassirer's opinion, the art of loving Plato praises in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* cannot be interpreted as “the art of the poet and creator but as the Socratic art, the art of dialectics.”³ Socrates made the attempt to present beauty as a philosophical question. The *Symposium* illustrates this by making Socrates say that beauty is the climax of the philosophical procedure.⁴ In *Phaedrus* the lover and

¹ Plato, *Hippias Major*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.9, transl. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925) 304e: “Χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ.” This is a Greek proverb.

² Plato, *Phaedrus*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.9, transl. Harold N. Fowler, 247e.

³ Ernst Cassirer, “Eidos und Eidon. Das Problem des Schönen und der Kunst in Platons Dialogen,” *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg, 1922-1923/ I. Teil*, ed. Fritz Saxl (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1924) 21.

⁴ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.9, transl. Harold N. Fowler, 210a-e.

the philosopher are closely linked to one another, since, both in a shattering emotion of love and in a philosophical question, the soul is directed towards the eternal sphere and can no longer find any rest in the finite world. As a result, Cassirer blames the Neoplatonic history for not having noticed this, which led to the fact that art theories were derived from Plato's doctrine of beauty. Yet, art merely presents an imitation of reality, a copy of the original. The artist is even only a copier of something copied; he reflects twice by observing a reality that can be found at a level lower than primary reality.

Therefore, it follows that Plato should equate the artist with the sophist, his foe image par excellence.⁵ In *Hippias Major* he even makes fun of the sophistic theory of beauty, which says that there is no objective existence of beauty. According to them, the individual has to be considered the measure of all things, so that subjective perception, that is, personal taste makes a judgment on the presence and the degree of beauty. Plato replaces this theory containing subjectively aesthetical elements with the Pythagorean theory, which is more to be seen in the ethical and, above all, in the ontological sphere. It says that beauty represents an appearing and essential order, an objective characteristic of things, which can be found as *symmetria* – a proportion under the aspect of size – in the form of things and as *harmonia* – an order and conformity of the parts.⁶

Plato's fight against art shows how important truth is for him. Socrates asks in the *Republic* whether painting should be understood as an attempt to copy being as it is or to copy appearance as it appears, that is, whether it is truth that is reproduced or merely an appearance of truth. The matter is solved by admitting that reproduction lies far away from truth, since it refers to an appearance.⁷ When Plato condemns art as a substitute for life,

⁵ Cf. Plato, *Sophist*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.12 transl. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921) 239d: "He will easily take advantage of our poverty of terms to make a counter attack, twisting our words to the opposite meaning; when we call him an image-maker, he will ask us what we exactly mean by 'image.'" Cf. also *Republic*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.5 and 6, transl. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) 605b-c.

⁶ Cf. Hauskeller, 11-12.

⁷ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 598b: "'Consider, then, this very point. To which painting is directed in every case, to the imitation of reality as it is or of appearance as it appears? Is it an imitation of a phantasm or of the truth?' 'Of a phantasm,' he said. 'Then the mimetic art is far removed from truth, and this, it seems, is the reason why it can produce everything, because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that a phantom; as, for

he does not do so as a result of an apparent usurpation of beauty by art, but because he is aware of art's perversion of truth and of morals owing to art's sacrifice of truth to aspiration and purpose:

“But, as it seems, the thing he will imitate will be the thing that appears beautiful to the ignorant multitude. (...) On this, then, as it seems, we are fairly agreed, that the imitator knows nothing worth mentioning of the things he imitates, but that imitation is a form of play, not to be taken seriously, and that those who attempt tragic poetry, whether in iambics or heroic verse, are all altogether imitators. (...) This business of imitation is concerned with the third remove from Truth.”⁸

The result of the artist's working with appearances is the irrational and emotional nature of art. So, for example, painting contains a number of optic illusions which are not able to withstand the test of measure and mathematical evaluation. In *Timaeus*, Plato justifies his conviction that beauty is based on pure determination by numbers and measures in the sense that original fields were established in the unification of the two most beautiful triangles.⁹ In *Philebus*, he mentions the following:

“For when I say beauty of form, I am trying to express, not what most people would understand by the words, such as the beauty of animals or of paintings, but I mean, says the argument, the straight line and the circle and the plane and solid figures formed from these by turning-lathes and rulers and patterns of angles; perhaps you understand. For I assert that the beauty of these is not relative, like that of other things, but they are always absolutely beautiful by nature.”¹⁰

Mathematics is to be found on a very high level of truth. In contrast, the artistic act is less an act of perceiving and more an act of supposing, because it is bound to the sensuous appearance of things, of which full knowledge can never be attained: “No veritable knowledge is able to invade the world

example, a painter, we say, will paint us a cobbler, a carpenter, and other craftsmen, though he himself has no expertness in any of these arts, but nevertheless, if he were a good painter, by exhibiting at a distance his picture of a carpenter he would deceive children and foolish men, and make them believe it to be a real carpenter.’” Cf. also *Sophist*, 236a: “‘So the artists abandon the truth and give their figures not the actual proportions, but those which seem to be beautiful, do they not?’ ‘Certainly.’”

⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 602b-c.

⁹ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.9, transl. W.R.M. Lamb, 53c-e.

¹⁰ Plato, *Philebus*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.9, transl. Harold N. Fowler, 51c.

of becoming, for the concept of knowledge excludes that of becoming,”¹¹ as Cassirer puts it. Hence, the artistic act does not direct man to reality but hinders him in a pseudo-reality from participating in the divine being. On the other hand, Plato does admit that the restricted world of the senses must be passed in order to be finally transcended.¹² In *Timaeus*, this ambivalence of the evaluation of the sensuous becomes drastically clear: In the beginning of the dialogue, the vision of something becoming is considered a mere recreation during the philosopher's vision of the eternal being: “For as regards this, whenever for the sake of recreation a man lays aside arguments concerning eternal realities and considers probable accounts of becoming, gaining thereby a pleasure not to be repented of, he provides for his life a pastime that is both moderate and sensible.”¹³ In opposition to this, Socrates even calls the world a “perceptible god”¹⁴ at the end of the dialogue. It does contain a certain amount of truth, but an occupation with its beauty in art instead of with the Idea, toward which it hints, leads in the wrong direction – away from truth.

I will now treat in detail what Plato exactly means when he speaks of ‘τὸ καλὸν’ – as encompassing concepts of the just, the proper, the good, the appropriate and the integrative – and in what position it has to be seen in

¹¹ Cassirer, 8. According to an ancient report, Plato burnt his poetry as a young man after his first meetings with his teacher Socrates and his getting acquainted with the Socratic question. Cf. Cassirer, 3. On the other hand, Plato compares a philosopher with a painter who paints the fairest painting. Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 501c; 472d-e. Moreover, his dialogues seem to be pieces of art as well. He makes frequent use of literary devices such as myths and analogies, but apologizes for doing so. For him, they only represent the second-best way of explaining matters. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a. Nevertheless, he chooses this way – or is forced to – owing to Socrates' dialectical partners and their difficulties in understanding abstract ideas without this imagery help. Julius Moravcsik calls them “crutches of the imagination”, which should be cast away as soon as understanding is reached. Cf. Julius Moravcsik, “Noetic Aspiration and Artistic Inspiration,” *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, ed. Philip Temko and Julius Moravcsik (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982) 44. Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 59b: “And how can we ever get a permanent grasp on anything that is entirely devoid of permanence?”

¹² Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e.

¹³ Plato, *Timaeus*, 59c-d.

¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 92c: “For this our cosmos has received the living creatures both mortal and immortal and has been thereby fulfilled; it being itself a visible living creature embracing the visible creatures, a perceptible god made in the image of the intelligible, most great and good and beautiful and perfect in its generation – even this one heaven sole of its kind.”

the world of Ideas according to him. John Warry's terms for the different shades of beauty seem to me apposite, so that I will take them over. In his analysis of the Greek concept of beauty, he differentiates between the intellectual (more formal and functional), the moral and the sublime (romantic) beauty, which is linked to the passions, in order to find a relation between these three kinds of beauty. For, in his eyes – and in contrast to Hippias – beauty is an unambiguous relation representing, therefore, a single, unambiguous reality.¹⁵ *Hippias Major* portrays for us these various classes of beauty, which nevertheless have something in common, for the notion of beauty is closely linked to the Pythagorean principle of harmony underlying nature and all beautiful objects, and representing the only possibility for man to find a way to the divine world. Thus, harmony, that is, unity in variety,¹⁶ underlies both formal and functional beauty: The former can be found in a consequent arrangement (indicated by “κοσμεῖται”¹⁷) of, for example, line and color, the latter in a substitution of gold for figwood when it is appropriate.¹⁸ Hippias notes that there seems to be a difference between inanimate beauty and personal beauty. Yet, one can say that moral beauty, as the first kind of personal beauty, is determined by harmony as well. Hippias' example of filial piety¹⁹ is inherently beautiful in a moral sense owing to a propriety of behavior. The second kind of personal beauty, namely, romantic beauty, seems to be of a higher order, since it can lead man to the sublime. Although Hippias does not go so far, he is aware of the

¹⁵ Cf. John Gibson Warry, *Greek Aesthetic Theory. A Study of Callistic and Aesthetic Concepts in the Works of Plato and Aristotle* (London: Methuen, 1962) 15.

¹⁶ In *Philebus*, 64e, Plato states that a mixture without proportion is merely “an uncompounded jumble.” The inherent lack of measure in it prevents the parts from being both stable and harmonious. This harmonious state can only be caused by reason, be it human or divine. Cf. *Philebus*, 26b. Werner Beierwaltes indicates that only under the presupposition that beauty is determined by reason, is it simultaneously a mode in which truth expresses itself. Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1980) 17. Beauty represents an excellent mixture of opposed elements. Dorothea Frede considers compounds as such to be things which have a well-determined being, that is, which are not in flux and are, therefore, not processes of becoming. Cf. Dorothea Frede, notes, *Philebos*, by Platon, transl. Dorothea Frede (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997) 196.

¹⁷ Plato, *Hippias Major*, 289d.

¹⁸ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 290d.

¹⁹ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 291e.

functional aspect of personal beauty, namely, that the difference between a goddess and a maiden is smaller than the difference between a maiden and a pot²⁰ as a result of the existence of personality, making a more appropriate substitution possible.

The apprehension of beauty described in *Philebus* is of an intellectual kind linked to the concept of truth. Sense must supply us with units, the basis of truth, and our pleasure in such truth is the elemental, objective apprehension of beauty. Man's enjoyment of the beauty of these units such as found in colors, forms and sounds is connected with the pleasure which arises from learning and intellectual activity. Socrates calls the painlessness and the purity of these pleasures the common basis of intellectual activity. He considers particularly seeing and, less obviously, hearing to be intellectual pleasures because of the different levels of clarity the respective sense offers.²¹ As long as their objects are abstract, mathematical and free from any material association, they remain beautiful, but become tainted when the abstract form giving rise to them receives concrete embodiment, that is, when sense perceptions are associated with our appetites, predilections and aspirations, and are thereby dissociated from our will. In contrast to this, romantic beauty is attained after suffering and endurance as a result of a deliberate application of the will. Thus, the question arises for Worry why the human soul has to begin with the strenuous spiritual aestheticism of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, when sublime and eternal joy seems to be available in elementary intellectual pleasure²² owing to the encounter with the Absolute: "I mean that those sounds which are smooth and clear and send forth a single pure note are beautiful, not relatively, but absolutely, and that there are pleasures which pertain to these by nature and result from them."²³ The answer Worry offers is that the sublimity which is the object

²⁰ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 289b.

²¹ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 51b-52b. James Joyce concludes that the relationship between beauty and truth in Plato's philosophy results in a kinship: "Plato, I believe, said that beauty is the splendour of truth. I don't think that it has a meaning, but the true and the beautiful are akin. Truth is beheld by the intellect which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the intelligible; beauty is beheld by the imagination which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible." James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996) 236.

²² Cf. Worry, 36.

²³ Plato, *Philebus*, 51d.

of romantic aspiration is higher than an intellectually apprehended sublimity, because the former absorbs the soul's entire attention, whereas the latter is a blessed moment which stirs us to evanescent ardor before it fades.²⁴

Phaedrus and the *Symposium*, finally, suggest that such a clear distinction between the forms of beauty is not as important to Plato as it appears to be in his other writings. By saying that the beauty of a beloved is apprehended mainly by the eye, the clearest of the senses, both romantic and intellectual beauty are intertwined. A sexual orgasm experienced in romantic love is a very irrational thing, but since it is associated with birth and, therefore, causes immortality, it is rationalized. This importance of immortality for humans is pointed out in the *Symposium*, where Diotima says that it can only be achieved by means of begetting upon something beautiful.²⁵

To my mind, Warry is wrong here in his interpretation of the link between beauty and goodness in the *Symposium*. Without giving a reference, he changes the Platonic “beget upon the beautiful” to “beget the good upon the beautiful”²⁶ and calls immortality the contribution of beauty to goodness. The text, however, says that by means of begetting in the beautiful, Eros strives along with (or with the help of) the good for immortality (“ἀθανασίας δὲ ἀναγκαῖον ἐπιθυμῖν μετὰ ἀγαθοῦ”²⁷). Warry seems to want to build up a contrast between this writing and Plato's *Philebus* by pointing out that the *Symposium* analyzes the relation between romantic beauty and

²⁴ Cf. Warry, 37.

²⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 206b-e: “What is the behavior the eagerness and straining of which are to be termed love? What actually is this effort? (...) It is begetting on a beautiful thing by means of both the body and the soul. (...) All men are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul: on reaching a certain age our nature yearns to beget. This it cannot do upon an ugly person, but only on the beautiful: the conjunction of man and woman is a begetting for both. It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal; and it cannot occur in the discordant. The ugly is discordant with whatever is divine, whereas the beautiful is accordant. Thus, beauty presides over birth as fate and Lady of Travail; and hence, it is that when the pregnant approaches the beautiful it becomes not only gracious but so exhilarate that it flows over with begetting and bringing forth. (...) Therefore, when a person is big and teeming-ripe he feels himself in a sore flutter for the beautiful, because its possessor can relieve him of his heavy pangs. For you are wrong, Socrates, in supposing that love is of the beautiful. (...) It is of engendering and begetting upon the beautiful. (...) Because this is something ever-existent and immortal in our mortal life.”

²⁶ Warry, 22.

²⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 206e-207a.

the good, whereas *Philebus* tries to find a link between beauty and truth, thus implying an understanding of beauty as intellectual. This procedure appears to be beside the point, since Warry's aim is to show – with reference to *Gorgias*, 474d-475c – that, in the end, truth, beauty and goodness meet and become indistinguishable in the divine, the “apex of the pyramid.”²⁸ The human soul begins at the edge of truth, which is occupied by harmonious formal beauty, proceeds to the edge of beauty – personal beauty in particular – and passes on to goodness, where moral beauty can be found. Since it is the soul's intention to ascend to the divine, but man-made morality lacks this factor, it has to rise spirally to the truth-edge again, where it is now confronted with philosophical and psychological adjustment. The final turn leads the soul to the Good itself, the direction towards it serving as a unification principle of the three cardinal values. This final goal of life can only be reached by way of all three values stimulating one another – in what way, Warry does not say. None of them is self-sufficient. In contrast to this, Ute Schmidt-Berger interprets beauty and truth as two aspects of the Idea of the Good, which transcends every earthly being in dignity and power,²⁹ and which merges with the divine principle.³⁰ Michael Hauskeller goes so far as to identify the highest Beauty with the highest Truth and the Idea of the Good,³¹ which partly corresponds to Hans Urs von Balthasar's

²⁸ Warry, 50.

²⁹ With regard to the ultimate supremacy of the good over truth cf. Plato, *Republic*, 508e-509b: “‘This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the Idea of the Good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth insofar as known. Yet, beautiful as they both are, knowledge and truth, in supposing it to be something more beautiful still than these you will think rightly of it. But as for knowledge and truth, even as in our illustration it is right to deem light and vision sunlike, but never to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to consider these two their counterparts, as being like the Good or boniform, but to think that either of them is the Good is not right. Still higher honor belongs to the possession and habit of the Good.’ ‘An inconceivable beauty you speak of,’ he said, ‘if it is the source of knowledge and truth, and yet itself surpasses them in beauty. For you surely cannot mean that it is pleasure. (...) In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the Good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.’”

³⁰ Cf. Ute Schmidt-Berger, notes, *Das Trinkgelage oder über den Eros*, by Platon, transl. Ute Schmidt-Berger (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1985) 148.

³¹ Cf. Hauskeller, 14.

assertion that Plato is convinced of the final congruence of the two concepts of the good and the beautiful.³² Wilhelm Schmid equates the Idea of Beauty only with Truth itself.³³ Beierwaltes considers beauty to be the truth of the good, revealing the latter in its unclandestineness and openness, and sometimes exposing truth.³⁴ For Stanley Rosen, however, beauty seems to be “the result of an appropriate suppression of aspects of truth,”³⁵ which Socrates detests:

“I feared that Agathon in his final phrases would confront me with the eloquent Gorgias’ head, and by opposing his speech to mine would turn me thus dumbfounded into stone. And so in that moment I realized what a ridiculous fool I was to fall in with your proposal that I should take my turn in your eulogies of love, and to call myself an expert in love-matters, when really I was ignorant of the method in which eulogies ought to be made at all. For I was such a silly wretch as to think that one ought in each case to speak the truth about the person eulogized.”³⁶

Rosen denies that beauty, truth and goodness coincide at the highest point of Socrates’ teaching, seeing that a falsehood can be beautiful and good.³⁷ The analysis which is to follow will, hopefully, expand into the true inner core of what Plato intended to express in his writings.

2. The Idea of Beauty as the Cause of All Beauty

*The beautiful “is beautiful to all and always.”*³⁸

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At the beginning of *Hippias Major*, Socrates tries to establish the difference between universals and particulars by asking the rhetorical question

³² Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 187.

³³ Cf. Wilhelm Schmid, *Die Geburt der Philosophie im Garten der Lüste. Michel Foucaults Archäologie des platonischen Eros* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1994) 96-97.

³⁴ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus*, 16-17.

³⁵ Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 206.

³⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 198c-d.

³⁷ Cf. Rosen, 224.

³⁸ Plato, *Hippias Major*, 292e.

of whether or not all beautiful things are beautiful by the beautiful.³⁹ The unusualness of this idea – *Hippias Major* is among Plato's early writings, which means that his doctrine of Ideas, which is explicitly illustrated only later in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, has not yet been clearly defined – is emphasized by Hippias' reaction to the question of what *the* beautiful is, for his answer is not a definition but a concrete example and, thus, a particular: "I will answer and tell him what the beautiful is, and I shall never be confuted. For be assured, Socrates, if I must speak the truth, a beautiful maiden is beautiful."⁴⁰ Hippias' sophistic background is unmasked here. He considers the question a very easy one, since it depends on his subjective taste only. Beautiful maidens are pleasant to his eyes, so that for him they represent the solution to the problem. Socrates, on the other hand, looks for that kind of beauty which can be found in all beautiful things as a common element. However, in this book, he does not offer an analysis of his initial statement that all beautiful things are beautiful by the beautiful.

In contrast, Plato's middle dialogues, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, do analyze this relationship. The underlying principle of all sensuous beauty cannot be sensuous itself but has to be seen as transcendent to everything sensuous. It serves as a norm for sensuous beauty: "In the evaluation of sensuous being with regard to its beauty, we bring a norm with us by means of which we measure this being with regard to its beauty. The norm determines an ideal, a paradigm,"⁴¹ as Walter Bröcker describes the nature of a universal. The problem with those who precede Socrates with the praising speeches on Eros in the *Symposium* is that they do not notice this fact. They form part of a sophistic community, whose self-sufficiency and self-love results in a surrender of transcendence, and as an opposition to whom Diotima functions as a "necessary corrective,"⁴² as Barbara Zehnpfennig calls her. She makes Socrates see the essential reference to the transcendent by calling the apex of the ascent to Beauty itself "divine Beauty" ("τὸ θεῖον καλόν").⁴³ In *Phaedrus*, the divine is considered to be beautiful, wise and

³⁹ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 287c.

⁴⁰ Plato, *Hippias Major*, 287e.

⁴¹ Walter Bröcker, *Platons Gespräche* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1985) 158.

⁴² Barbara Zehnpfennig, introduction, *Symposium*, by Plato, transl. and ed. Barbara Zehnpfennig (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2000) xxix.

⁴³ Plato, *Symposium*, 211e.

good,⁴⁴ and it presents for Plato the presupposition of our possible understanding of what true Beauty is. In order not to fall into the sophistic trap of remaining in the sphere of inferior or illusive beauty, man must be inspired by the beauty of the divine principle.

This Idea of Beauty must have a being independent from particular appearances, because it is their ontological presupposition, their formal cause, which is, therefore, ontologically prior to that which is caused. The Idea of Beauty is beautiful by nature⁴⁵ and not dependent on the situation or perspective, for otherwise one would be faced with a particular. This Idea does not change:

“‘Absolute equality, absolute Beauty, any absolute existence, true being – do they ever admit of any change whatsoever? Or does each absolute essence, since it is uniform and exists by itself, remain the same and never in any way admit of any change?’ ‘It must,’ said Cebes, ‘necessarily remain the same.’”⁴⁶

Plato justifies this permanence in *Cratylus*, stating that Beauty is always such as it is, because we would not have any knowledge of it, were it in constant flux. The very essence of knowledge must remain the same. Since there is knowledge of it, absolute Beauty must exist.⁴⁷ Closely linked to this characteristic of permanence is the fact that Beauty is always. Neither does it have any kind of beginning, in terms of being created or generated, nor does it perish. Beauty simply is, as all Ideas are. Plato does not have a concept of creation in the Judeo-Christian sense of the word, but, in his eyes, being is generated as a result of the limitation of the infinite.⁴⁸ This limitation, of course, means the production of a particular from “something” abstract. Diotima points out the drastic difference between Beauty and beautiful things in the *Symposium* by saying that the former exists “ever (ἀεὶ) in singularity of form independent by itself, while all the multitude of beautiful things partake of it in such wise that, though all of them are coming to be and perishing, it grows neither greater nor less, and is affected

⁴⁴ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246e.

⁴⁵ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e: “τὶ θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν.”

⁴⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.1, transl. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 196) 78d.

⁴⁷ Cf. Plato, *Cratylus*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.12, transl. Harold N. Fowler, 440a-b.

⁴⁸ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 26d.

by nothing.”⁴⁹ Thus, Beauty itself is unique, the sole member of its class, while from this eternal unity all mortal beautiful things flow in their concrete multitude. They possess immortality at best for a limited time, namely, by seeing the immortal Beauty, τὸ καλόν. Schmid calls the latter “the all-embracing potential which is always the same and which is the potentiality of all reality.”⁵⁰ To my mind, he goes a little bit too far at this point in his use of Aristotelian terms and concepts of thinking. Why should τὸ καλόν be the potentiality of *all* reality? He does not offer a specific proof of his thesis, but his understanding of Plato here might be a conclusion from the fact that he, as Hartmut Buchner,⁵¹ considers the Idea of Beauty to be “the highest Idea, that which makes an Idea to an Idea.”⁵² Plato never calls Beauty the Idea of all Ideas. For him, the Idea of the Good holds this supreme position. Apart from this, Schmid is right in calling the substantivized neuter adjective ‘τὸ καλόν’ “dequalified quality.”⁵³ The reader is confronted with the highest form of abstraction and purity, with “neutralized beauty,”⁵⁴ as Henri Joly expresses it. Therefore, Diotima can hardly describe this Idea in a way other than negatively: As the cause, it differs from that which it causes in that it is wholly that which the other is only partly and impurely. In the *Parmenides*, Plato mentions man’s difficulty of comprehending the Idea of Beauty owing to his lack of absolute knowledge and the fact that the Ideas are not among us: “Then the absolute Good and the Beautiful and all which we conceive to be absolute Ideas are unknown (ἄγνωστον) to us.”⁵⁵ Our sensuous eyes will never be able to perceive Beauty itself, which can only become a subject of our knowledge (“μάθημα”⁵⁶) at the end of our ascent to it. How far this knowledge goes remains unclear, so that Georg Picht is even of the opinion that the Socratic wisdom⁵⁷ consists in the realization

⁴⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 211b.

⁵⁰ Schmid, 107.

⁵¹ Cf. Hartmut Buchner, *Eros und Sein. Erörterungen zu Platons Symposion* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1965) 134.

⁵² Schmid, 111.

⁵³ Schmid, 107.

⁵⁴ Henri Joly, *Le renversement platonicien: Logos, episteme, polis* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1974) 22.

⁵⁵ Plato, *Parmenides. Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.9, transl. Harold N. Fowler, 134b-c.

⁵⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 211c.

⁵⁷ According to a question of Socrates’ during Hippias’ speech, wisdom is the most beautiful thing of all. Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 296a.

that man will never possess beauty and truth, since “we are nothing in contrast to the gods and their truth, and our ἀρετὴ should be to realize and bear our invalidity, (...) from which that kind of striving originates which brings us beyond ourselves, namely, Eros.”⁵⁸

In spite of the apparent lack of qualities in the Idea of Beauty and man’s non-existing knowledge of it, he seems to have a constant presentiment of what beauty is, for otherwise he would not be able to call anything beautiful. The Idea of τὸ καλὸν has a privileged role among the Ideas with value, because it is the only one which has sensibles among its instances. Thus, in beautiful things the Idea of Beauty becomes tangible for the senses. Something from the transcendent sphere appears in this world and proves itself to be that which man has to love naturally owing to the need of his soul.⁵⁹ The cause of all beautiful things in the world is the presence of or the communion with Beauty itself, as Socrates says in *Phaedo*.⁶⁰ According to Plato’s parable in *Timaeus*, the cosmos is the most beautiful of all those things which have come into existence, that is, which are not absolute and, therefore, not eternal. He draws the conclusion that the cause of this beautiful cosmos – everything that comes into being needs a cause⁶¹ – must have its gaze fixed on the eternal in order to use it as a model.⁶² Τὸ καλὸν can be interpreted as the logical cause of all things partaking of this concept and becoming beautiful as a result. From then on, concrete beauty has a transcendent implication referring to something beyond itself and all concreteness, to something which is not yet fully present, but to be aspired. Even though this particular is a good imitation, which should not seduce man to fail to notice the fact that it mainly serves as a means for reference, it is imperfect. Since it ranks among the caused things, it would not even exist without its partaking of the Idea.⁶³ Moreover, it is always relative to call something beautiful, because so many different things can fall into this category: a beautiful mare is a beautiful thing, a beautiful lyre is a beautiful thing, a beautiful pot is a beautiful thing, a beautiful maiden is a beautiful

⁵⁸ Georg Picht, *Platons Dialoge “Nomoi” und “Symposion”* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990) 464.

⁵⁹ All the other noetic elements, such as wisdom, are not visible for the senses, or else they would arouse terrible love in man. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d.

⁶⁰ Cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, 100d.

⁶² Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 29a.

⁶³ Cf. Hauskeller, 13, note 9.

thing. But compared to a god, all these things appear to be ugly rather than beautiful.⁶⁴ At this point, Plato again underscores the difference between the imperfect plurality of concrete beauty and the perfect oneness of absolute Beauty, for oneness is the Platonic principle par excellence.

In-between the Idea of Beauty and all concrete beauty a third level lies, namely, that of geometric figures. In opposition to created beauty, they are not relatively beautiful, that is, dependent on the perspective, but absolutely beautiful by nature.⁶⁵ They have a much higher form of abstractness, so that Moravcsik even considers Platonic mathematics fully separated from creative work: "For him [Plato] mathematics is not a matter of constructions and creations, but a matter of discovering antecedently given timeless relationships between the Forms. Arriving at the truth is for Plato a matter of discovery rather than that of creation."⁶⁶ It becomes clear here how superior insight is to creation. The familiar problem that art leads away from truth while intellectual activity, here in the form of mathematical procedures, brings us nearer to truth is taken up. Moravcsik interprets this superiority as follows: "In a well-lived life noetic aspiration has to be the mainspring for all of our activities."⁶⁷ Hence, our occupation with beautiful forms paves the way to our arrival not only at the Idea of Beauty, but also at the Idea of Truth, which is, as always, closely linked to the former. The question remains of where the difference between the beauty of geometrical forms and Beauty itself lies, for Plato never explicitly presents a detailed analysis of their relationship. How can anything be beautiful by nature and not be an Idea? Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker makes an attempt to solve the problem:

"For Plato, the common mathematics is nothing more than an analogy of the cognition of true being, but no fully valid example of it. For the mathematician does indeed conclude strictly from presuppositions which are already given or which he hypothesizes. He cannot prove them any more. (...) According to Plato, true perception would have to be able to account for the presuppositions of mathematics as well."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 288c-289d.

⁶⁵ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 51c.

⁶⁶ Julius Moravcsik, 37.

⁶⁷ Julius Moravcsik, 29.

⁶⁸ Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Tragweite der Wissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 1990) 68.

For mathematics, too, the Idea serves as a formal cause. Since it is nevertheless nothing concrete, but something abstract, it does not fall into the class of beautiful things the beauty of which is as imperfect as that of matter.

3. Beauty, the Good and the Beneficial

*“The useful and the powerful for doing something good is the beautiful.”*⁶⁹

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a) *The Beneficial*

Cratylus brings up the idea that beauty is in some way related to the useful or, more precisely, to the beneficial (“ὠφέλιμος”), that is, that which is useful for and able to produce some good,⁷⁰ though what this relationship is is not mentioned. In *Gorgias*, Socrates tries to convince his dialogue partner that all beautiful things, like bodies, colors, figures, sounds, laws, observances and studies are beautiful “either in view of their use for some particular purpose that each may serve, or in respect of some pleasure arising when, in the act of beholding them, they cause delight to the beholder.”⁷¹ Thus, when of two beautiful things one is more beautiful, the reason is said to be that it surpasses in either one or both of these effects, namely pleasure and benefit.⁷² Something similar is expressed in

⁶⁹ Plato, *Hippias Major*, 296d.

⁷⁰ Cf. Plato, *Cratylus*, 416e-417a.

⁷¹ Plato, *Gorgias*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.3, transl. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 274d.

⁷² This notion is led ad absurdum in Xenophon’s *Symposium*. At a contest of beauty, Socrates declares himself more worthy of the crown than the young favorite for utility reasons. His eyes bulging out from his head are most advantageous for seeing; his nostrils wide and open to the air most appropriate for smelling; his large mouth best fitted for eating and kissing. Cf. Xenophon, *Symposium*, intr., transl. and commentary A.J. Bowen (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1998) V. Santayana concludes that “the most ordinary way in which utility affects us is negatively; if we know a thing to be useless and fictitious, the uncomfortable haunting sense of waste and trickery prevents all enjoyment, and therefore banishes beauty.” Santayana, 114.

a fiercely disputed passage in *Protagoras*: “All actions aimed at living painlessly and pleasantly are beautiful, are they not? And the beautiful work is both good and beneficial?”⁷³ In the *Republic*, Plato tackles the case from the opposite direction, saying that the beneficial is beautiful and the harmful foul.⁷⁴ This notion is further analyzed in *Hippias Major*, where Socrates relates τὸ καλόν, firstly, to the useful (“τὸ χρήσιμον”) and, secondly, to the beneficial. He comes to the conclusion that the useful cannot be the beautiful, since this ability can also perform bad things.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the beneficial cannot be the beautiful, because otherwise it would be the cause of the good, which would result in the fact that the beautiful could not be good nor the good beautiful⁷⁶ – an unthinkable situation.

Paul Woodruff offers a solution to the problem of the apparently complex relationship between beauty and the beneficial by differentiating between οὐσία and πάθος.⁷⁷ Thus, the beneficial is not the essence of beauty, that is, the proposal to consider the beautiful to be the beneficial is not a definition, but something true of it, a guiding property.⁷⁸ If all beautiful things were beneficial without qualification, they would have to be beneficial wherever they occur and never have a harmful effect, which our experience tells us to be untrue. Moreover, Socrates' view of the relationship between the two does not subordinate beauty to any other good as being instrumental. Woodruff calls attention to the anti-Socratic tendency

⁷³ Plato, *Protagoras*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.3, transl. W.R.M. Lamb, 358b. The ‘and’ between ‘good’ and ‘beneficial’ is probably explanatory, meaning ‘good in the sense of beneficial.’ Cf. C.C.W. Taylor, notes, *Protagoras*, by Plato, transl. C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 202.

⁷⁴ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 457b.

⁷⁵ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 296c. Although Oscar Wilde turns Plato's philosophy upside down, for example by identifying beauty and truth with art, he constantly refers to him especially where the topic of utility is concerned: “The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art.” Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997) 783.

⁷⁶ Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 297a-c.

⁷⁷ Cf. Paul Woodruff, commentary and essay, *Hippias Major*, by Plato, transl. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982) 184.

⁷⁸ As everything useful is, of course, also capable of beauty.

in the insistence on the autonomy of beauty that would be present in Plato when interpreting τὸ καλὸν as subordinate: “Virtues and other fine things would be valued by Socrates only as instruments for some other more final good.”⁷⁹

This quote already shows that goodness is very closely linked to beauty and the beneficial. From the excitement in *Hippias Major* over the thesis that the beautiful cannot be good nor the good beautiful in case of an identification of beauty with the beneficial, it can be deduced that the beautiful is good and the good beautiful. But even in spite of this non-identification, there is a relationship between all three elements, namely, if one considers the beneficial a possible quality of τὸ καλόν. Accordingly, beautiful things are beneficial, which means that they produce good things. But by being good, these good things are beautiful. Hence, beauty reproduces itself. Woodruff sees here a close connection with the *Symposium*, where the Idea of Beauty is useful for the reproduction of beautiful things⁸⁰: Eros is a desire to beget upon the beautiful with the ultimate reward for the lover in the form of the begetting in himself of true virtue, which will, finally, make him an object of divine love.⁸¹

b) *The Good*

The Idea of the Good⁸² is the first principle both of this world and of the world of Ideas.⁸³ To underscore this special and unique aspect, Plato never

⁷⁹ Woodruff, 183. Instead of translating ‘καλὸς’ as ‘beautiful,’ Woodruff decided to use a meaning of the term which – in English – undermines a restricted association with aesthetics. (The Greeks used ‘τὸ κάλλος’ if beauty in the more aesthetical sense was meant.) Thus, the word ‘fine’ appears constantly in both his translation of *Hippias Major* and his commentary on the book as a foundation of all sorts of value judgments.

⁸⁰ Cf. Woodruff, 188.

⁸¹ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 212a.

⁸² Hans Georg Gadamer even suggests that the Good itself cannot be an Idea, since it is the being of all Ideas. In his eyes, “the transcendence of the good bars the possibility of considering it an Idea, something with a quiddity, which, at the same time, would be a highest and all embracing genus.” Hans Georg Gadamer, *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1978) 75.

⁸³ This statement provokes the question about the relationship between the Good and the One, since the latter is also considered to be the ultimate principle of reality. However, Plato does not identify them in his dialogues, although in an anecdote on his lecture ‘On the Goods’ he is said to argue that the Good is one, which surprised his audience owing to the seemingly

uses the phrase ‘εἶδος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ,’ but always talks of ‘ἰδέα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ.’ As a first principle, it is beyond everything else and, therefore, beyond being as well: “The objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the Good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.”⁸⁴ Hence, it functions not only as an exemplary cause but also as an efficient cause. Its capacity as a principle of order is interpreted by Paul Friedländer in the following way: “For in the nature of τὸ ἀγαθὸν two facts are present: firstly, that – as a goal – it gives everything its direction inescapably; secondly, that the λόγος has to stop in the face of it, because it is beyond being and, consequently, beyond the λόγος.”⁸⁵ Goodness itself is a light which makes all things intelligible and, hence, gives them truth.⁸⁶ On the other hand, we do not have adequate knowledge of it, because as the first principle it eludes all derivation, and our knowledge of all other things is of no value without the Idea of the Good.⁸⁷ Plato, therefore, never offers a definition of it and merely posits it as the center of life and the object of human striving. In a certain sense we are nevertheless able to apprehend the Idea itself – not by means of the senses,

paradoxical implication of the remark. Cf. Aristoxenus, *Elementa harmonica*, ed. Rosetta da Rios (Rome: Polygraphica, 1954) II, 30-31. Proclus suggests that Socrates would have associated the same things with the Good in the *Republic* which Parmenides ascribes to the One, had Glaucon not given such a ridiculous answer. Because of this lack of insight, Socrates withholds his most important doctrine and names only those properties which are easily graspable for his listeners. Cf. Proclus, *Commentaire sur la République*, traduction et notes A.J. Festugière (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1970) I, 285, 31-286, 8. As a result, Neoplatonism developed a doctrine of the One-Good from an interpretative interaction of the passages in the *Parmenides* and the *Republic*, calling both the transcendent cause of all beings, implying that they themselves are beyond being. Cf. Carlos Steel, “The One and the Good: Some Reflections on a Neoplatonic Identification,” *The Neoplatonic Tradition. Jewish, Christian and Islamic Themes*, ed. Arjo Vanderjagt and Detlev Pätzold (Köln: Dinter, 1991) 9-10.

⁸⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 509b: “ἐπέχεινα τὲς οὐσίας.”

⁸⁵ Paul Friedländer, *Platon II. Die platonischen Schriften: Erste Periode* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1957) 392. Λόγος has to be translated here as the ability or power to think.

⁸⁶ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 508e: “This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the Idea of the Good.” For Plato, this is a beautiful characteristic of goodness: “An inconceivable beauty you speak of (...) if it is the source of knowledge and truth, and yet itself surpasses them in beauty.” *Republic*, 509a.

⁸⁷ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 505a.

but by means of dialectics: “When anyone by dialectics attempts through discourse of reason and apart from all perceptions of sense to find his way to the very essence of each thing and does not desist till he apprehends by thought itself the nature of the Good in itself, he arrives at the limit of the intelligible.”⁸⁸ The apprehension of the Good itself reminds us of the vision of the Idea of Beauty as man’s almost highest goal in the *Symposium*.⁸⁹ Is Plato not consistent in his writings or are beauty and goodness identical? In *Lysis*, beauty is at least considered to be a property of the latter: “For I declare that the good is beautiful.”⁹⁰ In *Gorgias*, Socrates refutes Polus’ attempt to divide beauty from goodness,⁹¹ but a concrete identification is never made explicit. As with the beneficial, the reader is confronted with a mere description of the properties of the nature of the good. A more detailed characterization of it is presented in the more mature book *Philebus*:

“Then if we cannot catch the Good with the aid of one Idea, let us run it down with three – beauty, proportion, and truth – and let us say that these, considered as one, may more properly than all other components of the mixture be regarded as the cause, and that through the goodness of these the mixture itself has been made good.”⁹²

Shortly before this paragraph, Socrates says that the qualities of measure and proportion constitute beauty, so that, as two aspects of the Good itself, they are interdependent, with proportion functioning as a guarantee that the right measure of reason and pleasure is present in order to be able to call something good. The question remains why Plato splits up the Idea of all Ideas into three components at all, for this seems strange at first sight. Dorothea Frede suggests that he wants to make clear that he cannot offer us an unambiguous definition of this Idea, because there is nothing further that can be sensibly said about the Good except that it manifests itself in

⁸⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 532a-b.

⁸⁹ Seth Benardete is of the opinion that Diotima makes the Idea of Beauty coincide with Goodness itself. Cf. Seth Benardete, *On Plato’s Symposium/Über Platons Symposion* (München: Siemens Stiftung, 1994) 86.

⁹⁰ Plato, *Lysis*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.8, transl. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955) 216d. *Timaeus*, 87c says the same.

⁹¹ Cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 474c-475a.

⁹² Plato, *Philebus*, 64e-65a.

these three ways.⁹³ I would add that there is unity and multiplicity, that is, unity in multiplicity, on all levels of the Platonic doctrine of Ideas – in the *Philebus*, Socrates asks the question of how it is possible that unity is to be at the same time in one and in many⁹⁴ – and that the three elements are not components but rather aspects or ways to the highest Idea. Gadamer, on the other hand, considers the passage a slight revision of the doctrine of Ideas. In his eyes, Plato points out here that the good does not exist somewhere on its own at some transcendent place, but is in everything that we judge to be a beautiful mixture. As the structure of the mixture itself, it is only present in that which manifests concrete beauty and goodness, namely, in such a way that exactly this unity and composition of the appearance serve as the criterion for its goodness. The Idea is in everything; yet, the Good itself has to be unhinged and extracted from that which appears to be good.⁹⁵

How does the good manifest itself in concrete life? Even in Plato, the concept of *καλοκαγαθία* – the connection of beauty and goodness – is present, although the word itself appears only once in the spurious writing *Definitiones*: it is a habit or way of living which deliberately chooses the best things.⁹⁶ A deed is, therefore, not beautiful in itself, but has to be morally good, that is, it must emanate from a virtue, a habit, a way of seeing, judging and wanting things. Man must be rightly constructed, or else beauty turns into something almost disdainful: “Nor do beauty and strength appear comely, but rather uncomely, when they are attached to one that is cowardly and base, since they make their possessor more conspicuous and

⁹³ Cf. Dorothea Frede, introduction and notes, *Philebus*, by Plato, transl. Dorothea Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) 80, note 1.

⁹⁴ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 15b.

⁹⁵ Cf. Gadamer, *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, 70-71.

⁹⁶ “Καλοκαγαθία ἔστι προαιρετικὴ τῶν βελτίστων.” Plato, *Definitiones*. *Opera*, vol.5, ed. Joannes Burnet (Oxonii: Oxford University Press, 1972) 412e. *Καλοκαγαθία* had been a predicate of value since Homer expressing at first the appropriateness regarding norms, then a general qualification of everything due, excellent and beneficial. In the fifth century before Christ, the ethical term was introduced to popular morality and became a keyword and a status trait in the political field. Cf. Rüdiger Bubner, “Kalokagathia,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol.4, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1976) 681. Balthasar points out that Plato avoids this term owing to its political implication referring to the highbred in contrast to philistine people. Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 186; Plato, *Republic*, 569a.

show up his cowardice.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, the doing must be beautiful, as Pausanias says in the *Symposium*: “When the doing of it is beautiful and right, the thing itself becomes beautiful; when wrong, it becomes base.”⁹⁸ Only then are all aspects of a good deed accounted for, since every beautiful deed is also good.⁹⁹ Plato considers a virtue to be a beautiful thing.¹⁰⁰ Woodruff even claims – as a hypothesis – that virtue is a prime example of a beautiful thing for the philosopher,¹⁰¹ although he admits at another point that beauty “was always valued by Plato in its own right,” and that Plato’s Socrates is in love with beauty as well, “rather than with what it produces.”¹⁰² In the *Symposium* and in *Phaedrus*, it becomes clear that it is possible to produce real virtue in the erotic striving to the Beautiful itself, since “the philosopher notices the normative principle of virtue in the Idea of Beauty,”¹⁰³ as Beierwaltes explains the possibility. Hence, somebody who is inspired and moved by Eros can create the good in being a good person.¹⁰⁴ What is really interesting is that such a person, who separates himself from human interests and turns his attention to the divine,

⁹⁷ Plato, *Menexenus*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.9, transl. W.R.M. Lamb, 246e.

⁹⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 181e.

⁹⁹ Cf. Plato, *Protagoras*, 358b.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. for example Plato, *Laches*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.8, transl. W.R.M. Lamb, 192c, where courage is defined as beautiful or *Charmides*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.8, transl. W.R.M. Lamb, 159c, where temperance is ranked among beautiful things. Benardete interprets Plato’s view of what a virtue is as a “fraternal strife of the beautiful with the beautiful.” Two beautiful alternatives – in this case courage and self-restraint – compete with each other, and it depends on the situation whether the actualization of the one or the other is a virtuous act. Benardete wants to find this in Plato’s *Statesman*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.12, transl. Harold N. Fowler, 305e-307d, although no word related to κάλλος appears. Cf. Seth Benardete, commentary, *The Being of the Beautiful. Plato’s Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman*, transl. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) III.142.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Woodruff, 112.

¹⁰² Woodruff, 185.

¹⁰³ Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus*, 14.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 212a; *Phaedrus*, 252e-253a: “The followers of Zeus desire that the soul of him whom they love be like Zeus; so they seek for one of philosophical and lordly nature; and when they find him and love him, they do all they can to give him such a character. (...) They have been compelled to keep their eyes fixed upon the god, and as they reach and grasp him by memory they are inspired and receive from him character and habits.”

is considered to be mad by the vulgar.¹⁰⁵ In Plato's eyes, however, we ought to do our best to acquire virtue and wisdom in life, for the prize is beautiful and the hope great: all who have duly purified themselves by philosophy live henceforth altogether without bodies, and pass to still more beautiful dwellings.¹⁰⁶ But there is not only a positive effect in the one who tries to be virtuous – the children of a virtuous friendship are more beautiful and deathless as well in comparison with those of a bodily relationship.¹⁰⁷

The question remains now how beauty is related to the good in cases where morality is not explicitly and exclusively meant. That the two concepts are somehow linked to one another at all originates from a Pythagorean doctrine, from which Plato adopted it.¹⁰⁸ Sometimes they are even used as virtual synonyms, because there is a certain rhythm in the word pair 'καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν.' Accordingly, in the *Republic*, they are mentioned together as necessary components of worthwhile understanding: "Or do you think there is any profit (...) in understanding all things else apart from the good while understanding and knowing nothing that is beautiful and good?"¹⁰⁹ They seem to be directly linked to what constitutes value in life, to man's final and perpetual goal, namely, happiness: "A good and beautiful man or woman is happy, and an unjust and wicked one is wretched."¹¹⁰ As is very often the case, Plato is not quite consistent in his doctrine, so that in the *Symposium*, the love for beauty is at one point not an end in itself and its possession is not directly called a cause of happiness. Yet, the possession of good things is considered to be the cause of happiness, which is defined as the final and no longer to be questioned goal: "The happy are happy by acquisition of good things, and we have no more need to ask for what end a man wishes to be happy, when such is his wish: the answer seems to be ultimate."¹¹¹ Is beauty then actually irrelevant? At the very least, it does not

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, 114c.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 209c.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Alcimus, "Fragment 7," *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum*, vol.4, ed. Karl Müller (Paris: Didot, 1868) 296-298.

¹⁰⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 505b.

¹¹⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, 470e.

¹¹¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 204d-205a.

seem to be contrary to goodness. Iris Murdoch interprets it as “an introductory section of the good,”¹¹² in which situations of beauty are not so much analogies as cases of goodness. Beauty can help to understand the latter if one does not get stuck in the mere sensuous world, where the appreciation of beauty can mire us. Therefore, it should not be seen only in terms of appearances, but as something that gives us our wings, as it is expressed in *Phaedrus*. There, the ambivalence of the human body – and consequently of everything sensuous – is illustrated in the picture of the two horses, one of which wants to ascend to the Ideas, the other of which helps man to lose his wings. Beauty is among those Ideas that have sensuous representatives, resulting in a consistent danger of forgetting its transcendent reference to the Idea of the Good. In the *Laws*, this complicated relationship between the two concepts is made explicit: “When a man honors beauty above goodness, this is nothing else than a literal and total dishonoring of the soul; for such a statement asserts that the body is more honorable than the soul, but falsely, since nothing earth-born is more honorable than the things of heaven.”¹¹³ In the *Republic*, beauty appears more valuable than in the passage in the *Laws*, because it is somehow implied in the highly praised Idea of the Good, from which it – apart from what is right – flows directly: “When seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause of all that is right and beautiful.”¹¹⁴ The value is, of course, attained by grouping beauty together with what is right: τὸ ὀρθόν. Since the Good does not have any sensibles among its instances, and is, therefore, not visible – whatever that means with regard to the ascent to it – Murdoch qualifies beauty as the visible and accessible aspect of it.¹¹⁵ Taking into account the fact that beauty is also something sensuous and, moreover, a direct offspring of the Good itself, this hypothesis seems justified.¹¹⁶ What makes the foundation of it even stronger is the fact that

¹¹² Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) 41.

¹¹³ Plato, *Laws*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.10 and 11, transl. R.G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967 and 1968) 727d-e.

¹¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 517b-c.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Murdoch, 70.

¹¹⁶ Ivor Ludlam takes up the concept of visibleness in his interpretation of *Hippias Major* saying that τὸ καλὸν is that by which things which appear appropriate do so as distinct from τὸ ἀγαθόν, which is that by which things that are appropriate are appropriate. This points

Plato changes¹¹⁷ his concept of the goal from the striving to the best,¹¹⁸ to the acquaintance with real being,¹¹⁹ to the ascent to the sun,¹²⁰ to the Idea of Beauty,¹²¹ and to the dialectical progress of thought to the Idea of the Good.¹²² Picht solves the problem by calling the Idea of the Good beauty perceived by the νοῦς, that is, by that kind of capacity of reason to which real beauty is visible.¹²³ Gadamer is of the opinion that the good is only in that which it gives – comparable to the sun as a giver of light: “As the sun provides all that is visible with being and visibility by giving warmth and light, so is the good for us only in that which it gives.”¹²⁴ To conclude, one can say that we can see Beauty itself in a way in which we cannot approach the Idea of the Good. For Murdoch, this is connected with the phenomenon of experience.¹²⁵ Man can experience the transcendence of the Beautiful, but not the transcendence of the Good, owing to beauty's special splendor, which we can become aware of by means of the senses. Nevertheless, Beauty itself stands only in the vestibule of the Good and in the dwelling of the Good,¹²⁶

out the active conferment of nature by the good and the sensuous implication – that seems not to touch an object's nature and could even be interpreted as an illusionary effect – with regard to beauty. Cf. Ivor Ludlam, *Hippias Major: An Interpretation* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1991) 181.

¹¹⁷ It simply seems to be important to Plato to ascend at all to the transcendent dimension, to become conscious of the fact that this world is only a copy containing less truth, beauty, goodness and reality than its origin – the Ideas. Therefore, his inconsistency in naming the goal of our necessary ascent could be an expression of his inability to name what he knows intuitively but not explicitly. Here, the Socratic wisdom can be applied: I know that I do not know anything. A second possibility could be to try to differentiate between what the soul can apprehend in this sensuous life, namely, the Idea of Beauty, and what it will be able to see after death, when it returns to the heaven of Ideas: the Idea of the Good – which is, according to *Phaedrus*, not visible for every soul.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 237d.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247e.

¹²⁰ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 516b.

¹²¹ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 211a.

¹²² Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 532b.

¹²³ Cf. Picht, 274-275. He contrasts the νοῦς with the λόγος – truth which is produced by the νοῦς when the latter catches sight of beauty – and the practical φρόνησις, which needs the λόγος as a necessary companion in order not to miss the good which it tries to produce.

¹²⁴ Gadamer, *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, 21-22.

¹²⁵ Cf. Murdoch, 60.

¹²⁶ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 64c.

the threshold of which man must, however, cross in order to reach his target.

4. The Desirous and Erotic Pursuit of the Idea of Beauty

“All these and still more are the beautiful achievements which I am able to relate to you of madness coming from the gods.”¹²⁷

≈

a) Pleasure and Desire

If one poses the question of how true Beauty can be reached, the concepts of either the desire for beauty or the pleasure while enjoying it come to one's mind. This does not mean that desire is good owing to the goodness of what provokes it. That Plato is conscious of this ambivalence becomes clear in *Phaedrus*, where he writes that there are two ruling and leading principles (metaphorically articulated in the form of the two horses) in man, namely, an innate desire for pleasure and an acquired opinion striving for the best.¹²⁸ The inspiration by concrete beauty followed by a remembrance of true Beauty is the best enthusiasm, being of the highest origin in the philosopher's eyes – but enthusiasm is not sufficient. Only a life characterized by a mixture of pleasure and mind or wisdom is worthwhile.¹²⁹ Pleasure is even considered a final cause of beauty, that is, something is beautiful under the condition that it causes pleasure.¹³⁰ However, Plato distinguishes between different forms of pleasure. Geometric figures, for example, are objectively beautiful and cause that pleasure which pertains to them: “The beauty of these is not relative, like that of other things, but they are always absolutely beautiful by nature and have peculiar pleasures in no way subject to comparison with the pleasures of scratching.”¹³¹ These pleasures are regarded as positive because they are unmixed. There are several conditions

¹²⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245b.

¹²⁸ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 237d.

¹²⁹ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 22a.

¹³⁰ Cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 474e.

¹³¹ Plato, *Philebus*, 51c.

for a pleasure to be included in this class: It must not be accompanied by pain, it must be factually true and of the right size, and it has to be stable, free of limiting conditions and pure.¹³² This purity is given when it does not depend on a contrast or an inner tension, because otherwise it would create a sensual and intellectual excitement in the viewer stimulating his appetite for more pleasure, so that, as a consequence, restlessness would result. This life-style of restlessness is of an inferior form, for it mirrors man's needy nature, which is characterized by becoming instead of being – such as is also the nature of pleasures.¹³³ The latter point is for Plato the strongest reason for criticism. Those people who are not newly stimulated by beauty or who are corrupt give themselves up to a life of pleasures and will not rise from this world to the world of absolute Beauty. Plato calls their behavior “beastlike”¹³⁴ and “a violation of nature.”¹³⁵ In contrast to such a life, a life of mind and wisdom is considered the most divine.¹³⁶ But this is not a human life owing to the lack of a harmonious mixture. Therefore, pleasure is always part of everyone's life or else it would be an apathetic way of living.

The idea of apathy already indicates that Plato appreciates some kind of desire in man. Despite man's incapacity to reach Beauty itself with his senses, the Idea causes our attraction by certain sensuous observations: Whenever one is confronted with earthly beauty, a longing (‘ποθοῦσα’ or ‘ἔμερος’) is caused which wants to behold the possessor of this beauty.¹³⁷ However, the yearning cannot be fulfilled, for “beauty does not so much render as promise.”¹³⁸ It evokes an expectation, since it refers to something that is not yet present. We are, therefore, opened towards an eternal fulfillment, that is, we, ourselves, cannot reach this fulfillment but have to encounter a “divine satiation.”¹³⁹ Based on his interpretation of the *Laws*,¹⁴⁰ Schmid

¹³² Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 50e-52c.

¹³³ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 53c.

¹³⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250e.

¹³⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251a.

¹³⁶ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 33b.

¹³⁷ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251e.

¹³⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Campagne in Frankreich 1792*. *Goethes Werke*, vol.1,33 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1898) 234.

¹³⁹ Josef Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness. On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus*, transl. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2000) 86.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 837c: “He that counts bodily desire as but secondary, and puts longing looks in place of love with soul lusting really for soul, regards the bodily satisfaction of

suggests a means of maintaining the necessary desire: “The distance in a glance makes the continuity of desire possible.”¹⁴¹ For Plato, this form of desire is good, since it makes us strive beyond the concreteness surrounding us – even though it still shows our defective nature. Our final goal should be true and absolute Beauty, which is being. Josef Pieper points out the difference between this positive longing, namely, love, and lust. He who is moved by the latter does not go beyond himself, but stays within himself. He is calculating with respect to the means to his satisfaction, that is, he is much more active in being moved than is a lover of beauty, who has to strive forward owing to a deep, inner void serving as an impulse.¹⁴² In the end, beauty is not only the cause of desire but its objectification. Benardete considers it to be not the beloved, but the genesis of that which is one’s own in beauty.¹⁴³

b) *Eros*

Eros is beautiful if it impels us to love in a beautiful manner.¹⁴⁴ But why does man love at all? The answer to this question can again be found in the concept of beauty, for man can love only that which is beautiful. A shattering emotion takes place in the encounter with sensuous beauty, which is capable of moving man more strongly than any other value, because it is the most visible¹⁴⁵ of them – were this not the case, he would love other spiritualities more strongly.¹⁴⁶ We perceive beauty with the “clearest of our senses,”¹⁴⁷ as Plato calls the sense of sight. This whole theory is based on

the body as an outrage, and, reverently worshipping temperance, courage, nobility and wisdom, will desire to live always chastely in company with the chaste object of his love.”

¹⁴¹ Schmid, 109. He concludes that the begetting in the *Symposium* should, therefore, not be interpreted as procreation (γένεσις) but as confinement (τόκος), since the latter maintains a distance from beauty. He reformulates the “begetting in the beautiful” to “begetting in the light of the beautiful.” Cf. Schmid, 109-110.

¹⁴² Cf. Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness. On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus*, 21; 82.

¹⁴³ Cf. Benardete, *On Plato’s Symposium/Über Platons Symposion*, 80.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 181a.

¹⁴⁵ It is its nature to be something that appears, that shines and shines out.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250e.

¹⁴⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d: “ἐναργεστάτης.” Pieper interprets this as “den lichtesten unserer Sinne,” thus underlining the similarity of the sense of sight with a source of light, which makes everything else visible. Cf. Josef Pieper, *Begeisterung und göttlicher Wahnsinn. Über den platonischen Dialog Phaidros. Werke I: Darstellungen und Interpretationen:*

Plato's ἀνάμνησις-doctrine. Love is memory – memory of something that transcends an earthly fulfillment. During the soul's pre-existence, it was enabled to view the true nature of Ideas such as Justice, Prudence and Beauty, which Plato calls “the most blessed of mysteries”¹⁴⁸ and Ernst Heitsch characterizes as “the induction (...) into holy things and mysterious wonders.”¹⁴⁹ This memory – and, thus, love – awakes when one is suddenly confronted with the dim brilliance of earthly beauty. Hence, Eros opens the entrance to the sphere of eternal being. Plato uses Empedocles' theory on the functioning of perception in order to illustrate the effect of beauty:

“And as this intimacy continues and the lover comes near and touches the beloved in the gymnasia and in their general intercourse, then the fountain of that stream which Zeus, when he was in love with Ganymede, called ‘desire’ flows copiously upon the lover; and some of it flows into him, and some, when he is filled, overflows outside; and just as the wind or an echo rebounds from smooth, hard surfaces and returns whence it came, so the stream of beauty passes back into the beautiful one through the eyes, the natural inlet to the soul, where it reanimates the passages of the feathers, waters them and makes the feathers begin to grow, filling the soul of the loved one with love.”¹⁵⁰

The example underscores the importance of the senses and shows also that love is answered by love. With regard to the ascent, Benardete, however, claims that the lover ceases to be a lover as soon as he has transcended man and begun viewing the beauty in laws and behavior, and that he becomes

Platon, ed. Berthold Wald (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002) 317; *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness. On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus*, 84. Wolfgang Welsch points to the primacy of the vision of sight with regard to the perception of beauty, having its roots in the fifth century before Christ and having become fully accepted with Plato. Even the Ideas as basic determinations of being refer to the concept of seeing when one takes the etymology of the word into account. At the same time, theory turns into man's highest act. Cf. Wolfgang Welsch, *Grenzgänge der Ästhetik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996) 237-238. He continues by drawing attention to the fact that the primacy of vision is carried forward in Neoplatonic and medieval light metaphors, as well as in the Christian eschatology and its beatific vision.

¹⁴⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250c.

¹⁴⁹ Ernst Heitsch, commentary, *Phaidros*, by Plato, transl. Ernst Heitsch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1993) 177.

¹⁵⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 255b-d.

solely an observer.¹⁵¹ What Benardete simply ignores here is that Diotima associates the ascent with hard effort¹⁵² and the reaching of the highest level almost with the fulfillment of man.¹⁵³ This does not sound like an aloof viewer, but like someone who makes these efforts willingly, that is, as a result of his love. This view of the situation is supported by Socrates' speech in *Phaedrus*, where the one who encounters beauty is afflicted with something as strong as divine madness. Although he does not act against his nature or his will, man seems not to be capable of behaving differently in the face of beauty. He is enraptured, moved, not with himself any longer. He is a sufferer,¹⁵⁴ overwhelmed by divine madness, and is downright driven towards beauty. This shows as well that it is not possible for man to reach or even to understand divine Beauty without a divine inspiration. In spite of the human efforts, they alone would not be sufficient, since man would not be moved by love and, consequently, by a yearning to become one with the beloved. This also underscores the fact that Plato did not have an egoistic love in mind.¹⁵⁵ It is a love that is wanted by god and not anything emanating from man. When the latter sees a godlike face or form which is a good image of Beauty, "he shudders at first, and something of the old awe comes over him; then, as he gazes, he reveres the beautiful one as a god, and if he did not fear to be thought stark mad, he would offer sacrifice to his beloved as to an idol or a god."¹⁵⁶ The lover's reaction reminds one more of an awesome prayer than of a selfish procedure. So does the final step to Beauty itself in the *Symposium*, which is like an honor that is granted to few people only. At one point in *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the beautiful beloved as the only healer of the greatest woes, who is worshipped on account of his beauty.¹⁵⁷ However, since this apprehension of beauty touches the sphere

¹⁵¹ Cf. Benardete, *On Plato's Symposium/Über Platons Symposium*, 86.

¹⁵² Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e.

¹⁵³ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 211b.

¹⁵⁴ In the *Laws*, Plato interestingly remarks that all sufferings are beautiful, thereby forming a circle with the assertion that someone who is startled by beauty is a sufferer. Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 859e.

¹⁵⁵ This throws new light on the eros-agape dispute instigated by Protestant theologians against Catholicism, "polluted" by Hellenistic philosophy. Cf. Josef Pieper, *Über die Liebe. Werke IV: Schriften zur philosophischen Anthropologie und Ethik: Das Menschenbild der Tugendlehre*, ed. Berthold Wald (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1996) 354-366.

¹⁵⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251a.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 252a-b.

of the lover's happiness, he cannot want anything else. Heitsch calls the lover as such "a servant of Eros."¹⁵⁸ But what is important is that this refers only to those who have viewed the high Ideas in their pre-existence, such as those who will become philosophers, friends of knowledge, because their memory is still clear.

This parable of a pre-existence followed by a fall to earth emphasizes the importance of the backward ascent to one's origin as the actual task in life. Thus, beauty is the cause and the goal of love, and since it always aspires to beauty, Picht considers it to be σωφροσύνη, prudence, which teaches us not to offend against anything beautiful.¹⁵⁹ Love strives for something valuable, which is more reasonable than the tyranny of sensuality. However, this does not mean that Eros is perfect. In the *Symposium*, Socrates severely criticizes Agathon for his concept of Eros as the best and most beautiful god. It is rather a lover of beauty who, consequently, lacks beauty. Furthermore, it cannot be good owing to the fact that the good is beautiful.¹⁶⁰ It is a demon, a messenger and mediator between the gods and humanity, because "god does not mingle with man."¹⁶¹ Eros is the son of Penia and Poros, a mixture of needfulness and the desire for goodness and beauty.¹⁶² This nature between lack and perfection is illustrated in *Philebus*, where Plato differentiates between a courageous lover representing the incomplete part, and his good and beautiful beloved, who is a symbol for perfection.¹⁶³ Becoming and being face one another with becoming striving for perfect being. However, as Frede points out, the lover can never attain the state of being, since his beloved's beauty remains out of his reach in the same way as an Idea does for its copy.¹⁶⁴ Eros is always on the way. Even in the apprehension of Beauty itself, the lover who apprehends does not become one with it. Man, like Eros, can never step over the border between becoming and being. In the attempt, which

¹⁵⁸ Heitsch, 114.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Picht, 471.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 201b-c.

¹⁶¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 203a. This excludes the Christian concept of Incarnation.

¹⁶² Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 202e-203d.

¹⁶³ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 53d-e. Socrates concludes from his example of the lover and his beloved that one part of existences always exists for the sake of something, and the other part for the sake of which the former is always coming into being.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Frede, notes, *Philebos*, 312.

nevertheless takes place, love embraces both sensuousness and spirituality. A new world of beauty opens up in the love of one beautiful representative. Suddenly, everything is seen in a new light and seems to be worthy of being loved. Hence, Eros serves as a helper for man to ascend to higher levels of being.

Moreover, Eros and beauty are closely linked in the field of procreation, which makes love's desire for the beautiful rather a by-condition. In Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, Plato – and nature – are used to contradict Schopenhauer's conception that beauty serves as a redeemer of the will in its denial of the procreative impulse: "No less an authority than the divine Plato (so Schopenhauer himself calls him) maintains a different thesis: that all beauty incites to procreation – that precisely this is the *proprium* of its effect, from the most sensual regions up into the most spiritual."¹⁶⁵ Thus, Eros wants to beget upon the beautiful to attain immortality, which it naturally lacks as something that is only a becoming as opposed to a being: Love is "of engendering (...) because this is something ever-existent and immortal in our mortal life."¹⁶⁶ Rosen goes so far as to regard Eros and genesis as equal, concluding that since the former is said to lack beauty, beauty must be beyond genesis.¹⁶⁷ This corresponds to the text in the sense that both Eros and genesis are principles of becoming, and beauty a concept of being. However, this identification seems to be arbitrary and perfectly senseless in respect of the course of Rosen's argument. He proceeds by asking why Diotima concerns herself exclusively with beauty, thus ignoring ugliness. How and why is Eros able to avoid desire for the ugly? Can only beautiful people procreate?¹⁶⁸ The answer to the question of how is that Eros always desires beauty, that is, if it wants to beget upon something, this something is in some way beautiful, so that, indeed, only beautiful people can procreate – beautiful in the eyes of Eros. With respect to the question of why, Plato himself gives an answer in the *Symposium*: "The ugly is discordant with whatever is divine, whereas the beautiful is accordant."¹⁶⁹ It is surprising that Rosen does not see this explanation, for

¹⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 91.

¹⁶⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 206e.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Rosen, 247. He even says that Diotima wishes to claim this identity.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Rosen, 247-248.

¹⁶⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 206d.

at a different point he defines the power of the beautiful within the flux of existence as something that “not only endures but is itself the cause of the perpetuation of human existence. As such, the beautiful comes to be regarded as the direct presence of the divine in man and the cosmos. The orderly and regular is beautiful because it endures the flux of genesis.”¹⁷⁰

As a demon, Eros lies between mortality and divine immortality.¹⁷¹ Owing to his parents, a wise and resourceful father and an unwise and resourceless mother, he is neither wise nor ignorant, and, therefore, a lover of wisdom. This is, however, the definition of a philosopher, so that it becomes clear that Plato identifies the two with one another. A philosopher is between ignorance and wisdom, which means, between man and the divine dimension, exactly in the same way as Eros is between mortality and immortality. To underscore this identification, Diotima adds that wisdom is concerned with the most beautiful things, and Eros is a love directed to what is beautiful, so that Eros must be a friend of wisdom.¹⁷² At this point, the Socratic wisdom shines through once again. Man's wisdom should consist in acknowledging his need and using Eros as a power to go beyond this invalidity. That is why Barbara Zehnpfennig can call Diotima “the principle of conception.”¹⁷³ Willingness to conceive means openness to the reception of something which is not one's own. This openness, however, is only present in those who have experienced a need within themselves, which they want to overcome.¹⁷⁴ All this does not mean that Eros or philosophy are totally rational, which becomes obvious when the book *Phaedrus* is also taken into consideration. There, the concept of ‘divine madness’ is illustrated. Philosophizing is presented as an inspired, manic and Muse-loving activity,¹⁷⁵ where the irrational elements play an important role in our aspiration toward understanding, or where they are “necessary sources of motivational energy,”¹⁷⁶ as Martha Nussbaum interprets them. In the

¹⁷⁰ Rosen, 200.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 202e.

¹⁷² Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 204b.

¹⁷³ Zehnpfennig, xxxii.

¹⁷⁴ This also marks the difference between Socrates and those who praised Eros before him, because they deny the existence of a lack in themselves.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248d.

¹⁷⁶ Martha Craven Nussbaum, “‘This Story isn't True’: Poetry, Goodness, and Understanding in Plato's *Phaedrus*,” *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, 98. However, she seems to

end, only the reference to the divine sphere promises insight and fulfillment owing to man's needy nature. No sooner will he be able to perceive true Beauty. Eros is a help given by the gods to begin the ascent to the divine. The highest Beauty, divine Beauty, is pure and freed from all other things, and is, therefore, called infinite. This infinite Beauty, which can be reached as the final step of a lover's striving, demands vast love as well.

5. The Apprehension of the Idea of Beauty

*“Those from heaven relate
their delights and visions of a Beauty
beyond words.”¹⁷⁷*

≈

The ascent to the Idea of Beauty emanates from a direct vision and culminates in an act of apprehension. The fact that one somehow sees the Idea sensuously and spiritually is due to the common root of ‘idea’ and ‘seeing,’ namely, εἶδ.’ In its pre-philosophical use, ‘idea’ meant a visible, often beautiful figure,¹⁷⁸ which turned into the pure archetypical figure of reality for Plato. There, “the mystic,”¹⁷⁹ as Picht calls the one who views the pure εἶδος, sees nothing corporeal, but something that is eternal and unchangeable in itself, so that he, as he sees the Beautiful through that which makes it visible, is able “to breed not illusions but true examples of virtue, since his contact is not with illusion but with truth.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, in spite of its absoluteness, the Idea of Beauty is in a certain way reachable for man, and since he is confronted with pure reality, Beauty is identical with Truth. This means that the Idea is apprehended with the

go a little bit too far in calling Eros a god as a conclusion from her view that all actions inspired by these irrational elements are themselves intrinsically valuable components of a good life. Eros should, then, be considered to be not only a demon in the *Phaedrus* but “a thing of intrinsic value and beauty, not just a way station toward the good.” Nussbaum, 102-104.

¹⁷⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 615a.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Schmidt-Berger, 148.

¹⁷⁹ Picht, 212.

¹⁸⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 212a.

νοῦς, which produces truth in doing so – in contrast to the empty opinions, that is, opinions without insight, of those who love copies of the Beautiful. These conventions “are tumbled about in the mid-region between that which is not and that which is in the true and absolute sense.”¹⁸¹ In the former case, seeing noetic beauty is identical with seeing the truth of various instances of corporeal beauty, which are included in the highest form.

How exactly does Plato estimate man's possibilities for arriving at the level of viewing the Idea of Beauty? At first glance, it seems to be possible for everyone, since sensuous beauty awakes – or it should rather be ‘can awake’ – one's realization that there is something more beyond it. If one then starts to discover what there is to find beyond the first encounter with sensuous beauty, one begins to strive for knowledge, that is, one philosophizes, which alone makes life worth living. This first step should actually be a very obvious and easy one owing to beauty's moving nature. But Plato explicitly says that very few of those who are moved by concrete beauty will go from there to start the journey towards attaining a glimpse of Beauty itself. One reason for the difficulty is that most of those who encounter concrete beauty mistake it for the true and only existing beauty:

“ ‘The lovers of sounds and sights (...) delight in beautiful tones and colors and shapes and in everything that art fashions out of these, but their thought is incapable of apprehending and taking delight in the nature of the Beautiful in itself. (...) Will not those be few who would be able to approach Beauty itself and contemplate it in and by itself?’ ‘They would, indeed.’ ”¹⁸²

Plato compares them to dreamers who at night mistake the events in their dreams for reality, while those who try to look beyond mere appearances are considered to be awake:

“ ‘He, then, who believes in beautiful things, but neither believes in Beauty itself nor is able to follow when someone tries to guide him to the knowledge of it – do you think that his life is a dream or a waking? Just consider. Is not the dream state, whether the man is asleep or awake, just this: the mistaking of resemblance for identity?’ ‘I should certainly

¹⁸¹ Plato, *Republic*, 479e.

¹⁸² Plato, *Republic*, 476b-c.

call that dreaming,' he said. 'Well, then, take the opposite case: the man whose thought recognizes a Beauty in itself, and is able to distinguish that Self-Beautiful and the things that partake of it, and neither supposes the participants to be it nor it the participants – is his life, in your opinion, a waking or a dream state?' 'He is very much awake,' he replied."¹⁸³

These ideas in the *Republic* fit well with the scheme of composition in the *Symposium*, where the ascent of five steps to the true Idea of Beauty in the speech of the wise Diotima is preceded by five speeches to the most wonderful appearance of beauty, a glorious mock beauty. Those who more and more forget the nature of their own soul and apotheosize their loving appetite, as the first five speakers tend to, get stuck in the seductions sensuous beauty offers and are even likely to end up leading a barbaric lifestyle.

In this context, Zehnpfennig suggests the need for a drastic change of one's attitude towards the experience of reality,¹⁸⁴ which is a hard and not frequent step, so that, consequently, being moved beyond mere sensuousness does not happen each time that sensuous beauty is encountered. The important and decisive process takes place at the beginning of the ascent marking a break with the immediacy of the experience and is followed by a differentiation between cause and that which is caused. This then brings about a search for the apprehension of this cause. Zehnpfennig, therefore, criticizes those who simply interpret the process as an act of abstraction, which is insufficient in her eyes. Peter Gardeya, in particular, pleads for such an understanding of the ascent. He is of the opinion that man tries to realize the beautiful, the good and the just as a result of insight, while he abstracts from sensuous plurality to notional unity. This accomplishment of thinking leaves the perceptible region and ascends towards notions and Ideas.¹⁸⁵ Schmid adds that the abandonment of all singular and corporeal beauty is "an act of liberation."¹⁸⁶ But I would say that the two fully misunderstand Plato's concept of abstraction. According to his doctrine of Ideas, there are not steps leading up a ladder, so that each step

¹⁸³ Plato, *Republic*, 476c-d.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Zehnpfennig, xviii, note 15.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Peter Gardeya, *Platons Phaidros. Interpretation und Bibliographie* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998) 17.

¹⁸⁶ Schmid, 102.

leaves what is beneath it behind, but steps leading up a pyramid, so that those notions which are on a higher level embrace and include everything beneath them. Moreover, this misinterpretation overlooks the fact that in *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, sensuousness plays an important role, for there would be no possibility of starting out for the Idea without sensuous beauty as a starting-point. That Plato did not deprecate the body to the extent we are accustomed to believe is also obvious in his illustration – or that of his time – of the gods: “But we, though we have never seen or rightly conceived a god, imagine an immortal being which has both a soul and a body which are united for all time.”¹⁸⁷ In this same book, man's depravity is actually not a result of the soul's bond with the body but the reason for it. The two horses of the soul already pull in different directions during its existence in the heaven of Ideas, which makes the soul fall. Zehnpfennig accordingly argues that the *Symposium* presents a “reconciliation of sensuousness and spirituality by means of a love which already realizes spirituality in sensuous things and which respects sensuousness without losing itself in it.”¹⁸⁸ In this context, Ratzinger points to the misinterpretation of most theologians even more radically: “The doctrine on the Greek-Platonic dualism of body and soul together with the corresponding doctrine on the immortality of the latter spooking through all more recent theological treatises is a fantasy of theologians without a counterpart in reality.”¹⁸⁹

Furthermore, another necessary condition has to be given to make an ascent possible, namely, the recollection of the Idea of Beauty, which was seen by some during their pre-existence. Without this ἀνάμνησις, man is not drawn away from sensuous beauty to the original, because he feels no longing towards something dimly known, but remains within sensuousness, even when that means an unnatural unification.¹⁹⁰ According to Plato's parable in *Phaedrus*, the lack of memory is due to the different degrees of success the souls had in following the gods to their glorious vantage point from which the Ideas are visible. Of those falling to earth the soul that has seen the most enters into the birth of a man who is to be a philosopher or

¹⁸⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246c-d.

¹⁸⁸ Zehnpfennig, vii.

¹⁸⁹ Ratzinger, *Kleine katholische Dogmatik IX. Eschatologie – Tod und ewiges Leben*, 123.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250e.

a lover of beauty, or one of a musical or loving nature.¹⁹¹ The connection between this pre-existence and the time to come, when absolute Beauty will again be apprehended, is established by the word ‘τότε’ meaning ‘at one time’ or ‘once.’ Thus, the following quote from *Phaedrus* that “in those days [τότε], they saw beauty shining in brightness, when, with a blessed company – we following in the train of Zeus, and others in that of some other god – they saw the blessed sight and vision,”¹⁹² refers to a pre-historical past as well as to the future. Pieper interprets this future even in an eschatological sense in terms of “the end of time”¹⁹³ owing to Plato’s reference to what happens to the souls after death.¹⁹⁴ Be it either the one or the other possible interpretation, the ascent to the Idea of τὸ καλὸν after the fall resembles a return to the origin.

Beauty alone is capable of stimulating the longing which is naturally followed by such an ascent that leaves the common path of every-day human occupation. The different steps up to the highest level possible are described in a very detailed way in Diotima’s speech. This ascent should start already in youth, when one should pay special attention to beautiful bodies, but must be in love with one particular body. The next step is to acknowledge that the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, thereby becoming a lover of all beautiful bodies and slackening the strength of one’s feeling for a single body. The next advance will be to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of bodies, closely followed by the realization of how beautiful our behavior and laws are. From behavior one should be led on to the branches of knowledge rising from a single instance to the main ocean of the beautiful and resulting in a creation of many beautiful words and notions in a boundless love of wisdom until, suddenly, one is confronted

¹⁹¹ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248c-d. The concept of a fallen nature shines through at this point. Not all souls fall to earth, but only those which through inability to follow fail to see truth, and through some mischance are filled with forgetfulness and evil, grow heavy and lose their wings. On the other hand, the soul which follows after god and obtains a view of any of the truths is free from harm until the next period, and if it can always attain this, is always unharmed.

¹⁹² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250b.

¹⁹³ Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness. On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus*, 84.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 256b-d.

with the revelation of a wondrous vision, beautiful in its very nature.¹⁹⁵ As one can see, the steps of the ascent become more and more universal and at the same time more spiritual, until at last the most universal and most spiritual thing, the Idea, is reached, which embraces the necessary steps beneath it as their perfection. This process involves effort, strain and pain owing to the difficulty of comprehending what is reasonable, of seeing it as good, beautiful and right, and of putting it into action: “The soul suffers when the growth of the feathers begins; it is feverish and uncomfortable, and it itches when they begin to grow.”¹⁹⁶ Heitsch interprets the wings that begin to grow for the ascent as a metaphor for the power of the spiritual upswing of the soul, which is strengthened by everything good and beautiful, but which atrophies as a result of beauty's absence.¹⁹⁷

For him, the question then arises whether the yearning that makes the wings grow is satisfiable in this world or not. The *Symposium* seems to hint at a positive answer to the question, although apprehending absolute Beauty in contrast to the Good itself is not the utmost fulfillment intended for man.¹⁹⁸ Plato, however, does not believe this is so in the *Symposium*; rather, he says that one is *almost* able to lay hold of the goal (“σχεδὸν ἄν ἄπτοιτο τοῦ τέλους”),¹⁹⁹ which, of course, again refers to Beauty being the threshold of Goodness itself. In contrast to this, *Phaedrus* tends toward an eschatological interpretation of the moment when man is able to view the Idea of τὸ καλόν:

“If now the better elements of the mind, which lead to a well ordered life and to philosophy, prevail, they live a life of happiness and harmony here on earth, self-controlled and orderly, holding in subjection that which causes evil in the soul and giving freedom to that which makes for virtue; and when this life is ended they are light and winged (...). Neither human wisdom nor divine inspiration can confer upon man any greater

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210a-e.

¹⁹⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251c.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Heitsch, 110; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251d.

¹⁹⁸ Pieper is of exactly this opinion: “Apparently Plato envisages the utmost perfection accorded to man only as an encounter with divine Beauty, not as an encounter with the idea of Goodness or of Being – or anything else.” Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness. On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus*, 83.

¹⁹⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 211b.

blessing than this. If, however, they live a life less noble and without philosophy, but yet ruled by the love of honor (...), at last, when they depart from the body, they are not winged, to be sure, but their wings have begun to grow, so that the madness of love brings them no small reward; for it is the law that those who have once begun their upward progress shall never again pass into darkness and the journey under the earth, but shall live a happy life in the light as they journey together, and because of their love shall be alike in their plumage when they receive their wings.”²⁰⁰

In spite of all these uncertainties with regard to one’s fulfillment, the striving for one’s perfection and that of the beloved is, in any case, a direct cause of the apprehension, for the lover tries to model the beloved after the ideal which he sees shining through from his beloved. With respect to his own perfection, he takes his god as an example and adopts good habits from him.²⁰¹ The only problem remaining is that the lover’s attempt to perfect himself cannot be brought to an end, since the end cannot be grasped despite its visibility: “Nor again will our initiate find the beautiful presented to him (...) as a particular description or piece of knowledge.”²⁰² The vision of Beauty remains incomplete, because man can never entirely possess the Good, which is not seen but only exemplified by Beauty. On the other hand, the realization of concrete goodness seems to be possible with philosophy playing a key role. It emanates from the love of beauty, but there always remains a bit of ugliness in nature, which gives philosophers the task not to scorn it, or even mistake it for the Beautiful itself, but to accept it as the way to the genuinely loveable and to teach others their insight. This marks them off from the rhetorician, who tries to influence his hearers for his own good. The philosopher, in contrast, commits himself to an unconditional enlightenment by means of his dialectical art in order to realize a civilization that guarantees objective justice, beauty and goodness.²⁰³ A lover of wisdom has to go beyond his own nature, since it lacks a divine character,

²⁰⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 256a-d.

²⁰¹ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 252e-253a.

²⁰² Plato, *Symposium*, 211a.

²⁰³ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276e-277a; *Republic*, 518c: “Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul, like the scene-shifting periact in the theater, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being.”

and he can thereby find truth in the creation of love in his abstract thinking. Eros is directed towards Beauty itself in the pure and unique truth of its nature and tries to attain the Good by means of a loving reference to beauty. Thus, Truth itself is touched during the vision of the Idea of Beauty. But, in the end, there is no final unification with the Good – at any rate not in this world. Here, man remains on the beautiful and true threshold.

6. Summary

Plato is of the opinion that the divine Idea of Beauty is the transcendent and eternal norm of every beautiful reality, which partakes of the Idea formally without being provided with the same amount of reality. He differentiates between different types of beauty surrounding man, namely, formal and functional beauty, moral beauty, and romantic beauty. Unconsciously, every human being knows of the transcendental reference included in these types and receives a possibility of recollecting it through an encounter with concrete beauty. This encounter is followed by an evocation of a desirous longing to become one with the beloved beauty, that is, to beget upon it in order to gain immortality. Plato calls this erotic enrapture divine madness, considering it to be a mediator between the earthly and the divine sphere. For instead of falling into the trap of sensuous beauty, such as can happen through the seductive effect of art, and thus getting stuck in it, the enraptured person should go beyond himself and sensuousness in an ascent to his origin. Despite the abstracting process of each step – from sensuous beauty to that of the souls, of morality and laws, to the beauty of wisdom – a view must be established which sees through mere sensuality and which finds the spiritual and more abstract levels in it. Hence, the ascending person advances deeper and deeper into reality and thereby into truth. The final step possible reaches Truth itself, identical with the Idea of Beauty. The highest existing principle, the Idea of the Good, remains out of reach, but man can at least enter its vestibule by apprehending the Idea of Beauty, which is sufficient to impart human happiness to him.

Chapter III

Beauty in Aristotle's Writings and in Early Neoplatonism

1. Aristotle – The 'End' of Ideology

“Indeed it would seem to be obligatory, especially for a philosopher, to sacrifice even one's closest personal ties in defense of the truth.”¹

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a) The Notion of Beauty

Even though the word ‘καλός’ itself appears quite frequently in Aristotle's books, beauty does not occupy a comparably central place as it does in Plato, that is, there is no treatise on τὸ καλὸν as one finds it in Plato's philosophy. By distancing himself from his teacher's metaphysical idealism, Aristotle abandons the anagogic sense of beauty. Thus, his use of a phrase such as “the eternally beautiful, and that which is truly and primarily good, and not at one moment good, and at another not good, is too divine and precious to be related to anything else”² no longer refers to the Ideas of Beauty and the Good, but represents a characterization of the first mover. With regard to concrete beauty, the cosmos itself serves as a point of reference for what can be rightly considered beautiful: “For what being could be better than this [the cosmos]? Anything that might be suggested is only a part of it. And everything that is beautiful and well-arranged receives its

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.19, transl. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934) 1096a13-15. Aristotle refers here to his relationship with Plato.

² Aristotle, *Movement of Animals*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.12, transl. A.L. Peck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) 700b33-34.

name from it.”³ In contrast to Plato’s doctrine that the Idea of Beauty defines all other beauty, nature is the cause of beauty for Aristotle – as τέχνη is the cause of health.⁴ Hence, nothing contrary to the order of nature can be called beautiful.⁵ Beauty is stable, permanent and does not change.⁶ The more permanence a thing has, the more beauty it bears for Aristotle. In the unchangeable essences, beauty is, consequently, present in a much higher degree, which is proven by health, strength and prudence.⁷ At this point, man’s lack of permanence is emphasized: “Man is nothing, and nothing human is stable. Strength, size, beauty are a laugh and nothing more; and beauty seems to be beauty only because we see nothing accurately.”⁸ Since Aristotle was a very practical man, he applied this problem to the state’s situation with slaves. Who should become a slave? Some people have the bodies of free men and others the souls. Those who are inferior deserve to be slaves. And if this is true in the case of the body, there is far juster reason for this rule being laid down in the case of the soul. But the beauty of a soul is not as easily seen as the beauty of a body.⁹ Hence, very often, the wrong people are forced into slavery owing to man’s insufficiency to judge rightly. This point, in particular, – the superiority of permanence and the inferiority of becoming – is concordant with Plato’s opinion.

Another major similarity to Plato’s doctrine is developed in his pupils’s attempt to define τὸ καλόν. In doing so, he remains in the Pythagorean tradition and takes up the idea of harmony from *Philebus* and *Hippias Major*, where Plato states that the principle of harmony is present in the universe, of which beauty is an aspect. Thus, Aristotle concentrates on what I defined as intellectual beauty as opposed to sublime beauty. In his opinion, the main forms of beauty can be found whenever order, proportion and a

³ Aristotle, *On the Cosmos*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.3, transl. D. J. Furley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955) 397a5-8.

⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.22, transl. J.H. Freese (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926) 1362a4.

⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.21, transl. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944) 1325b10.

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a16.

⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.20, transl. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933) 1218a22.

⁸ Aristotle, *Protrepticus*. *The Works of Aristotle*, vol.12, transl. David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 10a.

⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b16-1255a1.

definite form are present, such as demonstrated by the mathematical sciences. Although they are not concerned with the concrete embodiments of τὸ καλόν, they “manifest the effects and principles of beauty (...) without naming them.”¹⁰ In his *Poetics*, he touches on the concept of order, adding the factor of magnitude, which recalls Plato’s view of symmetry. The size of a reality must be in proportion to its surroundings:

“In everything that is beautiful, whether it be a living creature or any organism composed of parts, these parts must not only be orderly arranged but must also have a certain magnitude of their own; for beauty consists in magnitude and ordered arrangement. From which it follows that neither would a very small creature be beautiful – for our view of it is almost instantaneous and, therefore, confused – nor a very large one, since being unable to view it all at once, we lose the effect of a single whole.”¹¹

The idea of proportion is further explained in the *Topics*, where it is now definitely said that beauty seems to be a certain symmetry of the elements.¹² Even the fact that there are different elements in a beautiful thing is a presupposition of calling it beautiful, for beauty is usually found in number¹³ and, as a consequence, in the functional subordination of the parts under the whole.¹⁴ Since the three qualities are fundamental causes of existence, beauty has to be treated as a fundamental cause in the same way. The philosopher, consequently, says that mathematics deals with beauty as a cause.¹⁵

In his writings, Aristotle describes several things as καλός. In the *Rhetoric*, he calls victory and honor καλός, because both are desirable even when they are fruitless.¹⁶ In general, that which is esteemed should be

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.17 and 18, transl. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947 and 1961) 1078a34-35.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.23, transl. W.H. Fyfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932) 1450b34-1451a1.

¹² Cf. Aristotle, *Topics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.2, transl. E.S. Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) 116b21.

¹³ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1326a33.

¹⁴ Cf. Glenn W. Most, “Das Schöne. Antike,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol.8, 1346.

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1078b5. Aristotle promises to explain this thesis at a later point but fails to do so.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1367a22.

classed as καλός, since there seems to be a close resemblance between the two.¹⁷ This is exactly the other way around from what Plato taught, namely, considering beauty to be that which is esteemed precisely for its beauty. In detail, things which are possible for a man to possess after death rather than during his lifetime are to be characterized as καλός, for the latter involve more selfishness. Something similar is true for individuality, which should be esteemed more highly, because customs that are peculiar to individual peoples are more worthy of remembrance.¹⁸ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle points out that friendship is καλός apart from the fact that it is necessary to man: “And friendship is not only indispensable as a means, it is also beautiful in itself. We praise those who love their friends, and it is counted a beautiful thing to have many friends; and some people think that a true friend must be a good man.”¹⁹ Furthermore, as in Plato, truth is considered to be beautiful in itself,²⁰ which paves the way for what Aristotle most often associates with the concept of τὸ καλόν, namely, the beauty of virtues, that is, the moral good.

b) *Beauty and Goodness*

From Homer on, the range of meaning of the term ‘τὸ καλόν’ had been extended from basic physical beauty to moral goodness and, with the course of time, to actions and persons in the moral order.²¹ This polyseme has also a traditional moral meaning in Aristotle’s writings, namely, by being characterized as the cause for knowledge, movement²² and the better things in the world. The last point, in particular, bestows upon the beautiful a highly esteemed sense, when one considers that everything transient has the possibility of taking part in either minor or better things.²³ The original qualities of joy and attraction, which can be found in physical beauty, were also associated with morality, so that the philosopher can claim that moral

¹⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1367b11.

¹⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1367a30.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a29-31.

²⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127a29.

²¹ Cf. Joseph Owens, “The ΚΑΛΟΝ in the Aristotelian *Ethics*,” *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. Dominic J. O’Meara (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 261.

²² Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1013a23.

²³ Cf. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals. Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.13, transl. A.L. Peck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942) 731b25-26.

beauty carries in itself a profound and compelling attraction for man. This apparent convergence of beauty and goodness has its origin in the concept of a beautiful soul, since this implies the notion of moral beauty:

“The life of active virtue is essentially pleasant. For the feeling of pleasure is an experience of the soul and a thing gives a man pleasure in regard to which he is described as ‘fond of’ so-and-so: for instance a horse gives pleasure to one fond of horses, a play to one fond of the theater, and similarly just actions are pleasant to the lover of justice, and acts conforming with virtue generally to the lover of virtue. But whereas the mass of mankind take pleasure in things that conflict with one another, because they are not pleasant of their own nature, things pleasant by nature are pleasant to lovers of what is beautiful. So always are actions in conformity with virtue, so that they are pleasant essentially as well as pleasant to lovers of the beautiful. Therefore, their life has no need for pleasure as a sort of ornamental appendage but contains its pleasure in itself. For there is the further consideration that the man who does not enjoy doing beautiful actions is not a good man at all.”²⁴

Hence, beauty and goodness can be attained by man. The *Magna Moralia* further explains how one becomes virtuous, since this is the presupposition of being a lover of virtue. When a certain irrational impulse, which for Aristotle does not constitute a hindrance to virtue but rather something that drags along,²⁵ is confronted with moral beauty, a rational element, as a second instance, has to decide the situation on this basis.²⁶ This control of reason – as a habit – is what constitutes the essence of a virtue, so that Aristotle can call a virtue beautiful: “The beautiful, then, is that which, being desirable in itself, is at the same time worthy of praise, or which, being good, is pleasant because it is good. If this is the beautiful, then virtue must necessarily be beautiful, for, being good, it is worthy of praise.”²⁷ However, the beauty of a virtue does not solely depend on the worthiness of the virtue itself, but also on the worthiness of its beholder. Accordingly, the virtue of men is said to be more beautiful than that of women owing

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a6-17.

²⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia. Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.18, transl. G. Cyril Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958) 1206a8-16.

²⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 1206b9-14.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1366a33-35.

to the worthiness of the former: "Virtues and actions are more beautiful, when they proceed from those who are naturally worthier."²⁸ But virtue is not the only thing that is καλός – everything that comes from virtue has the same quality, as well. Aristotle's notion of the beauty of a virtuous act bears some resemblance to Plato's definition of beauty as symmetry or proportion, as Donald Allan points out: "The effect of their application here is that a virtuous action, which is good in so far as it conduces to a well chosen end, is also fine in so far as it exhibits the beauty of order."²⁹ Joseph Owens interprets the process of a morally good act in the same way:

"A man sees that the right thing to do is what corresponds to himself insofar as he is the standard and measure of truth in moral activity (...) and the origin of his own actions in accord with what is dominant in him (...). In this way, through symmetry and proportion, the attraction of what is right readily parallels the appeal of physical and esthetic beauty and lends itself to expression by one and the same word in Greek, τὸ καλόν."³⁰

As the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows, beauty is also the motive of a virtuous act,³¹ that is, an act is morally good if performed for the sake of τὸ καλόν: "So it is, therefore, with the activity of the courageous man: his courage is beautiful; therefore its end is beauty, for a thing is defined by its end; therefore, the courageous man endures the terrors and dares the deeds that manifest courage, for the sake of that which is beautiful."³² The difficulty of such an act becomes obvious if we take into account the fact that it should be done with pleasure, as stated above. Thus, there is a certain intrinsic obligation in Aristotle's view. It requires the realization of the moral good and is itself the reason for the force owing to its attraction: "Reason does not bid [the brave man] endure things that are extremely painful and destructive, unless they are beautiful."³³ Consequently, a virtuous man would never sacrifice the beauty of a virtuous act, in contrast to all other worldly

²⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1367a20.

²⁹ Donald J. Allan, "The Fine and the Good in the *Eudemian Ethics*," *Untersuchungen zur Eudemischen Ethik*, ed. Paul Moraux and Dieter Harlfinger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971) 65.

³⁰ Owens, 271.

³¹ According to Aristotle, a virtue makes a man choose everything for the sake of some object. Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1230a29.

³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115b21-24. Actually, τὸ καλόν is the goal of every act.

³³ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1229a9.

goods, which he is ready to surrender or forgo.³⁴ Despite its being its own motive, τὸ καλόν, in the moral sense, has positive effects. It creates true goodwill, which springs up when one person thinks another beautiful or brave.³⁵ Moreover, if all men vied with each other in moral beauty and strove to perform the most beautiful deeds, the common welfare would be fully realized.³⁶ Finally, it ranks among the necessary components constituting happiness,³⁷ the ultimate goal of life.

The moral meaning of τὸ καλόν is evidently very central to Aristotle’s writings. Hence, it is not surprising that he emphasizes the close connection between beauty and goodness in his frequent use of the term ‘καλοκαγαθία,’ the ideal of moral perfection: “Καλοκαγαθία is virtue perfected.”³⁸ In order for someone to have this virtue, he has to find beauty par excellence to be beautiful and the ultimate goodness to be good.³⁹ There is, however, a difference in the essence of being good and having the virtue of καλοκαγαθία:

“For all goods have ends that are desirable in and for themselves. Of these, all those are beautiful which are laudable as existing for their own sakes, for these are the ends which are both the motives of laudable actions and laudable themselves – justice itself and its actions, and temperate actions, for temperance also is laudable; but health is not laudable, for its effect is not, nor is vigorous action laudable, for strength is not – these things are good but they are not laudable.”⁴⁰

The philosopher says that, apart from the possession of the goods, one must necessarily possess the beautiful values par excellence as well as actualize them constantly in one’s behavior for their sake in order to have the virtue. For he who thinks that one ought to possess the virtues for the sake of external goods does beautiful things only by accident.⁴¹ What he means by beautiful values is, first of all, the possession of virtues and, secondly, the acts that emanate from them: “For things are beautiful, when that for which men do them and choose them is beautiful, therefore to him who has

³⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a20-35.

³⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1167a20.

³⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a7-9.

³⁷ Defined as “well-being combined with virtue.” Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1360b14.

³⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1249a16.

³⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 1207b31-32.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1248b18-24.

⁴¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1249a10-15.

the virtue of καλοκαγαθία things good by nature are beautiful.”⁴² Since it is virtue perfected, it is not easy for man to attain this habit. His character must be absolutely and perfectly developed.⁴³

In spite of their close connection, beauty and goodness are considered distinct from one another, because it is always in actions that goodness is present, whereas beauty is also in immovable things, for example in mathematics, which describe and manifest these qualities in the highest degree.⁴⁴ On the other hand, beauty is also seen as good owing to the fact that pleasure is a good: “Pleasure also must be a good; for all living creatures naturally desire it. Hence it follows that both agreeable and beautiful things must be good; for the former produce pleasure, while among beautiful things some are pleasant and others are desirable in themselves.”⁴⁵ The term ‘good’ seems to be a polysemous word having many meanings, one of which is beautiful.⁴⁶

Aristotle’s criticism of Plato’s philosophy comes to its climax in his doctrine on goodness. Even though the former also differentiates between a practical and an unchangeable good, he indicates that it is wrongheaded and unnatural to begin with the identification of the absolute Good so as to demonstrate that moral virtues are goods⁴⁷ – something that “no sensible person denies,”⁴⁸ as Allan interprets the philosopher’s criticism. The sole problem here lies in the fact that Aristotle obviously misunderstands his teacher. For Plato, the Good itself is the transcendent cause of everything else. Aristotle, however, interprets the Platonic Good as the first element in a chain – common to the other elements with respect to its goodness, but, at the same time, separate from them owing to its absoluteness – and criticizes this philosophy – or, as one should rather say, his own interpretation of it:

⁴² Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1249a5-6.

⁴³ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124a3.

⁴⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1078a31-32.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1362b6-9.

⁴⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1218b4.

⁴⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1218a17-19: “At present it is from things not admitted to possess goodness that they prove the things admitted to be good, for instance, they prove from numbers that justice and health are good, because they are arrangements and numbers – on the assumption that goodness is a property of numbers and monads because the absolute good is unity.”

⁴⁸ Allan, 65.

“Yet, a thing that is white for days is no more white than a thing that is white for one day, so that the good is no more good by being eternal.”⁴⁹ For his part, he suggests starting from things admitted to be good – for instance health, strength, sobriety of mind – and proving that beauty is present even more in the unchanging.⁵⁰ In his eyes, one ought to study this matter carefully, and not make an unreasoned assumption about anything – as he thinks the Platonists do – as it is not easy to attain certainty even with the aid of reason.⁵¹ Their procedure and his attempt to expose its problems indicate that the good taken as absolute and separate, as the first of goods and by its presence the cause of the being good of the other goods, does not exist.⁵² In contrast to this, he states that the absolute good we are looking for is the end of the goods practicable for man and “not the form of good, nor yet the good as universal, for the form is unchangeable and impracticable, and the universal good though changeable is not practicable.”⁵³ In the *Magna Moralia*, Plato is, consequently, criticized for having included the question of virtues at all in his ontological doctrine on goodness.⁵⁴ The knowledge of a good as such bears no relation to the philosophy of human practice, nor would such a separate and unique Idea be practicable for nor attainable by man.⁵⁵

c) *The Functional Aspect*

In the *Rhetoric*, function is proven to be the principle not only of artistic but also of personal beauty:

“Beauty varies with each age. In a young man, it consists in possessing a body capable of enduring all efforts, either of the racecourse or of bodily strength, while he himself is pleasant to look upon and a sheer delight.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1218a13-14.

⁵⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1218a20-21.

⁵¹ Gadamer shows that for Plato the knowledge of the absolute Good was also a special and unique sort of knowledge beyond science, “which is different from the structure of knowledge of the *techne* in its deduction from given presuppositions, but a justification of the highest *telos* in the sense of a dialectical pervasion of that which Hegel calls the ‘concrete-general.’” Gadamer, *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, 80.

⁵² Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1218a1-15.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1218b6-8.

⁵⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 1182a25-29.

⁵⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096b33-34.

This is why the athletes in the pentathlon are most beautiful, because they are naturally adapted for bodily exertion and for swiftness of foot. In a man who has reached his prime, beauty consists in being naturally adapted for the toils of war, in being pleasant to look upon and at the same time awe-inspiring. In an old man, beauty consists in being naturally adapted to contend with unavoidable labors and in not causing annoyance to others, thanks to the absence of the disagreeable accompaniments of old age.”⁵⁶

This is the result of an attempt to assure the successful functioning of the state, where each person should have a task suitable to his character and bodily configuration. Thus, the intention of nature is to make the bodies of, for example, freemen and slaves different: the latter strong for necessary service, the former erect and unserviceable for such occupations, but serviceable for a life of citizenship. Not only a particular age but also a particular social status carries with itself the necessary consideration of function.⁵⁷ This aspect evokes the Socratic suggestion that beauty has to be measured with respect to its adequacy for the purpose it has to serve. This is the notion of *πρεπόντως*, which is rejected as the definition of the nature of *τὸ καλὸν* – though not as a possible quality of it – in Plato’s *Hippias Major*.⁵⁸

Interestingly, Aristotle also deals with the question of animals in this context. With regard to them, one can speak of beauty when their different parts and possibilities correspond to their final cause.⁵⁹ Moreover, this aspect can be found in an area where it is most unexpected, namely, in friendship: The virtuous man loves his friend more than himself with regard to what is useful, whereas he loves himself mainly where it is a question of the morally beautiful.⁶⁰ The philosopher denies that this is self-love, but considers it to be love of the morally beautiful. This is right as a comment on the latter part of his quote. Yet, he seems to overlook the fact that loving one’s friend

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1361b7-15.

⁵⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b26-30.

⁵⁸ Consequently, I would not call the notion of appropriateness the Socratic view of what beauty is – as Hauskeller does – especially, since Xenophon’s Socrates is of the same opinion as the Platonic Socrates in this question. Cf. Hauskeller, 55.

⁵⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *The Parts of Animals. Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.12, transl. A.L. Peck, 645a23-26.

⁶⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 1212b14-16.

because he can be useful to one is love of oneself and a misuse of the other as a means to one’s own ends. Although this love refers to a readiness to surrender useful goods in favor of the friend, a certain factor must be guaranteed, namely, that by doing so he acquires the possession of moral beauty. At another point, however, he says that someone is not selfish if he does not surrender the morally beautiful because of someone else, except in a case where a benefit or something pleasant is concerned.⁶¹ This clearly shows how highly Aristotle esteems the virtuous life. The beneficial has to be subordinated. Hence, he, of course, argues that it is not one of the highest goals in human life, because it has several disadvantages even in comparison with τὸ καλόν: Beauty is long-lived, but its utility to the recipient passes away; and whereas the memory of beautiful things is pleasant, that of useful ones is hardly so at all.⁶² The useful has no natural or ethical priority and is only sometimes preferred by man: “Most men wish what is beautiful but choose what is profitable; and while it is noble to render a service not with an eye to receiving one in return, it is profitable to receive one.”⁶³ Or: “For the benefactor there is an element of beauty in the act, and so he feels pleased with the person who is its object; but there is nothing beautiful for the recipient of the benefit in his relation to his benefactor: at most, it is profitable.”⁶⁴

d) *Pleasure and Desire*

For Aristotle, desire is a natural movement of the soul.⁶⁵ The latter consists of a rational part with the capacity for theoretical contemplation and practical decisions, and of an irrational element rooted in the vegetative and appetitive dispositions. Pleasure and desire are to be found in the irrational faculty of every human being:

“There are three things that are the motives of choice and three that are the motives of avoidance; namely, the beautiful, the expedient, and the pleasant, and their opposites, the base, the harmful, and the painful. Now in respect of all these the good man is likely to go right and the bad to go wrong, but especially in respect of pleasure; for pleasure is common

⁶¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 1212b3-5.

⁶² Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a16-17.

⁶³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1162b34-1163a1.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a9-19.

⁶⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, 70b12.

to man with the lower animals, and also it is a concomitant of all the objects of choice, since both the beautiful and the expedient appear to us pleasant.”⁶⁶

Thus, beauty is a motive which is intensified by the pleasure one experiences or hopes to experience, and which serves as a second motive. Yet, as stated above, in most people, several pleasures are at war with one another whenever the objects of choice are not by nature pleasurable, as is the case with acts in conformity with virtue.⁶⁷ A life controlled by reason is central.

The same is true for desire. Its elements in the soul can obey reason. Aristotle even says that “desire is the result of opinion rather than opinion that of desire.”⁶⁸ It is generated by means of perception, imagination or conception and is transformed into a rational wish, so long as the object of desire is judged by correct reasoning.⁶⁹ Man’s appetitive part has to be ruled by that which expresses his inward thought, namely, the λόγος, “just as a boy should live in obedience to his tutor.”⁷⁰ Aristotle here takes up the notion of harmony, and it resembles Plato’s doctrine. For in the temperate man, desire must be in harmony with reason in order to establish a connection with beauty, since the aim of both temperance and the λόγος is something beautiful. As soon as one has attained this harmony, one can try to build up morally good habits. The result of such a virtuous life is then an intensification of the delight that the mind takes in reasoned processes.⁷¹ In contrast to this, the desire for pleasure, for example, is insatiable and indiscriminating in an irrational being.⁷² At this point, it also becomes clear that virtue, that is, a habitual life controlled by reason for the sake of τὸ καλόν, defines the way in which man is supposed to live, because it is possible for him to live rationally. In contrast to human beings, animals are not affected to any significant degree by the mere sight of beautiful objects.⁷³ With this doctrine, Aristotle distances himself from

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b30-1105a1.

⁶⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a12-13.

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a27.

⁶⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Movement of Animals*, 701a35-36.

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1119b13.

⁷¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a14-15.

⁷² Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1119b8.

⁷³ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1231a1. This is in accordance with Schiller’s description of human nature. Beauty is for him a guarantee of the communicableness of nature and

his teacher, because there is no reference corresponding to Plato’s association of beauty with love, and through love with divine madness. The irrational impulse can never exist on its own as a means to a productive effect.⁷⁴

That which realizes the rational consideration in man is the will, and the will is the actual power that has beauty as its aim. For the object of the will is what *is* beautiful; the object of desire is only what *appears* to be beautiful,⁷⁵ although a desirous person might not be conscious of the pseudo-beautiful target of his desire. In this context, Aristotle asks himself the question of why desire strives for the beautiful at all. His hypothesis is that beauty must be connected more with lust than with anything else. But he denies this proposition at once, claiming that “not every beauty is pleasant, nor are pleasure and beauty equally pleasant to all men; for instance, one finds eating and drinking more pleasant, another sexual indulgence.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, we experience beauty as such even if we do not desire it. Hellmut Flashar suggests that the philosopher wants to differentiate between ‘beauty itself’ and ‘beauty for a specific purpose.’ When one does not feel desire, beauty itself might appear to be the most beautiful object, but if desire arises, that which can satisfy one’s desire is considered the most beautiful thing.⁷⁷

In art, the field of pleasure and desire loses its ambivalence, since a moral evaluation does not take place: “For men who delight in the pleasures of

freedom. Cf. Friedrich Schiller, “25. Brief,” *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen. Werke in drei Bänden*, vol.2, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966) 509. Man feels free in the face of beauty, because sensuous appetites harmonize with the law of reason. Cf. Friedrich Schiller, *Über das Erhabene. Werke in drei Bänden*, vol.2, 611.

⁷⁴ The same is partly true in the case of knowledge, as Warry suggests. For Aristotle, an irrational wonder can serve as an impulse towards knowledge, because one is aware of one’s own ignorance. In Plato’s eyes, however, a philosopher is identified with the irrational Eros. On the other hand, this identification can be considered a similarity between the two philosophers, since philosophizing is, of course, a rational act as well. Cf. Warry, 94-96.

⁷⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a28.

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *Physical Problems. Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.15 and 16, transl. W.S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953 and 1957) 896b13-16.

⁷⁷ Cf. Hellmut Flashar, commentary, *Problemata Physica*, by Aristoteles, transl. Hellmut Flashar, ed. Ernst Grumach (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962) 528.

the eye, in colors, forms and paintings, are not termed either temperate or profligate.”⁷⁸

e) Art

The Aristotelian concept of art is quite different from Plato's. While the latter rejects it owing to its distance from the truth of the Idea, Aristotle asserts the opposite. For him, art has a moral usefulness, since it does not picture nature, but an ideal. Thus, as Hauskeller concludes, the philosopher seems to consider the ideal more perfectly present in art than in nature.⁷⁹ Art is the perfection of the insufficiencies of nature. On the other hand, Warry suggests that truth is not an ultimate criterion in art for Aristotle.⁸⁰ The artist selects from a variety of models to form the most beautiful whole. This means that beauty is a legitimate consideration in art, a quality which can be found both in pieces of art and in natural objects in equal measure. But, what is more, a severe technicization of beauty takes place, since different parts have to be formed into a beautiful whole.⁸¹ The *Poetics*, for example, represent a technical guide instructing the reader on how to produce beautiful poetry. This also results in a “decrease in demands on quality,”⁸² for a poetic inspiration is correlated to personal natural talent: “Poetry needs either a sympathetic nature or a madman, the former being impressionable and the latter inspired.”⁸³

Aristotle notices an effect of art which can be rightly called *κάθαρσις*:

“Under the influence of sacred music we see these people, when they use tunes that violently arouse the soul, being thrown into a state as if they had received medicinal treatment and taken a purge; the same experience then must come also to the compassionate and the timid and the other emotional people generally in such degree as befalls each individual of these classes, and all must undergo a purgation and a pleasant feeling of

⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1118a3.

⁷⁹ Cf. Hauskeller, 55; Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b4-7.

⁸⁰ Cf. Warry, 89.

⁸¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447a10-11.

⁸² Most, 1346.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1455a32-34.

relief; and similarly also the purgative melodies afford harmless delight to people.”⁸⁴

In this sense, Aristotle regards beauty after all as being concerned with an ecstasy similar to that mentioned by Plato – although the former does not go so far as to call it a madness bestowed by the gods. Mark Packer proposes, or as he himself formulates it, dares to propose – as a hypothesis – that *κάθαρσις* serves as the mediating function of transforming an aesthetic judgment into practical wisdom.⁸⁵ This view is not as far-fetched as he presumes it to be, since the philosopher obviously sees a connection between art, morality and *κάθαρσις*, namely, in the form of the moral impact of art: “We say that music ought to be employed not for the purpose of one benefit that it confers but on account of several, for it serves the purpose both of education and of purgation.”⁸⁶

f) Summary

In his attempt to distance himself from Plato’s doctrine of Ideas, Aristotle chooses nature as a point of reference with regard to that which can be called beautiful. Hence, the concept of beauty is for him not about any Idea or ideal, but about a good attainable and creatable by man. The factors implying the existence of beauty are order, proportion and a definite form, all of which emphasize that beauty is concerned with the generating of an adequate whole. Firstly, this is true for the moral sphere: Different powers in man must harmonize with one another and be ruled by reason so that man can be described as a beautiful whole, thus setting the basis for his happiness. His pleasures and desire must be in accordance with this virtuous whole, and the more virtuous he is, the stronger they in fact become. The philosopher considers *καλοκἀγαθία* the highest virtue, since the most beautiful goods are laudable and chosen for their own sake. Secondly, the concept of the beautiful whole can be found in art. The artist tries to create a piece of art that manifests a beautiful whole as well as possible. The degree of its beauty can, at times, even surpass the beauty of nature.

⁸⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1342a8-17.

⁸⁵ Cf. Mark Packer, “The Conditions of Aesthetic Feeling in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24,2, Spring (1984): 146.

⁸⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341b35-37.

2. Plotinus – The Return Inwards

“So let us flee to the beloved home.”⁸⁷

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a) *The Notion of Beauty*

In his early book on beauty, Plotinus rejects the Stoic definition of beauty, namely, that being beautiful means being symmetrical, because then there would be only compound beauty and no uncomplex one. This would mean that only a reality as a whole could be beautiful, but not parts of it. According to the Neoplatonist, a whole cannot consist of ugly elements, but beauty has to pervade all parts of the whole in order to make the whole beautiful. Furthermore, splendor, such as that of colors and gold, would not be included in such a concept of beauty. For him, symmetry can be beautiful, but in this case only through something else. In this respect, he goes further than necessary, not only complaining that splendor as a traditional manifestation of beauty is missing in the definition of beauty as symmetry, but also rejecting symmetry as a manifestation at all. It can be an indicator of beauty, but it is not its essence. What kind of definition does he then approve of, taking into account the fact that he is concerned with the kind of symmetry to be found in actions, laws, knowledge, science and virtues?⁸⁸

Plotinus transforms the Platonic doctrine of beauty by incorporating Aristotelian concepts. Hauskeller, for example, draws attention to Plato's static dualism in his ontology, which is replaced with a more dynamic model inspired by the Aristotelian notion of development. Accordingly, Plotinus constructs a picture in which all diversity emanates from the ultimate One.⁸⁹ This first element, that is, the One and the Good, is sometimes called either the first Beautiful or the source and ultimate ground of

⁸⁷ Plotinus, *Enneades*, 3 vols., ed. Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1:1951; 2:1959; 3:1973) I 6.8.16. Plotinus took this quote from the *Ilias* (cf. Homer, *Ilias*, ed. T.W. Allen [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931] 2, 14; 9, 27) though he actually makes a reference to the *Odyssey*.

⁸⁸ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.1.21-54. The Stoics go so far as to claim that without unity, which is the principle of symmetry, existence itself could not be maintained. Cf. Steel, 13.

⁸⁹ Cf. Hauskeller, 56. With regard to my view on the question of the existence of a dualism in Plato see p. 61.

beauty.⁹⁰ His final conclusion that the One is hyper-beautiful, as it is also hyper-being, implies that there is no contradiction in these terms. Klaus Kremer coins the terms “non-beautiful beauty” and “non-being being” for the One in order to express its peculiar character, such as the coincidence of negative and positive elements in it.⁹¹ With the non-beautiful Beauty or simply the Hyper-Beautiful as the ultimate ground for every beauty, it can be said that earthly beauty, consequently, exists because of the upper sphere,⁹² manifesting the indivisible in plurality.⁹³ Beauty is manifold in the world: present in the face, in hearing, and in actions.⁹⁴ It can be found in the arts, sciences and virtues.⁹⁵ When Plotinus says that beauty is based on the sovereignty of the concept of the One over the parts he refers to Plato’s concept of formal beauty.⁹⁶ Its forming character can, for example, provide a reality with order and unity as the basis for beauty.⁹⁷ Hence, ‘beautiful’ is a relative quality depending on a comparison with the One,⁹⁸ which can be used as a criterion to judge the beauty of a reality, thus achieving an evaluation in accordance with truth.⁹⁹ Man has the ability to judge because the Idea is present in him and he recollects it. This is quite similar to Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, where the Idea is considered the ultimate objective principle for the soul, providing man with truth, and causing unity and harmony. Furthermore, this ordering principle is transferred to habits and behavior: “A reasonable life in accordance with truth means dignity and beauty.”¹⁰⁰ Since reason characterizes man as human, beauty is

⁹⁰ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.9.39; 41; 43.

⁹¹ Cf. Klaus Kremer, *Die neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966) 29. Whenever man says something about the One, he does not touch its quiddity, but he can only express what the One means for man. Cf. Plotinus, VI 9.3.49-51.

⁹² Cf. Plotinus, II 9.17.26.

⁹³ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.3.10.

⁹⁴ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.1.1-6.

⁹⁵ Cf. Plotinus, I 3.2.9. He considers the beauty of intellectual activities to be higher than sensuous beauty. Cf. Plotinus, I 6.4.1-9.

⁹⁶ Cf. Plotinus, VI 9.1.15.

⁹⁷ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.2.20-21. He says that where created things have a stable hierarchical order, they are beautiful. Cf. Plotinus, IV 3.10.27.

⁹⁸ Cf. Plotinus, VI 3.11.26.

⁹⁹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.3.4-5.

¹⁰⁰ Plotinus, VI 6.18.23.

nothing foreign to him. Rather, it is quite to the contrary: “Beauty has to be understood as an integrative element in us: it shines through everything,”¹⁰¹ as Werner Beierwaltes formulates it. He even suggests that it is identical with the quality of reflexive thinking shining in every instance and towards the whole.

Despite this ubiquitous presence and its character as a reference towards perfection, earthly beauty lacks perfection because its objects are in a mixture – in contrast to the divine world.¹⁰² In the sphere of the gods, where Truth is,¹⁰³ where there is being instead of becoming,¹⁰⁴ where there is unity¹⁰⁵ because everybody is everything,¹⁰⁶ Beauty is beautiful, since it does not tarry in the non-beautiful.¹⁰⁷ For “god is pure Being and pure Beauty.”¹⁰⁸ According to Plotinus, “he would also lack being, if he lacked beauty.”¹⁰⁹ Hence, being seems to be identical with beauty: “Τὰ ὄντα ἡ καλλοσύνη ἐστίν.”¹¹⁰ It is present in every concrete reality, but hidden. One sees the actual thing unconsciously in it. Beauty is beingness itself – in contrast to goodness, which is beyond being.¹¹¹ The philosopher underscores this by specifying what he means by being, namely, “τὰ ὄντως ὄντα.”¹¹² Every actual being is beautiful precisely under the aspect of its beingness. Plotinus, therefore, concludes that beauty is the unity of being and appearance.¹¹³

¹⁰¹ Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus*, 25. He draws attention to the metaphor of “light” and to the definition of beauty as light. Cf. Plotinus, I 6.3.24; 5.39; III 5.9.9.

¹⁰² Cf. Plotinus, V 8.7.18; Plato, *Philebus*, 33b, where the reason for the perfection of the divine sphere is also ascribed to its lack of mixture. However, Plato emphasizes that this should not serve as an ideal for human life, because it is divine and, therefore, too much for man.

¹⁰³ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.4.1.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.4.3.

¹⁰⁵ “Even the matter of the spirit is beautiful, because it is spiritual and one.” Plotinus, V 1.3.23.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.4.6-7. God is defined as “the One who is, however, all of them.” Plotinus, V 8.9.15.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.4.14.

¹⁰⁸ Plotinus, V 8.9.36.

¹⁰⁹ Plotinus, V 8.9.39.

¹¹⁰ Plotinus, I 6.6.22.

¹¹¹ Cf. Plotinus, VI 2.18.5.

¹¹² Plotinus, I 6.5.18-19. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247e.

That earthly beauty does not possess this degree of purity becomes clear in Plotinus' varying evaluation of it. In his eyes, Beauty, as it is, would never have been able to descend into the mud of the body, to get dirty and thereby to annihilate itself. This surpasses Plato in the rejection of the sensuous world to a high degree. After all, Plotinus' source called the world a "perceptible god."¹¹⁴ But Plotinus knows no solidarity with the world. To his eye's, "those who do not think of the beauty in this world exclusively while begetting but worship the beauty of the other world according to their memory of it do not disregard the present beauty, for it is a creature and a tool of the beauty of the other world."¹¹⁵ It remains uncertain how far Hauskeller's traditionally Platonic interpretation of this approach is true, namely, that sensuous beauty refers to the beauty of the Ideas and is thus filled with value, so that Plotinus must be seen in opposition to the Gnostic doctrine of the condemnation of sensuality.¹¹⁶ For Plotinus' other view of earthly beauty is that "a more beautiful copy of the upper world than the cosmos is not imaginable."¹¹⁷ Of course, this does not actually say anything about the real degree and value of earthly beauty. Be that as it may, the contrast between divine and earthly beauty is mirrored in the pair of inner and outer beauty. Accordingly, physicality is not beautiful in itself, but can take part in beauty through the soul, so that this soul-given beauty enraptures even the souls.¹¹⁸ Thus, if the external section is beautiful, it is always because inner beauty is predominate.¹¹⁹ And yet, we pay attention only to the outer region, although it is something internal that moves, for example, seeing right thinking in somebody.¹²⁰ Consequently, a phenomenon such as an erotic impulse is connected with beauty not because of its sensuous implication, but in the sense that it is either given by nature or in accordance with the nature of man.¹²¹ For it is his nature that he is guided by reason, that is, by an inner beauty.

¹¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 92c. Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.31.25-27.

¹¹⁵ Plotinus, III 5.1.59-62.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Hauskeller, 57.

¹¹⁷ Plotinus, II 9.4.26. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 29a.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Plotinus, II 9.17.20-21.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Plotinus, II 9.17.41.

¹²⁰ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.2.33-42.

¹²¹ Cf. Plotinus, III 5.7.40.

b) *The One as the Cause of Beauty*

The cosmos is the most perfect beauty existing in the sphere of sensuousness. It is the revelation of Goodness fulfilled in the spiritual realm, of its power and benevolence.¹²² But how can there be a similarity between beautiful objects in this world and those of the other world? Plotinus finds the answer in the transcendent One (τὸ ἕν), the productive power of everything.¹²³ Although it is beyond being, it is nevertheless pure actuality¹²⁴ as well as the source of a gradual outpouring¹²⁵ of being. First of all, it flows to the spirit (ὁ νοῦς), which passes it on to the cosmic soul (ἡ ψυχή).¹²⁶ The latter builds up a connection with individual souls, and they give being to bodies. This transmission of being is accompanied by the generation of beauty. According to Kremer's interpretation of Plotinus, this is because beauty does not appear before the existence of being. Owing to this coincidence, beauty is "neither a subjective liking nor a mere form, but identical with actual being. Since actual being exists in its original form exclusively in being or νοῦς, beauty and being coincide here."¹²⁷ An actual reality is

¹²² Cf. Plotinus, IV 8.6.24-26.

¹²³ Cf. Plotinus, III 8.10.

¹²⁴ Cf. Plotinus, VI 8.16.28; 30; 31; 35; VI 7.37.10.

¹²⁵ This is, firstly, due to the fact that the spirit is in the vestibule of the Good (cf. Plotinus, V 9.2.26) and, secondly, a result of the philosophical principle that the Good streams out of itself. Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1972) 214. Rein Ferweda emphasizes that this outpouring must not be misinterpreted as an emanation – as it frequently is – in the sense that after it, the One is in all things coming after it and not itself anymore. For Plotinus wants to express that the One does not lose anything by the outflow and that it is above everything else and not in it. Consequently, Ferweda concludes that we do not see the One through the things, but that when we see it, we see it along with the things coming after it. Cf. Rein Ferweda, "Translating Plotinus," *The Neoplatonic Tradition. Jewish, Christian and Islamic Themes*, 31-33.

¹²⁶ Ferweda draws attention to the articles of these main tenets. The neuter article adjoined to the One conveys the idea of its being ungraspable and uncategorizable. Cf. Ferweda, 27. Bernard McGinn notes that the choice of these three hypostases is influenced by different philosophical trends. The concept of the One is Platonic, while the νοῦς, as the one-many, is a combination of Aristotelian and Middleplatonian philosophy. The cosmic soul, finally, as the one and many, is influenced by Platonism and the Stoa. Cf. Bernard McGinn, *Die Mystik im Abendland I: Ursprünge* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994) 80.

¹²⁷ Kremer, 169-170. He even goes so far as to suggest in the tradition of Schelling that "since the Plotinic being is at the same time the place of truth, (...) there can be no beauty without truth and no truth without beauty."

beautiful precisely when its cause, that is, the νοῦς or, on a more abstract level, the One is included in it.¹²⁸ This is the case when the νοῦς generates the first rational form of beauty in the soul. It is the first rational form of beauty, since the νοῦς is formless and beautiful by itself, for only that which partakes of Beauty is formed.¹²⁹ Plotinus describes this Beauty as “residing in unsophisticated light and pure brilliance, containing the nature of existing things in itself.”¹³⁰ It is the Beauty beyond every beauty,¹³¹ the true Beauty: ἡ καλλονή, the Hyper-Beauty,¹³² the archetypical beginning and the goal.¹³³ Beierwaltes refers to the “absolute identity of the νοῦς with itself, the dynamic identity of its Ideas with itself”¹³⁴ as the constitutor of its beauty. The Ideas are identical with the divine λόγος, a specific form of reason or thinking.¹³⁵ This concept originates from the Platonic *Timaeus*: Matter is chaos, the “purely possible,”¹³⁶ as Beierwaltes expresses it, which is still without order and, consequently, without form. This can only be changed by the νοῦς as the intelligible principle, which is incorporated by matter and which then creates form and order. To put it into Beierwaltes’ words, the λόγος has to be seen not as the outer form but as a reasonable inner structuring principle, the function of which in its confrontation with beauty is “to put the appearing diversity together and ascribe it to the internal indivisibility.”¹³⁷ The soul, which receives beauty from the νοῦς, is responsible for the rational form of beauty in nature, which is itself the archetype for corporeal beauty.¹³⁸ As mentioned above, the beauty of bodies comes from

¹²⁸ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.3.9.

¹²⁹ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.32.38-39.

¹³⁰ Plotinus, III 8.11.27-29.

¹³¹ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.32.29-30.

¹³² Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.33.22. Balthasar emphasizes that “these words are not, as they are among later Neoplatonists, arbitrarily useable escalations, but economically used and well-considered statements forming the bearing basis of Plotinic aesthetics.” Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 274. He interprets hyper-beauty as glory (Herrlichkeit). Cf. *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 275.

¹³³ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.32.38.

¹³⁴ Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus*, 25.

¹³⁵ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.2.15.

¹³⁶ Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus*, 21.

¹³⁷ Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus*, 22.

¹³⁸ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.3.1-10.

outside: it is the form of the bodies, beautiful as a result of a partaking (“μεθεῖξει”) of the Idea.¹³⁹ The soul has formed the body, but, as is the case with the body, the former is not beautiful by itself, since there are souls which are unreasonable and ugly. For the beauty of the soul is based on cognition bestowed by the νοῦς.¹⁴⁰

The process of the generation of beauty, as it has just been presented, indicates that it is connected with the concept of form. There is a dualism of form and matter in reality: While the latter is hidden, unshaped, inexplicable and unlimited, the former is shaping, differentiating and “the principle of revelation,”¹⁴¹ as Ernesto Grassi interprets it. Plotinus calls those things beautiful that participate in the rational form – everything without a form (“μορφῆ”) is predestined to attain a form – which originates from the divine forming power (“θείου λόγου”),¹⁴² causing order and unity, that is, the basis for beauty.¹⁴³ The divine forming power is platonically related to the Ideas in the sense that there is a partaking of sensuous appearances in them, but Plotinus surpasses his predecessor and interprets him in the tradition of Aristotle: The participation is considered to be an overpowering of matter by a form.¹⁴⁴ Beauty can then be measured by evaluating to what extent matter is infused with the form,¹⁴⁵ a task which should be simple for man, since the beautiful form is that “which is enthroned shining through more than any other form.”¹⁴⁶

Beauty and being cannot originate in something bad or indifferent. Thus, the Good is the cause of everything,¹⁴⁷ including the beauty of the Ideas.¹⁴⁸ It is beyond being and unmixed, for the creating principle is better than that

¹³⁹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.2.12-13.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Plotinus, V 9.2.13-23. He is of the opinion that the gods are beautiful, because the νοῦς has an effective power in them to a very high degree. Moreover, he suggests that they are gods even owing to their spirit. Cf. Plotinus, V 8.3.20-23.

¹⁴¹ Ernesto Grassi, *Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike* (Köln: DuMont, 1962) 168.

¹⁴² Plotinus, I 6.2.13-15.

¹⁴³ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.2.20-21.

¹⁴⁴ According to Aristotle, matter without a form is even considered to be unrecognizable. Cf. Weizsäcker, 73, where the relation of matter to form in Platonism and Aristotelism is described in detail.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Hauskeller, 56.

¹⁴⁶ Plotinus, I 6.3.13.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.13.35-38.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.18.7.

which is created, because it is more perfect.¹⁴⁹ What underscores this superiority is the fact that the Good, which gives beauty to all things, does not change by doing so.¹⁵⁰ This implies that beauty as a concept is not independent, but in need of the One and the Good owing to the fact that it has come into being.¹⁵¹ As a consequence, it cannot be the utmost principle of striving. Plotinus concludes that “the striving for the Good is more original and always with us unconsciously, for the Good is more original and before the Beautiful.”¹⁵² The ugly or evil, on the other hand, is that which is not truly being.¹⁵³

c) Art

Plotinus’ attitude towards art is very ambivalent. On the one hand, he confirms with Plato that art is a copy. In that sense, pieces of art are judged to be weak and turbid copies without value owing to their low status in the hierarchy of truth.¹⁵⁴ With regard to beauty, Plotinus says, for example, that a not so beautiful man who is alive is more beautiful than a beautiful man who is presented in a picture.¹⁵⁵ However, art is not really considered a process of simply copying natural products, but it represents an imitation of nature’s way of producing. On the other hand, the philosopher can see advantages of being by nature a copy, which go beyond or, as one can also say, which go in the opposite direction of what Plato mentions on the topic of ἡ τέχνη. For Plotinus allows art to have the same function which Plato exclusively ascribes to the sensuous world in general. Accordingly, he who sees a good copy of a beautiful face advances to the face itself. In reaction to beauties in the sensuous sphere, including art, as well as to the harmony and ordered structure of the cosmos, one should become contemplative and “seized by awe about how wonderful things have emanated from something

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.13.35-38.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.26-27.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.12.24.

¹⁵² Plotinus, V 5.12.15-18.

¹⁵³ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.23.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Plotinus, IV 3.10.17-19.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.22.30-31.

wonderful.”¹⁵⁶ Hence, art can be said to be in the possession of beauty.¹⁵⁷ Yet, a piece of art is not beautiful in itself, but only as a result of the Idea expressed in art. The artist tries to transform matter into an ideal, that is, into something that represents the Idea in its most perfect and beautiful form. Originally, this Idea was not in matter, but in the cogitating artist as a result of his partaking of art. Art, therefore, overcomes the plurality of matter and brings it to the unity of the Idea. As a consequence, the beauty in art in general is higher than that in a particular piece of art, because the more beauty expands in matter, the more powerless it becomes, for it does not remain itself in matter – in contrast to the beauty remaining in the One. Furthermore, the Neoplatonist adds that everything that effects something must be superior to that which it effects.¹⁵⁸ To conclude, he offers three reasons why art should not be seen as inferior because of its copying character: Firstly, copying can be found in nature as well. Secondly, what takes place in art is not mere copying, but an ascent to the rational forms (τοὺς λόγους), virtually freeing art from nature. Finally, art is able to compensate for natural defects.¹⁵⁹ Grassi calls this a “refinement of nature”: A stone is naturally beautiful, but receives a new form through the artist, which represents the “gestalt of a higher reality.” He interprets Plotinus’ concept of art as an “ontological act of creation,” since Ideas receive a gestalt. But to my mind, he goes too far in calling this a process where “non-being becomes being.”¹⁶⁰ Ideas have definitely more reality and, thus, more being than their concrete images in art, which do not come into existence through a creation of matter and form, but rather through a redesigning of the latter.

d) *The Hyper-Beautiful Good*

In Plotinus’ eyes, the principle of the Good is the first one, having a supreme position over everything else. There is nothing beyond the Good,¹⁶¹ except for the One, since the latter is not really the Good per se, but “the

¹⁵⁶ Plotinus, II 9.16.48-54.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.1.38.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.11-30.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.32-37; Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b4-7.

¹⁶⁰ Grassi, 170.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.22.20.

Hyper-Good, which is not good for itself, but only for other things.”¹⁶² Hence, Hauskeller suggests that the good is not a positive definition of the One, but a designation of that after which the soul strives, namely, its highest good.¹⁶³ Plotinus advances, in fact, a little bit further. For him, the good is that after which not only the souls but all beings strive, because it is their primordial cause, that is, the source and power of being.¹⁶⁴ Putnam reinterprets this by claiming that it must be chiefly a final cause in order to avoid being driven to act.¹⁶⁵ This concept would partly identify the Plotinic Good with the Aristotelian first mover, except for the fact that it is also the source of emanation. Whether this is an active process or not remains unclear, especially when one considers such statements as “[it] brings forth spirit, substance, soul, life and activities directed to the spirit.”¹⁶⁶ Plotinus’ more detailed description of the concept recalls a combination of Aristotle’s first mover with Plato’s Idea of the Good: Its nature is said to be unchangeable.¹⁶⁷ Everything is in need of it, while the Good itself does not need anything but itself. As a consequence, it does not lack in anything. It is the measure and border for all things,¹⁶⁸ meaning that things are good in the measure in which they are and because they are.

The philosopher explicitly connects the concept of the good with that of the beautiful. According to him, everything up to the Good is beautiful, while the Good with its supreme position is more original than the Beautiful,¹⁶⁹ meaning that it has more reality. Thus, as it is beyond everything else, it is also beyond Beauty¹⁷⁰ – although there are instances where Plotinus identifies the two concepts.¹⁷¹ He concludes that “the Good does not

¹⁶² Plotinus, VI 9.6.39-42.

¹⁶³ Cf. Hauskeller, 57.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.12.7-8. Every soul strives for the Good, precisely because it is good. Cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.1-3.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Caroline Canfield Putnam, *Beauty in the Pseudo-Denis* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960) 50.

¹⁶⁶ Plotinus, I 8.2.6.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.10.15.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Plotinus, I 8.2.2-5.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.12.17-18.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Plotinus, I 8.2.1-8.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.

need the Beautiful, whereas the Beautiful is reliant on the Good.”¹⁷² What is interesting is that his justification for this reliance depends on the True, namely, in the sense that the Good is older in respect of truth, a position referring to the greater amount of reality the Good has. He proceeds by pointing out that it does not even intend to be beautiful,¹⁷³ conceding that it is nevertheless covered by the Beautiful as if by a blanket. This means that the Good is not not beautiful, but, as mentioned above, more than beautiful. Both concepts are more truly present in the other world.¹⁷⁴

Yet, in a way, they can be found together on earth as well, namely, in the sphere of morality. Although the Neoplatonist admits that “a virtue is neither beautiful nor good by itself, because that which is beautiful and good by itself lies before and beyond it,”¹⁷⁵ he still holds that it is good and beautiful by means of participation. In his eyes, it is the task of virtue to lead the common disposition to something better and more beautiful – beyond the level of the ordinary.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, he can use a phrase like “the shining of virtue,”¹⁷⁷ indicating both the beautiful element of splendor and the consequent setting apart from the ordinary through it. The concrete means by which a virtuous habit is established is a life in accordance with the Ideas discovered by man’s reason. Only by so living can he correspond to the laws of beauty.¹⁷⁸ In the Platonic tradition, Plotinus mentions the purifying character of such a beautiful life ruled by virtue.¹⁷⁹ This does not mean that he neglects Aristotle here, for he acknowledges that the resulting happiness is not due to the virtuous acts themselves, but that “inner states make an act beautiful.”¹⁸⁰ For one beautiful act is brought about easily, but a habit confronted with the pressure of circumstances demands perseverance and effort, which, however, increase the beauty and value of the resulting

¹⁷² Plotinus, V 5.12.32; 38.

¹⁷³ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.8.5.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.9.38-43.

¹⁷⁵ Plotinus, I 8.13.10-13. The Neoplatonist says that “some things are not beautiful owing to their substance but to their partaking (“μεθέξει”), as bodies are. Others are beauty in themselves, as the nature of virtues.” Plotinus, I 6.1.12-14.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Plotinus, I 4.8.22.

¹⁷⁷ Plotinus, I 6.4.9.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Grassi, 169.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.1-2.

¹⁸⁰ Plotinus, I 5.10.13.

acts.¹⁸¹ Evil, on the other hand, is generated when all of man's thoughts are terrestrial and inferior; when his passions reign and he is without virtue. This ugliness covers the beauty of his soul, making it impure.¹⁸² Yet, Plotinus knows of a divine element in human nature, which has a sense for beauty, so that things like bodily pleasures are likely to be considered to possess merely minor value.¹⁸³

e) Eros, the Beautiful Soul and Its Need for Κάθαρσις

According to Plotinus, its bondage to the body is the soul's own fault, as Plato explains, but since Plotinus holds, in contrast to Plato, that there still exists a spark of the divine One present in it, the soul can start its return journey to the One independently. The basis for this return can be found in the concept of beauty. The beauty of the soul consists in the fact that it is the embodiment of the Ideas, which lets it partake of true being.¹⁸⁴ Consequently, if the soul has the potential, it generates the beautiful.¹⁸⁵ Owing to its own beauty, which the soul remembers, it recognizes and appreciates something beautiful in an encounter with it, followed by an attempt to conform to it. When the soul sees something ugly, on the other hand, it draws back because of the dissimilarity of ugly things to itself and the lack of the soul's ability to conform to the formless.¹⁸⁶ While beauty does not need to come from outside, since the soul is glorious by itself as long as it is allowed to exist purely by itself,¹⁸⁷ ugliness comes into the soul from outside and overlies the beauty of the soul.¹⁸⁸ It is therefore necessary to purify the soul, and Plotinus defines several types of κάθαρσις. Firstly, it can be considered in an ascetical sense, that is, in the way a sculptor works in contrast to a potter, who forms. This is a purification of everything foreign and, therefore, of everything in man that is not divine, without which an ascent to the good, towards which everyone strives, would not

¹⁸¹ Cf. Plotinus, I 4.13.3.

¹⁸² Cf. Plotinus, I 6.5. 26-45.

¹⁸³ Cf. Plotinus, II 9.15.25.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.9.35.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.7.5.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.2.2-11.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Plotinus, IV 7.10.51-53.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.5.32-45.

be possible.¹⁸⁹ In detail, this process is described as a “freeing of oneself from the passions, from the embodiment” and as a “remaining alone with oneself.”¹⁹⁰ This implies that the soul should condemn earthly subjects by means of a new intellectual perspective on the sensuous world and its beauty. It can free itself from the body owing to its rational nature – an outflow of divine reason. Moreover, man should not fear death, since this leads to the anticipated separation of the soul from the body.¹⁹¹ The second kind of purification is already indicated in what Plotinus says on the revised perspective on the world. Accordingly, man’s intellect should take over the leading position. This does not mean a freeing from everything non-intellectual so much as an attempt to put it in its right place. Being virtuous can be classed among this kind of purification.¹⁹² It is not provoked by a divine initiative, but by man’s own effort. He himself is able to move towards the beautiful with his natural disposition, that is, by free choice.¹⁹³

The process of human perfection brings man nearer to god, the source of beauty,¹⁹⁴ for, according to the Neoplatonist, becoming good and beautiful means becoming similar to god.¹⁹⁵ Everybody has the potential to return home, but only a few people notice that they are lacking something in the shadowlands. This must be seen in Plato’s tradition, who emphasized this idea in his treatment of the nature of a philosopher.¹⁹⁶ In conformity with his allegory of the cave, Plotinus also considers life a process of education. He who is educated is blinded at first, since the splendor is too strong, so that he does not understand everything immediately. For if he understood everything, he would not learn anything new. The starting-point of learning is the unexpected jump of a spark from one soul to another. What follows

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.1-9.

¹⁹⁰ Plotinus, I 6.5.54-57.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.9-11.

¹⁹² Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.1-2.

¹⁹³ Cf. Plotinus, III 2.10.19.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.30-32.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.32-33.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 476b. According to Plotinus, there are three groups of people receptive to the divine region, namely, lovers, musicians and philosophers. The former possesses a special memory for beauty, the musician approaches beauty with the help of his sense for harmony, and the latter is already on his way towards the divine and merely needs instruction. Cf. Plotinus, I 3.1-3.

is a step-by-step self-education characterized by man's attempt to get used to the beauty with which he is confronted and to evaluate adequately the different degrees of beauty. The goal of this education is to become capable of seeing great beauty by oneself at last, to achieve maturity and independence.¹⁹⁷ Education implies one's training of a rational comprehension of metaphysical principles. This is the necessary precondition for the unification with the first principle, through which discursive thinking, however, is annihilated. Beierwaltes emphasizes that the annihilation does not mean a discrimination of discursive thinking, but a fulfillment of it by means of a self-transcending act. The reduction of thinking back to unity has to be understood as a reflection on the explication of this unity, that is, on variety. Everything in the sphere of the plurality of concrete life that helps to achieve this reduction is to be supported. Acts leading to moral perfection are among these aids;¹⁹⁸ another is an encounter with beauty.

Finally, like Plato, Plotinus considers Eros to be a driving force in the process of approaching beauty and finding one's fulfillment. He who wants to ascend to the divinity ultimately has to leave all concepts and all science behind.¹⁹⁹ The intellectual νοῦς must be sacrificed so that the loving νοῦς can step forward.²⁰⁰ The latter is able to possess beauty here on earth in such a way that it is not received but besieges.²⁰¹ Yet, he who is moved by love is not satisfied by corporeal beauty, but flees from it up to the beauties of the soul: to virtues, sciences, activities, law, and custom. His next step brings him to the cause of the beauty in the soul and then to that which is above it, namely, the first principle, which is beautiful through itself. In contrast to this, he who is satisfied with the beauty in actions and, therefore, chooses them, being fooled by the shadows and gleam of the beautiful, is said to be under a spell by pursuing that kind of beauty which occurs in menial things.²⁰² For Plotinus states that "one must

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.9.1-24.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, "Reflexion und Einung. Zur Mystik Plotins," *Grundfragen der Mystik*, ed. Werner Beierwaltes, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Alois M. Haas (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1974) 10-12.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Plotinus, VI 9.4.1-6.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.35.19-34.

²⁰¹ Cf. Plotinus, VI 5.10.6.

²⁰² Cf. Plotinus, IV 4.44.25-27.

not remain in this manifold beauty forever.”²⁰³ All the earthly beauty just mentioned should be left behind and revealed to be only a copy and nothing real, so that loving it would mean a corruption of the soul.²⁰⁴ But if one consciously acknowledges the immortal aspect of the appetite – as far as this is possible for a mortal being – one begins to search for the Beautiful per se in the perennial being, the eternal, which is the only place to dispose of one’s desire to beget.²⁰⁵ Plato says the same, when Diotima describes man’s desire to beget upon the beautiful. Owing to his desire for permanence, the lover sows in the beautiful because of its affinity to eternal lastingness: the eternal essence is the first entity of a beautiful constitution, and everything originating from it is also beautiful.²⁰⁶ The longing to beget is accompanied by feelings caused by Eros and taking place in a soul which desires to embrace something beautiful as a result of its virtuous disposition, which is familiar with the archetypal Beauty.²⁰⁷ This longing enraptures one, makes one powerless and incapable of resisting – an idea taken over from Plato, although Plotinus does not use the phrase ‘divine madness.’²⁰⁸ Eros becomes even more intense in the face of intelligible beauty than it does as a reaction to sensuous beauty, “since now one meets the truly beautiful”²⁰⁹ without the eyes of sensuous perception.

True Beauty, which is anticipated through purification and approached by love, is, however, not an external absolute beauty, but is the goal of a personal conversion of man to an inner state of being beautiful. “Hence, beauty does not fix the thinking gaze upon itself as an external appearance, but is the direct reason for the reduction of thinking to itself and, therefore, to the constituents of itself *and* beauty,”²¹⁰ as Beierwaltes interprets the situation. Man has to learn to acknowledge his own beauty,²¹¹ so that the return inwards can be considered a quasi awakening to one’s

²⁰³ Plotinus, VI 7.16.1.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.8.7-14.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Plotinus, V 9.2.2-10.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Plotinus, III 5.1.40-46.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Plotinus, III 5.1.10-13.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.4.20-23.

²⁰⁹ Plotinus, I 6.4.15.

²¹⁰ Beierwaltes, *Marcilio Ficinos Theorie des Schönen im Kontext des Platonismus*, 21.

²¹¹ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.2.45.

true self²¹²: “Our soul has not totally declined.”²¹³ According to Plotinus, one is beautiful, when one realizes one’s own self, because the presence of spiritual beauty shines through.²¹⁴ “He who knows himself, knows his whence.”²¹⁵ This natural beauty is also present, if one remains unconscious of one’s own beauty.²¹⁶ But as soon as one becomes conscious of it, a longing for the state of being together with oneself arises.²¹⁷

f) *Man’s Fulfillment* – Θεοφιλία

Porphyry notes that Plotinus himself had the experience of what the latter taught about human fulfillment: “For it was his goal and vanishing point to be near to and one with the god who is beyond everything. During the time I was together with him, he attained this goal four times for sure.”²¹⁸ The Neoplatonist legitimately questions whether someone can be fulfilled and called happy if this is not a result of an amplitude of beautiful things,²¹⁹ that is, after being woken up by means of Eros and thus being able to seize and gaze upon the Beautiful.²²⁰ Despite this necessary precondition, he comes to the conclusion that Beauty itself is not the explicit goal of the return inwards – a point which seems to me the greatest difference in comparison with Plato, whose doctrine was that man can find his fulfillment by means of an ascent to the Idea of Beauty. For Plotinus, it is rather beauty’s source and origin, namely, the Good as unformed beauty beyond beauty, towards which the inward movement aims: “Whoever has not yet seen it, strives to it as to the Good.” Beauty appears then to be only an aspect of it: “But whoever has seen it, can marvel at its beauty.”²²¹ In order to distance

²¹² Cf. Plotinus, IV 8.1.1.

²¹³ Plotinus, IV 8.8.2.

²¹⁴ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.13.21.

²¹⁵ Plotinus, VI 9.7.33-34.

²¹⁶ Cf. Plotinus, I 4.9.13.

²¹⁷ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.4.6-8.

²¹⁸ Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, ed. Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1951) 23.

²¹⁹ Cf. Plotinus, I 5.10.3.

²²⁰ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.12.9-10.

²²¹ Plotinus, I 6.7.34-36.

the first Beauty from this merely aspectual beauty, the philosopher uses the term ‘ἡ καλλονή,’ as Most points out. He thereby tries to emphasize the true nature of the Good,²²² which allows him to say that during the vision of it, in the state of motionlessness, one has already surpassed beauty and no longer thinks of beautiful things.²²³ The vision is a pure one, as long as one is oneself purified, and it is accompanied by a longing to become one with it. Pleasure is secondary here, but still present in the form of a shattering emotion.²²⁴ As in Plato’s cave allegory, Plotinus claims that this vision causes a new view of the world, since one starts to despise everything that seemed to be beautiful earlier.²²⁵

The fact that a vision is man’s fulfillment shows that in Greek philosophy experience is preferred to action. It takes place inside of man, that is, in his soul: “The spirit will stand still for the vision and not look at anything other than the Beautiful; it will turn to it fully and abandon itself. (...) It will be pervaded with power, so that it will notice first of all how it has become more beautiful.”²²⁶ This quote, in particular, illustrates that the origin of the Plotinic philosophy is combined with distinctive Neoplatonic ideas, for while Plato also taught the theory of apprehension, he did not mention self-abandonment. This latter point is, however, very significant for Plotinus: A soul remaining in the region of the highest Beauty allows the cosmos to take possession of it to the extent to which the cosmos is capable of achieving this, while the soul remains without activity. For the latter “does not reign over it with planning and musing nor with adjusting, but it pervades the cosmos with an amazing power by looking exclusively at that which is above itself. For the more it gives itself over to this vision, the more

²²² Cf. Most, 1349; Plotinus, VI 7.33.20-21; I 6.7.14-16.

²²³ Cf. Plotinus, VI 9.11.16.

²²⁴ Plotinus emphasizes the overwhelming, disturbing and sometimes even painful psychological effect of beauty more strongly than Plato does. These passions arising in the encounter with beauty – wonder, fright, joyful surprise, desire and love – are archetypes of being, which are unfamiliarly lying in the sphere of the uncanny, as Grassi expresses it. Cf. Grassi, 169.

²²⁵ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.1.9-17.

²²⁶ Plotinus, V 5.8.10-12.

beautiful and powerful it is.”²²⁷ In the Neoplatonist’s eyes, the self-abandonment during the most magnificent vision, in which the soul remains full of joy, is an assimilation to what it apprehends, thus attaining happiness.²²⁸ For similarity is the presupposition of an unrestricted vision of the Beautiful.²²⁹ Despite the abandonment of one’s own self, the vision is intended by one’s own nature²³⁰: It means a return home.²³¹ Only in this unification with the highest principle do Eros’ returning movement and its desire to beget come to rest.²³² According to Porphyry’s report, Plotinus was of the opinion that the final return is not possible before the soul has ultimately separated itself from the body in order for it to “congregate with others to the circle of the immortal Eros.” This is considered to be a lasting life full of pleasure and blessed by the gods.²³³

g) Summary

In the Neoplatonic philosophy founded by Plotinus, the hyper-beautiful One is described as the highest principle. From it, a gradual emanation of being takes place, which is accompanied by a generation of beauty, namely, insofar as a concrete form is incorporated into matter. Owing to this mixture of divine Beauty and matter, all earthly beauty including art is impure. Yet, it still has a grain of the divine in it. As a result of his reason, man can, therefore, become conscious of this grain and start a return inwards to his divine origin, that is, to the Hyper-Beautiful. On the one hand, an inner purification is a necessary precondition for the return; on the other hand, Eros, coming from the outside when a beautiful reality is met, functions as a driving force, since it supports the human desire for immortality. The return homewards culminates in a vision of the highest principle followed by a self-abandonment of the soul and its unification with the Hyper-Beautiful.

²²⁷ Plotinus, II 9.2.11-16.

²²⁸ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.29 and 35.

²²⁹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.9.29-32.

²³⁰ Cf. Plotinus, V 8.4.33.

²³¹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.8.16.

²³² Cf. Plotinus, V 9.2.10.

²³³ Cf. Porphyry, 23.

3. Augustine – Formation, Deformation, Reformation

*The bodies of martyrs, deformed by scars,
retain their wounds in the resurrection, because in them
“there will be no deformity, but only dignity.”*²³⁴

≈

a) *The Notion of Beauty*

According to Augustine, there are five concepts either necessary for or indicative of beauty. He agrees with Plato's *Hippias Major* that the useful is not one of them. Beauty is something that has a value in its own right: “There are some things, too, which have such a place in the body, that they obviously serve no useful purpose, but are solely for beauty.”²³⁵ Nevertheless, a useful reality can also be beautiful, but then it is regarded under a different aspect, that is, from another perspective. The elements indicative of beauty are rather classical and include a harmonious aspect and a gleaming effect:

“For all bodily beauty consists in the proportion of the parts, together with a certain agreeableness of color. Where there is no proportion, the eye is offended, either because there is something wanting, or too small, or too large. (...) And as for the pleasant color, how conspicuous shall it be where ‘the just shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.’ ”²³⁶

²³⁴ Augustine, *De civitate Dei. Patrologia Latina*, vol.41, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Chadwyck-Healey: Pro Quest, 1844-1855 and 1862-1865) l.XXII, c.19, n.3.

²³⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, l.XXII, c.24, n.4.

²³⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, l.XXII, c.19, n.2. Cf. *Epistola III. Patrologia Latina*, vol.33, n.4; Cicero, *Gespräche in Tusculum. Lateinisch-Deutsch*, ed. Olof Gignon (München: Heimeran, 1970) l.IV, n.31. Balthasar points out that despite Augustine's occasional use of this formula, he does not adopt it inwardly. The reason for this can be found in his personal fear towards sensuality in general. Accordingly, he asks himself in the *Confessions* how it is possible to escape the power of church music: “Sometimes I appear to myself to give them more respect than is fitting, as I perceive that our minds are more devoutly and earnestly elevated into a flame of piety by the holy words themselves when they are thus sung, (...) wherewith by I know not what secret relationship they are stimulated. But the gratification of my flesh, to which the mind ought never to be given over to be enervated, often beguiles

Yet, it must be noted that the condition of the agreeableness of color does not so much demand splendor per se as harmonious splendor, thus subcategorizing splendor under the concept of harmony. A side-effect of the latter is pleasure felt in the encounter with harmony: “Search in the pleasure of the body what it embraces and you find nothing other than harmony: for if disagreement brings forth pain, harmony brings forth pleasure.”²³⁷ This implies that pleasure can even be considered an indicator of harmony. In another book, Augustine revises this implication to establish that there are different kinds of pleasure, the pleasure taken in harmony being the one connected with reason. Accordingly, in the pleasures of sight, hearing and all the other senses, reason is not manifested unless there is a harmonious structure to be found.²³⁸

The third element necessary for a reality to be called beautiful can be deduced from the notion of harmony, for what the latter intends is to achieve a whole: “But when a kind of harmony in which all are unharmed and beautiful pleases in all arts, harmony itself actually desires equality and unity either in the similarity of equal parts or in the climax of unequal parts,”²³⁹ without which nothing is truly beautiful.²⁴⁰ The reason for this desire for wholeness is that any beautiful object whatsoever is more worthy of praise in its totality as a whole than in any one of its parts.²⁴¹ The praise is an effect of the two characteristics of unitary beauty, namely, that it stays complete and that it is

me, while the sense does not so attend on reason as to follow her patiently; but having gained admission merely for her sake, it strives even to run on before her, and be her leader. Thus, in these things do I sin unknowingly, but afterwards do I know it.” Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, I.X, c.33, n.49. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik II: Fächer der Stile* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962) 122.

²³⁷ Augustine, *De vera religione. Patrologia Latina*, vol.34, c.XXXIX, n.72.

²³⁸ Cf. Augustine, *De ordine. Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, I.II, c.11, n.32-33. Consequently, one does not usually declare that a rose smells according to reason or that a certain food tastes according to reason, unless the pleasure felt while tasting it has a necessary goal and the food was prepared in this way for this special goal.

²³⁹ Augustine, *De vera religione*, c.XXX, n.55. Cf. also *De musica. Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, I.VI, c.10, n.26; I.VI, c.13, n.38, where Augustine names unity and proportion as being among the decisive reasonable criteria of positive sensuous beauty.

²⁴⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De musica*, I.VI, c.14, n.46.

²⁴¹ Cf. Augustine, *De genesi contra Manichaeos. Patrologia Latina*, vol.34, I.I, c.21, n.32.

one.²⁴² As a Neoplatonist, Augustine, therefore, speaks of “the oneness of beauty.”²⁴³

The fourth factor as well is closely linked to the aspect of harmony. In the bishop's eyes, order is beautiful, because whenever something is in order, meaning that it is in accordance with the laws of nature, it appears to be guided by a higher reason.²⁴⁴ This recalls the manifestation of reason in harmony in general. Emmanuel Chapman refers this to the concept of truth and goodness: “Beauty is had when both the unity and the order of a thing, that is to say, its ontological truth and goodness are manifested.”²⁴⁵ There are laws in nature owing to the fact that everything is based on number. Augustine claims to find this idea both in Plato, who took it over from Pythagorism, and in the Bible: “For Plato, their great authority, represents god as framing the world on numerical principles: and in our books also it is said to God, ‘thou hast ordered all things in number, and measure, and weight.’”²⁴⁶ Man, as a rational creature with the ability to understand numbers, can also perceive and understand the beauty in the world connected with an order based on numeric principles. On a more abstract level, the basis for the ability to understand the beauty of the world is given with the concept of form – the fifth indicator of beauty. Outward forms lend beauty to this visible structure of the world and are perceived

²⁴² Cf. Augustine, *Epistola XVIII. Patrologia Latina*, vol.30, n.2: “Cum autem omne quod esse dicimus, in quantum manet dicamus, et in quantum unum est, omnis porro pulchritudinis forma unitas sit.”

²⁴⁴ Cf. Augustine, *De ordine*, I.I, c.8, n.25-26; I.II, c.4, n.12.

²⁴⁵ Emmanuel Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939) 54.

²⁴⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XII, c.18. Cf. *De ordine*, I.II, c.20, n.53; *The Book of Wisdom*, 8:2. Balthasar severely criticizes Augustine's fixation on the numeric principle as the structure of creation, which, according to Balthasar, makes the inner contradiction of Platonism in general even worse: Platonism is considered by him to be a “dualism of world and God, sensuousness and spirit, but nevertheless a monistically descending outpouring of the one true-beautiful and a monistically ascending Eros towards the One. What remains static and dualistic is communicated dynamically. Thus, where the Platonic-Augustinian thinking loses the erotic dynamics, it necessarily disintegrates into Cartesianism, idealism and mathematicism.” He sees the only way of rescuing Augustine's world view in the Platonic-biblical enthusiasm. Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik II: Fächer der Stile*, 125. As shown above, I do not share Balthasar's opinion that Plato must be blamed for a dualistic view of the world.

by the human senses.²⁴⁷ This is because form makes proportion possible and proportion is based on number: “Reason finds beauty alone pleasing. What pleases in beauty is form; in form, proportion; and in proportion, number.”²⁴⁸

b) *God-Made and Man-Made Beauty*

For Augustine, God is supreme Goodness, Beauty and Truth: “My Father, supremely good, Beauty of all things beautiful. O Truth, Truth!”²⁴⁹ He says the same about the specifically Christian idea of the Trinity,²⁵⁰ whose beauty is unutterable and invisible.²⁵¹ This supremacy is emphasized when the bishop compares God, the creator, to his creation: “For what is more admirable than the incorporate power creating and governing the corporate world? Or what is more beautiful than the power ordering and decorating it?”²⁵² Here it becomes clear again that order as a necessary factor of beauty is directly imprinted on the world by God owing to his own beauty. By means of this imprint, he reveals an aspect of his invisibility: “For he alone (...) causes the seed to develop, and to evolve from certain secret and invisible folds into the visible forms of beauty which we see.”²⁵³ Consequently, whenever God creates, the invisible becomes visible in the form of beauty. The latter concept, therefore, is a visible sign of the fact that God’s “unseen and unchangeable beauty continually pervades all things.”²⁵⁴

In Augustine’s eyes, the beauty of the course of this world is achieved by the opposition of contraries.²⁵⁵ Not all realities are created supremely, equally or immutably good. Still, as he insists, each single created thing is good, and taken as a whole all realities are very good, “because together they constitute a universe of admirable beauty.”²⁵⁶ This hierarchy

²⁴⁷ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XI, c.27, n.2.

²⁴⁸ Augustine, *De ordine*, I.II, c.15, n.42.

²⁴⁹ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, I.III, c.6, n.10.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate. Patrologia Latina*, vol.42, I.VI, c.10, n.12.

²⁵¹ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XI, c.4, n.2; I.X, c.14.

²⁵² Augustine, *De vera religione*, c.LI, n.100.

²⁵³ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XXII, c.24, n.2.

²⁵⁴ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.X, c.14.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XI, n.18.

²⁵⁶ Augustine, *Enchiridion. Patrologia Latina*, vol.40, c.X. Cf. *De genesi contra Manichaeos*,

of different values is mirrored in the relativity of created beauty as a whole: "This gloriously beautiful order of things that are very good will pass away when it has achieved its end: it will have its morning and its evening." This is because it leads to a higher beauty, namely, to "the beauty through the imitation of which all other things are beautiful, and by comparison with which all other things are unsightly,"²⁵⁷ which is the beauty of the creator.

One of the types of beauty in the hierarchy leading to the beauty of the creator is art. In contrast to Plato, Augustine has high regard for this specifically human form of beauty. He points out that art depends on reason and cannot be confounded with imitation. This dependence is underscored by his interchangeable use of art and reason for the third stage in the ascent to Beauty itself, in which reason invents architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry, music, and all the other arts.²⁵⁸ Augustine states that neither are animals capable of imitation as a result of their lack of reason nor do the virtuosi lacking knowledge possess art.²⁵⁹ Only rational humans can acquire the artistic faculty. However, the mind, which is changeable, could not possess unchangeable art unless it were illuminated. Augustine asks the rhetorical question of where this movement comes from that imprints these numbers on the human mind and makes the affection called art.²⁶⁰ For it is clear that it comes from something higher than man: "Beautiful patterns, which through the medium of men's souls are conveyed into their artistic hands, emanate from that beauty which is above our souls."²⁶¹ Art can then constantly and incommutably preserve that kind of beauty of which the beautiful in general shows vestiges.²⁶²

I.I, c.16, n.26: "I must admit that I do not know why mice and frogs, flies and worms were created. But I see that all of them are beautiful in their own peculiar way, although many seem to us to be adverse owing to our faults."

²⁵⁷ Augustine, *De ordine*, I.II, c.19, n.51.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae. Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, c.XXXIII, n.72.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Augustine, *De musica*, I.I, c.4, n.5.

²⁶⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De musica*, I.VI, c.12, n.35.

²⁶¹ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, I.X, c.34, n.53.

²⁶² Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione*, c.XXII, n.42.

c) *The Way to Happiness and the Beatific Vision*

The bishop is of the opinion that man's sole problem is that he is "a rational soul using a mortal and earthly body."²⁶³ On the one hand, he acknowledges, as Plotinus does, that sensuous beauty is a necessary component of superordinate beauty, having a legitimate place in creation. For just as the One and the forming spirit still have an effect upon their representations that are furthest away from them, so does God have an effect upon the least of his creatures.²⁶⁴ Christian doctrines, such as the Incarnation and the resurrection of the body, do not seem to give him much of an alternative other than to respect the temporal realm and its mere vestigial beauty.²⁶⁵ On the other hand, I would not go as far as Carol Harrison, who claims that

"it is in propounding the specifically Christian doctrine of the resurrection that we see Augustine most clearly taking a stand against Platonic thought on the body and soul, and most forcefully demonstrating their original and eternal unity, thereby also upholding the ultimate value of sensible temporal existence."²⁶⁶

Augustine does not leave out any opportunity to criticize both man's sensuousness and the inferiority of sensuous beauty – despite its use when confronted with man: Creation, with all its beauty and utility, was given to man by divine Goodness "to please his eye and serve his purposes, condemned though he is, and hurled into these labors and miseries."²⁶⁷ Yet, beauty is "much greater in that immortal condition than it could be in this corruptible state."²⁶⁸ The reason for this is human sin, without which the world would have been filled and beautified with natures, wholly good without exception.²⁶⁹ Beauty, as it is, although being God's handiwork, is only a

²⁶³ Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*. *Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, l.I, c.27, n.52: "Homo igitur, ut homini apparet, anima rationalis est mortali atque terreno utens corpore."

²⁶⁴ Cf. Augustine, *De ordine*, l.I, c.5, n.16-19; *De quantitate animae*, c.XXXVI, n.80; *De genesi contra Manichaeos*, l.I, c.16, n.25-26.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione*, c.XL, n.75.

²⁶⁶ Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 158-159.

²⁶⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, l.XXII, c.24, n.5.

²⁶⁸ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, l.XXII, c.12, n.1.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, l.XI, c.23, n.1; *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*. *Patrologia Latina*, vol.35, tr.IX, nr.9: "But our soul, brothers, is ugly owing to its misdeed. By loving God, it becomes beautiful."

temporal, carnal, and lower kind of good, and should not be fully loved in preference to God, the eternal, spiritual, and unchangeable Good.²⁷⁰ According to the bishop, man is easily tempted and trapped by the beauty of the created world, even when he thinks that he is on the way to true Beauty. This is because he tends to be ruled by his senses instead of by his reason:

“I marveled to find that at last I loved you and not some phantasm instead of you; yet I did not stably enjoy my God, but was ravished to you by your beauty, yet soon was torn away from you by my own weight, and fell again with torment to lower things. Carnal habit was that weight (...), ‘for the corruptible body is a load upon the soul, and the earthly habitation presses down the mind that muses upon many things.’”²⁷¹

Augustine clearly states that reason and sensuousness are to be seen as opposites, beauty being the only positive factor of the sensuous human body:

“What is praised in the body? Nothing else than beauty. (...) But where is it true? In the soul, of course. Therefore, the soul is to be loved more than the body. But in what part of the soul is truth? In the mind and understanding. What is opposed to these? The senses. Thus, it is clear that the senses are to be resisted with the whole force of the mind.”²⁷²

The superiority of reason originates in the fact that “not in the body, but in the mind was man made in the image of God.”²⁷³ As a result, it is the goal of man to become more spiritual in order to “enjoy one another’s beauty without any lust.”²⁷⁴ This enjoyment is motivated by a love of wisdom, either in another creature or in God. Augustine presents the interrelation of beauty and wisdom in a Platonic way: “For what is *philosophia*? Love for wisdom. And what *philocalia*? Love for beauty.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XV, c.22.

²⁷¹ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, I.VII, c.17, n.23.

²⁷² Augustine, *Epistola III*, n.4. Cf. *De Trinitate*, I.VIII, c.6, n.9, where Augustine points out that man is beautiful because of the beauty of the mind.

²⁷³ Augustine, *Tractatus in Evangelium Joannis. Patrologia Latina*, vol.35, tr.XXIII, n.10.

²⁷⁴ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XXII, c.24, n.4.

(...) So what is wisdom? Nothing other than true Beauty.”²⁷⁵ When wisdom is loved, the enjoyment of a beauty appealing to reason takes place.²⁷⁶

In contrast to Plotinus, for whom the human soul bears a grain of the divine in itself, Augustine merely argues that it is close to the divine and to Truth. But he does agree with Plotinus that, in order to know supreme Truth and Beauty, man must enter inside of himself²⁷⁷ in the attempt to judge the sensuous beauty with which he is confronted:

“I was transported to thee by thy beauty. (...) For, inquiring whence it was that I admired the beauty of bodies whether celestial or terrestrial, and what supported me in judging correctly on things mutable, and pronouncing, ‘This should be thus, this not,’ inquiring, then, whence I so judged, seeing I did so judge, I had found the unchangeable and true eternity of Truth beyond my changeable mind.”²⁷⁸

This statement shows that the use of the intellectual capacities can leave sensuous reality behind, from which they progress. But Augustine demands even more. The withdrawal to the rational soul must be followed by a step beyond the soul, which is brought about by divine grace.²⁷⁹ The whole process of entering within is described by means of the image of an ascent containing seven stages: vegetative life (or animation), sensual life (or sensation), imaginative life (or art), memorative life (or virtue), volunative life (or tranquility), intellectual life (or ingression), and the vision of the home of the True of truth (or contemplation). The soul has its own proper beauty in each of the seven stages, through which it mounts from beauty to beauty.²⁸⁰ The highest of the seven steps of the

²⁷⁵ Augustine, *Contra academicos*. *Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, l.II, c.3, n.7.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, l.XXII, c.30, n.1.

²⁷⁷ Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione*, c.XXXIX, n.72.

²⁷⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, l.VII, c.17, n.3.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, c.V, where the theological virtues of faith and love are mentioned as means to instigate the ascent: “As this faith, which works by love, begins to penetrate the soul, it tends, through the vital power of goodness, to change into sight, so that the holy and perfect in heart catch glimpses of that ineffable beauty the full vision of which is our highest happiness.” Cf. also Harrison, 241: “It is the faith, hope and love inspired by the revelation of God’s beauty on earth which purifies, heals, and reforms man in order to see God’s supreme beauty.”

²⁸⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, c.XXXIII, n.70 - c.XXXV, n.79.

soul conforms to Plato's doctrine, but differs from the Plotinic view of fulfillment insofar as there is no ontological unification of the soul with God, but a mere vision of him. Each of the steps also has its peculiar beauty, while true Beauty is reserved for the highest level. All other forms of beauty are only copies of the one, compared to which they appear ugly.²⁸¹ Accordingly, animation is said to be beautiful from something else, sensation through something else, art is beautiful in opposition to something else, virtue is beautiful towards the Beautiful, tranquility in the Beautiful and ingression towards Beauty. The highest level, that is, contemplation, is with God (*apud Deum*) – not in God – where the soul is “beautiful with the Beautiful” (*pulchre apud pulchritudinem*), for the highest Beauty is God himself.²⁸² In the sense of a final and lasting fulfillment, this is not possible until the purified soul has entered God's kingdom in life after death. Chapman calls the beatific vision accompanied by perfect joy in the contemplation of the supreme object the aesthetic experience *par excellence*.²⁸³ For “the vision of God is the beauty of a vision so great, and is so infinitely desirable”²⁸⁴ that it is “our highest happiness.”²⁸⁵

d) Summary

Augustine adopts the Platonic teaching on the highest Beauty imprinting all beauty upon the world, but instead of referring it to the Idea of Beauty, he, as a Christian, identifies the Trinitarian God with the highest principle. Beauty on earth – defined by proportion, an agreeable color, unity, order and form – is intrinsically structured in a hierarchy of values and is, when seen as a whole, just a minor good. This is because it functions as a mere reference to God, Beauty *per se*. Although man is part of this inferior sensuous world, he is also the image of God, namely, with regard to his mind. His goal is, therefore, to become more spiritual by entering within himself in a process consisting of seven steps. The final one of these is a gift of grace, bringing him beyond the boundaries of his soul and letting him apprehend divine Beauty.

²⁸¹ Cf. Augustine, *De ordine*, I.II, c.19, n.51.

²⁸² Cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, c.XXXV, n.79.

²⁸³ Cf. Chapman, 12.

²⁸⁴ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.X, c.16, n.1.

4. Proclus – The Love-Chain

“Everything divine is beautiful, wise, and good.”²⁸⁶

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In Plato’s tradition, Proclus sets up what is often called a ‘two-world-theory,’ saying: “For if the world is beautiful, it was generated according to an eternal paradigm.”²⁸⁷ The Beautiful itself is eternal, immaterial, one, and, hence, beyond the changing beauty of phenomena.²⁸⁸ This divine model can be seen from three perspectives: “There are three characteristic aggregate properties constituting the divine nature, which spread to all the divine classes, namely, goodness (ἀγαθότης), wisdom (σοφία) and beauty (κάλλος). Three, therefore, are those which are thus characterized and which join the inferior classes with the principal.” He continues by claiming that the three inferior classes correspond to the three divine classes: “They penetrate through all the divine cosmic orders; they are faith (πίστις), truth (ἀλήθεια) and love (ἔρως). Through them everything is saved and joined to the primary causes, some through love’s madness, others through divine philosophy and others again through theurgic power.”²⁸⁹ Accordingly, divine goodness corresponds to cosmic faith as the founder of every kind of being in the One or in the Good, while the second element, truth – with its counterpart wisdom in the divine world – presents the reason for the fact that reality is conceivable. Finally, Eros, as the cosmic counterpart of beauty, leads all being to divine Beauty and, by doing so, achieves a unity of all the individual parts of reality,²⁹⁰ as Beierwaltes concludes.

²⁸⁶ Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, transl. Thomas Taylor (Chippenham: Antony Rowe, 1995) I 21.

²⁸⁷ Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, transl. Thomas Taylor (Eastbourne: Antony Rowe, 2005) 1, 264.

²⁸⁸ Cf. Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, 1, 238.

²⁸⁹ Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 25. Proclus claims that the alliance of faith with truth and love is taught in Plato’s *Laws*.

²⁹⁰ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 68. This trinity constituting the relationship between God and man originates from Porphyry’s doctrine on the four elements faith, truth, love and hope: “One has to believe that the only salvation is the return to God, and, by believing this, endeavor as much as possible to attain the truth on him, and when having

As shown above, beauty and love belong together, which Proclus expresses with rhetorical questions such as, “For what is the connection with beauty, but love?”²⁹¹ In his eyes, love is a principle belonging both to the divine world – “for god loves the simple, unadorned beauty”²⁹² – and to the cosmic world, namely, in the form of a phenomenon on earth in general and as directed to the divine sphere. Therefore, Eros is considered to be the “uneffaceable love of the One”²⁹³ and as such the driving force of the dialectical ascent. It is “elevating, beneficent, bestowing perfection, cause of intelligence and of life according thereto.”²⁹⁴ Proclus makes a reference to the *Symposium* when he calls Eros the philosopher’s basic manner of behaving in the θεωρία, since it leads his search for truth and perfects it: “A better help than love towards philosophy (...) is not easy to find.”²⁹⁵ A lifestyle ruled by Eros and thus directed towards truth, leads man away from appearances of beauty to divine Beauty and thereby fulfills the search in a believing devotion.²⁹⁶ By the dialectical method, the one who is questioned attains the capacity to realize truth by himself: “He [Socrates] converts [his listeners] by the path of dialectics to the consideration of reality.”²⁹⁷

Eros is considered the “memory of god’s being,”²⁹⁸ the original beautiful, which non-philosophers have forgotten. Even though all lovers have the same end, namely, familiarization with the Beautiful, this ignorance is caused by the fact that their thinking is exclusively directed towards that kind of beauty which is implicated in matter.²⁹⁹ But beauty has also a

attained this, to love the attained, and while loving nourish the soul with good hope all through one’s life-time.” Porphyry, *Pros Markellan*, transl., intr. and ed. Walter Pötscher (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969) n.24.

²⁹¹ Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, VII 40.

²⁹² Proclus, “Eclogae de philosophia Chaldaica,” *Oracles chaldaïques*, ed. Édouard des Places (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971) frg.2.

²⁹³ Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Carlotta Labowsky (London: Warburg Institute, 1953) VII 54.

²⁹⁴ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, transl. and commentary William O’Neill (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965) 61.

²⁹⁵ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 61.

²⁹⁶ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 69.

²⁹⁷ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 28.

²⁹⁸ Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, ed. Georgius Pasquali (Leipzig: B.G. Teubneri, 1908) n.LXXXVII.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 48.

purgatorial and an indicative function using the power of love,³⁰⁰ so that Eros effects the return from the apparent beautiful to divine Beauty beyond being.³⁰¹ Concrete beauty, consequently, can lead thinking beyond sensuousness, in which true Beauty is visible, to the origin of beauty. Since Eros brings forth a union with divine Beauty³⁰² and an “intimacy with the entire divinity”³⁰³ as the unity of beauty, wisdom and goodness, it even functions as the driving force – itself driven by the origin – of the return to the divine origin of all beauty, truth and goodness. Proclus describes beauty as radiating the communications of divine light,³⁰⁴ because it is able to reveal the hidden and invisible part of the divinity, which becomes visible, if the lover is inspired. For then he enjoys close union with the spirit, through which he is united with the gods; and as Eros turns the soul beyond itself, it unites it “with the primary and hidden Beauty according to a certain mode of life superior to intellectual perception.”³⁰⁵ Hence, according to Proclus, not only the perception of Beauty itself but the unification with it, which ultimately means with the One, is the goal of every movement, of all human desire and love. This is due to the power of Beauty, which is “lovable in its own nature” and “in the highest degree.”³⁰⁶ Beauty causes consternation (ἐκπληξίς) and marvel (θαῦμα);³⁰⁷ it charms and beguiles, so that Proclus, consequently, derives καλὸν from καλεῖν or κηλεῖν, which means that beauty calls being and thinking to itself and enchants it.³⁰⁸ Eros manages to unify the whole of being by offering “a single bond and a single indissoluble friendship with each other and with essential beauty”³⁰⁹ in everything.

There is a love-chain that starts with its highest peak in the highest order of the gods and is unified with the highest spiritual Beauty. It then stretches, firstly, to the pre-terrestrial gods and, secondly, to the area of the world,

³⁰⁰ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 39.

³⁰¹ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 30.

³⁰² Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 29.

³⁰³ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 29.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 30.

³⁰⁵ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 64. Cf. *The Theology of Plato*, I 24: Because beauty “announces the occult nature of goodness, it is denominated splendid, lucid and manifest.”

³⁰⁶ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 328: “ἐράσμιον” and “ἐρασμιώτατον.”

³⁰⁷ Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Proklos. Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1965) 309.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 328. This notion originates from Plato’s *Cratylus*.

³⁰⁹ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 33.

where it produces several orders and powers by different peculiar ways of self-communication and caring of the superior for the inferior levels. Thus, angels, demons, heroes and human souls all receive the possibility of participating in Eros and are stimulated, vitalized and warmed. The divine Eros leads everything that partakes of its power to the truly Beautiful.³¹⁰ The term ‘ἔρως προνοητικός’ as a description of the caring Eros constitutes the origin of the later identification of God with love. God’s rescuing, fulfilling and unifying force finds its continuing equivalent in the care of human individuals for each other.³¹¹ However, this caring behavior of the gods does not concern the One, but is realized at a later stage, so that its absolute transcendence remains untouched despite its causal nature.³¹² Proclus is influenced to some extent by Plotinus’ concept of an absolute unity, which is – as the One – the universal origin of everything, as well as by several other ideas, such as the νοῦς as a reflexive power in the universe. But he modifies the latter’s basic plan of reality by itemizing the levels of being after the original One. The respective dimensions are directed towards their original meaning that “being after the One is guaranteed as a differentiated, circularly moved unity of the whole,”³¹³ as Beierwaltes interprets the Neoplatonist’s philosophy.

Not only is there a caring of the superior for the inferior in this chain of love, but the latter level is also active: “Everything that emanates from something returns to that from which it emanated according to its being.”³¹⁴ This indicates a lasting connection of being with its cause as the absolute goal, which perfects the emanation to a unit by means of the existing reference to the source and goal of being.³¹⁵ A reversion or return to fulfillment of that which emanated from the One is made possible by Eros in beauty or

³¹⁰ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 33; Hugo Koch, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und Mysterienwesen* (Mainz: Franz Kirchheim, 1900) 13.

³¹¹ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 32; 38; 41; 45.

³¹² Beierwaltes remarks that this way the “nothing of everything” maintains its unmixed purity and excludes the possibility of an incarnation – an active loving self-devotion. Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 73.

³¹³ Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 46. Beierwaltes points out that in contrast to Plotinus, Proclus conducts a theologization of reality by identifying every level of being with a specific mythological god. Cf. *Platonismus im Christentum*, 47.

³¹⁴ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, transl. and ed. Thomas Taylor (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 1998) 31. Cf. *The Elements of Theology*, 34.

³¹⁵ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 65.

in the good that is manifested in beauty. According to Beierwaltes, beauty in the Plotinic tradition is, therefore, considered a cosmic structure and the goal of striving in life, which represents the One itself in the sense of an anticipation. With this basic rule of life, namely, that all being is moved in a never-ending yearning for the One and that this is made possible by a grain of the One in man – even if the presence of the origin does not become conscious – Eros has to be considered the concrete actualization of this basic striving.³¹⁶

Thus, the principle of the One must be seen as the good for man. Proclus concludes that “if all goodness is worth striving for, all that is worth striving for is lovable, all lovable beautiful, then all which is good is beautiful.”³¹⁷ Beauty opens the path to the truth of goodness by revealing the hidden region of the Good.³¹⁸ The Good itself is the source for all things in general and for all concrete goods, keeping them in existence.³¹⁹ For Proclus, it lies beyond Beauty,³²⁰ an idea that he took over from Plotinus. Nevertheless, beauty and goodness are closely linked to one another. For example, they work together in the ordering of the heavens and have a close relationship in the soul’s knowledge.³²¹ Moreover, since truth is present in every beauty, which is the splendid appearance of the Good,³²² beauty can be considered the light of Truth itself,³²³ thus functioning as a mediator and providing participation in the Good.³²⁴ Since wisdom is full of divine Goodness,³²⁵ Eros as a driving force in the search for truth comes to rest in the divine Good itself as the lucid cause of all truth and beauty.³²⁶

³¹⁶ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 67.

³¹⁷ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 329. Cf. *The Elements of Theology*, 12-13, where he emphasizes the identity of the One and the Good. For it is both impossible that the One is superior to the Good and that the Good is superior to the One. Moreover, as ultimate principles, they cannot be different from one another, since something ultimate must be one.

³¹⁸ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24.

³¹⁹ Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 13.

³²⁰ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 320.

³²¹ Cf. Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, 1, 215.

³²² Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24.

³²³ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Proklos. Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik*, 308.

³²⁴ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24.

³²⁵ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 23.

³²⁶ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Proklos. Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik*, 309.

To conclude it can be said that Proclus considers beauty to be an intelligible structure existing in itself, and a cause which produces all beauty and which possesses a forming attraction for that which it has caused. As the reason for order and symmetry, that is, for the loving connection of being, it represents the cause of unity.³²⁷ The Neoplatonist calls beauty the “form of forms”³²⁸ as the most intensive existence of the inner form and as the cause of all shape.³²⁹ In accordance with Plato’s *Symposium*, Proclus describes the capacity of beauty to attract and manifest in three ways: it is delicate (ἀβρόν), splendid and the goal of man’s desire and love.³³⁰ If man, finally, is attracted by beauty and judges its function rightly, that is, if he acknowledges its indicative reference towards the One and the Good as true Beauty, Eros can lead him to a spiritual union with this divine Beauty. This union transcends the natural capacities of human reason and represents a revelation of the hidden beauty and truth of the Good.

³²⁷ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, III 8.

³²⁸ Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, III 13: “εἶδος εἰδῶν.” This originates from Aristotle. Cf. Aristotle, *On the Soul. Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.8, transl. W.S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957) 432a2.

³²⁹ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 68.

³³⁰ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24.

Chapter IV

Beauty According to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – The Non-Cognitive Unification with the Beautiful-and-Good

1. The Notion of Beauty

“No being fails to partake of the beautiful.”¹

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Most of the time the term ‘beauty’ appears in Dionysius’ writings² it is used as a divine quality. The Areopagite tries to circumscribe God’s nature by means of an analysis of biblical and philosophical propositions. Scripture is, therefore, the source for the symbolic and rational perspectives of his positive theology.³ With regard to philosophy, however, the case seems to be more complicated. Endre v. Ivánka argues that “the Neoplatonic term- and formula-set is, in fact, taken over outwardly” but that Dionysius “negates the actual Platonic content of thought or bends it to Christian belief in decisive and essential points by means of totally conscious and

¹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, transl. and intr. John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1976) 704B.

² Dionysius almost always uses expressions for beauty etymologically linked to τὸ καλόν. Only three times does he call divine Beauty ὡραιότης (cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; 724B; *De coelesti hierarchia. Corpus Dionysiacum*, ed. Günter Heil [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991] 165B) in order to symbolize the fullness and totality of God’s beauty, as Caroline Putnam claims. Cf. Putnam, 17-18. This is, for example, indicated by his reference to the ripeness of fields at harvest or to the fresh loveliness of youth. When beauty refers to a notion of order and harmony, such as divine Beauty in relation to the angelic and human hierarchies, the Areopagite uses the term ‘εὐπρέπεια.’ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 121D; 144A; 165A; 205C; 208D; 241C; *De ecclesiastica hierarchia. Corpus Dionysiacum*, ed. Günter Heil (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991) 473B; 473C.

³ Cf. McGinn, 239.

emphasized assertions.”⁴ If this is true, it raises the questions of what kind of doctrine on beauty is established in his theology, since it is obviously not exclusively founded on Scripture, and of how his theology should appear if it is not to be connected to Neoplatonic philosophy.

It is certain that Dionysius has neither an explicit anthropology nor a moral theology, which means that beauty cannot be understood in a moral sense as is possible to a great extent with Aristotle. Moreover, there is no art theory present, although the Areopagite became important for later art and art theorists, so that Balthasar argues that Dionysius makes “the evident and realized synthesis of truth and beauty, of theology and aesthetics.”⁵ He can be “called the most aesthetic of all Christian theologians, because the inner-worldly aesthetic transcendence (from the sensuous area as an appearance to spiritual things as the appearing) gives away the formal and schematic for the apprehension of the theological and mystical transcendence (from the world to God).”⁶ We can say that as early as Eriugena and his translation of Pseudo-Dionysius, properly medieval aesthetics began, which is based on the symbolic meaning of art forms, on beauty as the perfection of being and on the notion of vision as the highest form of knowledge.⁷ All vision is actually a vision of beauty and, hence, illuminated vision. At the same time, man suffers from the insufficiency of this perfection – the consequence of sin – and establishes a longing for the missing perfection. Thus, the beauty of imperfect beings impels us to search for perfection.

In Dionysius’ eyes, perfection exists in the divine sphere only. For that reason, he wrote a complete book on the divine names, that is, on God’s possible qualities indicated by his given names. For Plotinus, it is self-evident that we cannot make assertions about God, and this must be considered the direct source of the goal of Dionysius’ analysis of the divine names, namely, that we do not actually have the ability to give God appropriate names, but that we at least have a glimpse of how he is to be named owing to his own revelation in the divine processions. Plato provides a different way by

⁴ Endre v. Ivánka, *Plato Christianus. Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1964) 226.

⁵ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik II: Fächer der Stile*, 151.

⁶ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik II: Fächer der Stile*, 171. He does not so much refer the concept of aestheticism to art, but defines it as the “relationships between sensuousness and spirit.” *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik II: Fächer der Stile*, 202.

⁷ Cf. Rosario Assunto, *Die Theorie des Schönen im Mittelalter* (Köln: DuMont, 1963) 82.

saying that “the correctness of a name is the quality of showing the nature of the thing named”⁸ – a notion which his commentator Proclus takes over,⁹ although he concludes that with reference to the One, names can cover the hidden truth of the divine.¹⁰ Hence, the Areopagite uses Plato’s approach of naming God in order to find out about his nature, but comes to Plotinus’ conclusion, namely, that he is unnameable.

Among the divine names, εἶν is considered the most general one for God, although it is not dealt with immediately. Its unique position is due to its being “the precondition of every other name with regard to form and content and because it accommodates the intention of negative theology especially with its generality and abstractness at the same time,”¹¹ as Beierwaltes suggests. Dionysius himself states that “the One is elementary for all, for if you annihilate the One, neither wholeness, parts or anything else will be.”¹² On the other hand, even this name is insufficient; so is its negation. Beierwaltes indicates that, as in Proclus’ writings, Dionysius’ attempt to name the unnameable ends in the sublation of this activity, that is, in silence.¹³ Nevertheless, this process of affirmation and negation has to be gone through, so that he who will “unknowingly be elevated, as far as possible, to the unity of that beyond being and knowledge”¹⁴ will not misunderstand the experience of the divine in the ecstatic unification with it as a fall into an apriori irrational which can be apprehended without purification and illumination, that is, directly without the necessary presupposition of reflection.¹⁵ This idea of the importance of a negative theology originates, in the broadest

⁸ Plato, *Cratylus*, 428e.

⁹ Cf. Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, n.CXXII.

¹⁰ Cf. Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, VII 40; 46; 48; 60; 68; 70.

¹¹ Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 57.

¹² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 980B.

¹³ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 61. With regard to the Proclian silence in Proclus’ philosophy cf. also Senger, “Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nicolaus Cusanus und seinem italienischen Umfeld,” 518, note 44: “Proclus calls the analysis directed to the highest principle a theory ending in silence.” For according to Proclus, the names given to God must be seen as mere images, or else they would cover the truth of him. Cf. Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, VII 40; 46; 48; 60; 68; 70.

¹⁴ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, transl. and intr. John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1976) 998B. His assertion in 977C that the One is the cause of everything is close to what Plotinus says in the *Enneads*, VI 9, namely, that all beings proceed from it.

¹⁵ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 63.

sense, from Plato, for the hypothesis in the *Parmenides* that the One is not can be seen as the beginning of that which is perfected by Dionysius.¹⁶ Thus, calling the One, that is, God, beautiful does not touch its essence. The same is true for being. If the One existed, it would no longer be the One itself in the sense of a singularity, since ‘being’ would already imply a difference.¹⁷ By constantly emphasizing the otherness, nothingness and otherworldliness of God, the One, Dionysius thinks in Proclitic categories.¹⁸ God does not lose the unity characteristic of the One in his concretion to diversity.¹⁹ Thus, the principle is not identical with what emerges from it.

Divine names, which are actually only aspects of the One, expressing the causality of the first principle with regard to the created world, are dealt with first. Dionysius creates words like the Hyper-Good (ὑπεράγαθον) and the Hyper-Beautiful (ὑπερκαλὸν) to indicate a traditionally Neoplatonic experience of thinking²⁰ that wants to overcome and transcend the common subject-object dichotomy, “for if the soul spoke to itself in the transcending to itself, that is, in the immanent transcendence, it would no longer be speaking,”²¹ as Wilhem Perpeet expresses man’s paradoxical situation. Yet, the Areopagite differs from his source in the sense that he means something different with the method and words, namely, God’s transcendence separated from the human soul by an unpassable abyss. On the other hand, there are passages where God’s beauty is described in very sensuous terms with characteristics such as “splendor” and “fragrance.”²² This makes clear that it is hard for even a philosopher to remain in the abstract world and leave the more human way of thinking, which uses sensuous images to describe the indescribable. Hence, Dionysius’ theology finds itself in constant conflict between trying to make God understandable and

¹⁶ Cf. Plato, *Parmenides*, 141e.

¹⁷ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 54.

¹⁸ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 55.

¹⁹ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 121B; Plato, *Timaeus*, 42e: “He was abiding in his own proper and wonted state”; Plotinus, V 1.6.29; V 4.2.22: “If it [the One] remains in its own nature, being does emanate from it, but in a way that it [the One] persists in itself”; Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, 1, 390.

²⁰ Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.32.29: “It is the Beauty beyond every beauty.” Cf. also VI 7.33.22: “It is the true Beauty (ἡ καλλωνή), the Hyper-Beauty, not measured.”

²¹ Perpeet, 73.

²² Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 476B.

emphasizing his transcendence. In Balthasar's treatment of him, the former defines beauty, consequently, as "the appearing of the non-appearing in every appearance."²³ The concept of transcendence is both Christian and Platonic. Otto Siebert argues – without giving a reference or a justification – that the transcendent positing of God by Christianity is due to a moral need, whereas the Neoplatonic doctrine bases this on a metaphysical and ontological foundation.²⁴ As far as I can imagine, he seems to have developed this rather misleading idea owing to a mistaken assessment of Christianity in the first place, namely, with regard to the Good itself, which he seems to take as the moral good for Christians and the ontological good for Platonism. However, in Dionysius' case, there does not seem to be a moral motivation for the transcendence at all. Either way, his – and the Neoplatonists' – association of the hyper-natural Beauty with the transmundane God is problematic.²⁵ If something has to appear in order to be called beautiful, how can God be Beauty itself and not have the ability to appear? How should Beauty itself be defined, if it could not be found in man? Plato solves this problem by saying that Beauty is the only Idea which has sensibles among its instances.²⁶ Dionysius must be seen in this tradition: beauty is the visible proof for a relation between the created world and God.

As is the case with God's transcendence, his beauty also is described in concrete and abstract terms. The Areopagite does not distinguish between *καλὸν* (the participating) and *κάλλος* (the participated). Both names apply to God, for in him, there is no subdivision into participation and participant, as there is in all created beings. Consequently, "the Beautiful beyond being is said to be *κάλλος*, since it gives beauty from itself in a manner appropriate to each, it causes the consonance and splendor of all (...), it calls all to itself (...), and it brings all together into the same."²⁷ On the other hand, it is *καλόν*, because – and here he quotes Plato's *Symposium* almost word by

²³ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik II: Fächer der Stile*, 169.

²⁴ Cf. Otto Siebert, *Die Metaphysik und Ethik des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita* (Jena: Frommannsche Hof-Buchdruckerei, 1894) 28.

²⁵ Cf. Perpeet, 74.

²⁶ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d.

²⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C-D. In reference to this paragraph, Putnam defines the Dionysian concept of beauty as "a state of perfection in which relationships, if there be any, are so unified and well-ordered that a certain radiance results." Putnam, 15.

word,²⁸ adding only the Plotinic aspect of overabundance – it is “at once all-beautiful and hyper-beautiful, always beautiful according to the same and in like manner; thus, not coming to be, not passing out of being (...), not beautiful to some and ugly to others, but itself always being uniformly beautiful in virtue of itself and with itself.”²⁹ Hence, it is eternal and not relatively or subjectively but objectively beautiful. Perpeet criticizes Dionysius’ use of Plato here, because, in his eyes, it has such a divergent sense that “Plato would have protested fiercely against this abuse.”³⁰ He himself does not hint at the content of the divergence, but Putnam claims that the absolute in this paragraph is not a personal being but an abstraction for Plato, while it stands for God himself in Dionysius’ eyes.³¹

Beauty is the form in which we get to see being. While God, the Good, generates all being into existence, God, the Beautiful, provides all being with a form appropriate to it. For Dionysius, this means, firstly, that beauty resides primarily in the form as the intelligible element in the created thing – something that Plotinus taught him³² – while matter is only beautiful insofar as it reveals the form; and, secondly, that out of the Beautiful, that is, God, all being has its adequate beauty. One can, therefore, say that there is a universal extension of beauty over all being,³³ which suggests that the former is what would later be called a transcendental.

²⁸ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 211a-b.

²⁹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701D-704A.

³⁰ Perpeet, 74. Hugo Koch points to the oddity that this passage cannot be found in either Plotinus, Proclus or any other Neoplatonist, which suggests that Dionysius took it directly from Plato. However, Proclus’ lost book *περὶ τῶν τριῶν μονάδων* must have been partly on beauty, since the three monads are ἀλήθεια, καλλονὴ and συμμετρία. Diotima’s speech would simply not have offered a reason to treat the problem of evil, so that Proclus might have decided not to write about it in his book on evil, but in the lost one. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that everything else Dionysius says in *The Divine Names* is closer to Proclus. Cf. Hugo Koch, 64-65.

³¹ Cf. Putnam, 16.

³² Cf. Plotinus, V 9.2.12-15; I 6.2.13-15.

³³ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; 704B. He takes this thought over from Proclus. A discovery of Plato’s in the *Theaetetus* is very important for Dionysius, namely, that the former adds all basic traits present in all being – the anticipation of Aristotle’s modes of being – to what is later called the transcendentals, that is, oneness, goodness, truth and beauty. Cf. Alois Dempf, “Der Platonismus des Eusebius, Victorinus und Pseudo-Dionysius,” *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 3 (1962): 10.

By means of this beauty all harmony,³⁴ friendship and community exist; everything is united through beauty. The Godhead is actually celebrated as “wise and beautiful, for all beings are preserved in what is incorruptible of their own nature and indeed are filled with every divine harmony and sacred beauty.”³⁵ By calling God beautiful, it can, consequently, be said that without being something definite itself, beyond every determination, archetypical Beauty is the basic presupposition apart from genesis, the support and perfection of every beginning, end, movement and calmness. It is both the paradigmatic and the efficient cause of all things,³⁶ exciting the whole and keeping it together by means of the love of the beauty pursuant to the individual. By calling it, furthermore, a final cause, the Platonic circle becomes clearly visible in *The Divine Names*, when after a long list of creations it is concluded that “simply all being is from the Beautiful-and-Good, is in the Beautiful-and-Good, and is returned to the Beautiful-and-Good.”³⁷ Even the book itself is written in a circular

³⁴ Not only harmony in terms of symmetry, consonance, good order and a good proportion, but clarity (or splendor as well) is considered to be essential for beauty. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; *De coelesti hierarchia*, 144A. Putnam adds the characteristic of identity in the sense of wholeness and selfhood. Cf. Putnam, 85-87. Dionysius expresses this with the term ‘ταῦτότης,’ which first appears as a formal expression in Aristotle. Cf. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1161b27-33; *Metaphysics*, 1018a5-9. The most important meaning of the term in the Areopagite’s writings, which also corresponds to Aristotle’s view, is to indicate a being’s inner unity without a relationship to something else. This concept includes three aspects, namely, propriety as having everything which pertains to a particular mode of being, limitation as remaining distinct from other beings, and unity as being fully oneself.

³⁵ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 592A.

³⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A. The Areopagite has probably derived his knowledge of the Aristotelian causes from Proclus’ comment on the *Timaeus*, where he calls the shaping of the universe a contrivance of the effective, paradigmatic and final cause. Cf. Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, 1, 213; 1, 263. The paradigmatic cause can be considered a subcategory of the formal cause.

³⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705D. With regard to the concept of remaining cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 31c. Proclus establishes the triad of emanation (πρόοδος), remaining (μονή) and return (ἐπιστροφή) to a structural principle of spirit and world. Thomas Aquinas’ whole *Summa theologiae* is constructed according to this principle. The triad is a Neoplatonic continuation of the Platonic principle on the necessity of a middle term to link contrary terms. It resembles the divine structure, namely, that God remains identical with himself always, while he flows into difference in his effects and regains identity by means of the return.

style: The passage on the Trinitarian One in 980B refers back to the beginning.³⁸

Besides God, Christ is named “the Beautiful”³⁹ as well, which illustrates that the pagan philosophy on beauty is thereby truly Christianized. Dionysius describes the Incarnation in these terms and adds again that man then takes part in beauty:

“The infinite friendliness towards man of the goodness of the divine principle (...) entered a real community with everything on us, but without sin, (...) and provided our participation in its own beauties. (...) It filled the darkness in our intellect with blessing divine Light and its formlessness with beauties appropriate to God.”⁴⁰

Beauty also refers to the two hierarchies the Areopagite establishes in his writings. With regard to the celestial hierarchy, he says that the creatures beyond heaven, that is, the angels, have a distinctive illumination and “a sanctified beautiful order transcending our world.”⁴¹ In the ecclesiastical hierarchy, those who are ordained priests are described as having risen to the highest degree of beauty appropriate to God, which they preserve in the highest degree and fully by means of their ordination.⁴² When a monk cuts his hair, he symbolizes a pure life without external ‘make-up,’ so that the ugliness in the spirit is not made beautiful by means of external attempts to beautify oneself. The similarity to God should be the most important factor, that is, not a human quality of beauty, but a quality of beauty adequate for the One to shine through.⁴³

A peculiarity of Dionysius is his connection of beauty with the image of light, indicating the traditional concept of clarity as one of the major characteristics of beauty. Putnam points out that the very fact that the theologian describes divine Beauty right after his treatment of divine Light shows their close connection.⁴⁴ This assumption is supported by Dionysius’ own

³⁸ Cf. Beate Regina Suchla, introduction and notes, *Die Namen Gottes*, by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, transl. Beate Regina Suchla (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1988) 123, note 166.

³⁹ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 401D.

⁴⁰ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 441A-B.

⁴¹ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 200C.

⁴² Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 513B.

⁴³ Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 536A.

⁴⁴ Cf. Putnam, 83-84.

statement in *The Divine Names*, where he argues that beauty causes the splendor of all and flashes forth upon all in the manner of light.⁴⁵ Seen from the other side, it must be said that light is not the reason for the beauty of the lightlike. Light is always beautiful, because divine Beauty is present in light in such a way that divine Beauty can be implicitly and unknowingly loved in the natural preference of lucid beauty. Visible light is the most beautiful sensual phenomenon, since it is the most similar to God among all earthly dissimilarity.⁴⁶ God himself is, of course, not light, since the latter is created by him, but he himself has shown much love for light, as Scripture indicates, for light was his first creation.⁴⁷ However, the character of the lightlike offers an idea of how God's transcendence has to be understood. The attempt to express God's transcendent transcendence is exemplified in singular phrases, such as the light metaphors "intellectual light as source ray" and "overflowing burst of light."⁴⁸ The Good itself is the archetype of light, namely, hyper-light Light, the Light of the spirit similar to the Platonic sun of the Ideas as a metaphor for the Good.⁴⁹ God's hyper-bright light is identical with darkness in the sense that it has this effect on human shortsightedness, even though it actually is not identical.⁵⁰ Dionysius expresses this with phrases such as "darkness beyond light" or thoughts like "in the greatest darkness, that beyond all that is most evident exceedingly illuminates the sightless intellects,"⁵¹ for light is a metaphor for insight, illumination and clarification of truth. In comparison with light, man is at all times the one who receives. Light is always somewhere else shining beautifully. So God as the cause of all beauty remains man's opponent. Perpeet offers a variety of possible analogies between God and light.

⁴⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

⁴⁶ Cf. Perpeet, 80.

⁴⁷ Cf. Perpeet, 77.

⁴⁸ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701A.

⁴⁹ Regarding the sun as God and mover of the world cf. Plato, *Laws*, 886d: "Sun, moon, stars and earth are instances of deity and divinity." Cf. also *Laws*, 950d; Aristotle, *Physics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.4 and 5, transl. Philip H. Wicksteed and Francis M. Cornford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957 and 1960) 194b13; Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, II 4: "The sun surpasses all visible natures, and perfects and generates all things by its light."

⁵⁰ Cf. Walther Völker, *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1958) 212.

⁵¹ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 998A-B.

Light communicates itself without losing something; so does God. Both provide form, measure and relation. That which is illuminated by light shines back to its source. Accordingly, the loving God makes man love him back. Light connects separated parts; so does God, for unity is possible in him alone. Virtually, light is always present as is God,⁵² and both produce life and fulfillment. This latter point, in particular, refers to the divine healing power that resembles the capacity of light. Therefore, Jesus – the means of redemption – is described as the Light of the Father.⁵³

2. The Cause of Beauty and What Beauty Causes

*“Indeed, we must necessarily
dare to say that that which is not
partakes of the beautiful.”⁵⁴*

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As a Christian, Dionysius considers God to be the cause of everything, including beauty. However, the different names which are given to him by mankind reveal facets of him as *the* cause, incommunicable in itself, whereas the divine attributes are shareable.⁵⁵ In *The Divine Names*, God is given the Platonic name ‘the Good’ followed by Proclus’ triad οὐσία (beingness), ζωή (life), σοφία (wisdom). In the next part, he is defined as the triad of σοφία (wisdom), δύναμις (power), εἰρήνη (peace): the spiritual primordial cause of the universe, the creating power in it and the unifying force. Ivánka interprets this as Platonic emanation metaphysics,⁵⁶ which is, however, derived from the Constantinian triad of Gregory of Nyssa. Finally, Dionysius goes back to the beginning, forming a circle by analyzing the terms of Plato’s *Parmenides* in order to round up his work by identifying God with τέλειον and ἓν.

As mentioned above, the name ‘ἓν,’ ‘the One,’ is the most comprehensive. Since Dionysius is concerned with the explication of the One, that

⁵² Cf. Perpeet, 77-79.

⁵³ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 121A.

⁵⁴ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

⁵⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 644A; 956A.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ivánka, 237.

is, of the no-further-differentiable God – in contrast to Proclus’ doctrine, which analyzes the explication of differentiated divine being after the absolute One – he brings the seemingly paradoxical pair of hyper-being and being, as well as thinking and Trinitarian relationality, together in God’s unity.⁵⁷ According to Beierwaltes, “‘being’ and ‘hyper-being’ as main features of the one Trinitarian God do not form a contradiction. Being as a predicate does not annihilate hyper-being, but presents itself as its implicature, which receives the character of absoluteness and pure unity from the hyper-being.”⁵⁸ Siebert, on the other hand, is of the opinion that God lies definitively beyond being for Dionysius, and represents, in this course, the first – since he is before everything else – and the One – because diversity is a quality of being.⁵⁹ Dionysius, of course, applies this principle of transcending everything referring to God to the divine name ‘the One,’ too. God is, thus, not simply the One, but a One beyond the One.⁶⁰ He thereby rudimentarily incorporates the Neoplatonic approach of separating the One from the world according to the first hypothesis of Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*, and letting the world emanate from and be subordinated to it.

Moreover, Dionysius remains within the Neoplatonic tradition in his identification of the One with the Good.⁶¹ Apart from this adoption of the basic Neoplatonic concept, he Christianizes the philosophical emanation into a Christian understanding of the causing principle, namely, in the sense that the divine activity is influenced by goodness and love. God “alone is cause, source, being and life of all, a recalling and resurrecting of those who have fallen away from him, (...) a source of completion for those who are completed. (...) Through his goodness he brings forth and conserves beings in being.”⁶² This philosophical quality applies, in particular, to the

⁵⁷ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 58.

⁵⁸ Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 60.

⁵⁹ Cf. Siebert, 30. This does not mean a lack in the One, but a richness, since all diversity is included in its unity.

⁶⁰ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 649C.

⁶¹ Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 13: “So goodness is unity and unity goodness; the Good is one and the One the original Good.”

⁶² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 589B-C. Cf. *De coelesti hierarchia*, 177C: “The divine principle, itself beyond being, justifies the being of that which is and brought it into being out of goodness.” This does not mean that creation must be considered a necessary effect, as Heinrich Weertz seems to interpret Dionysius. Cf. Heinrich Weertz, *Die Gotteslehre des*

Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, for it is the ascent or transition of the hyper-being God into the region of being owing to his love for man.⁶³ In Dionysius' eyes, "the divine separation is the good-revealing processions of the Godhead."⁶⁴

His identification of God with Beauty makes him conclude that out of this first Beauty diversity and concreteness flow in such a way that "each is beautiful according to its proper *λόγος*."⁶⁵ Yet, divine Beauty remains one.⁶⁶ At this point, Regina Suchla sees a subtle difference in comparison with the Platonic doctrine on the One as the archetypical cause of all being, since Dionysius changes it to the Christian Trinitarian *ἐν* as the cause of the whole of creation.⁶⁷ God, the One, the Good, the Beautiful, created everything. That this assignation of qualities is not exclusively philosophical can be seen in the fact that the Bible calls God beautiful and good⁶⁸ and in the Areopagite's attempt to integrate Revelation as a necessary component into a realization of truth. Accordingly, he makes reference to Scripture's revision to Plato in attributing beauty and wisdom to the whole Trinity.⁶⁹

The Good and the Beautiful represent the first and most important Ideas for Dionysius, so that he uses them as the major predicates of God, even though he adds that he – as the Beautiful-and-Good, understood as having a beautiful and good nature and, what is more, as being somehow beyond it – generates the good and the beautiful and communicates goodness and beauty to all being by means of them. This creation and communication of beauty is the actual reason for calling God the most beautiful, Hyper-Beauty, archetypical Beauty and eternal Beauty. But even the other names given to God indicate a genesis of beauty. God as Wisdom is the founder of a beautiful agreement and of the harmony of all.⁷⁰ Moreover, God is

Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita und ihre Einwirkung auf Thomas von Aquin (Köln: Heinrich Theissing, 1908) 26.

⁶³ Cf. Dionysius, *Epistulae*. *Corpus Dionysiacum*, ed. Günter Heil (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991) 1069B.

⁶⁴ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 649B.

⁶⁵ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁶⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

⁶⁷ Cf. Suchla, 18.

⁶⁸ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 596B.

⁶⁹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 637B.

⁷⁰ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 872B.

called Justice, because he distributes what is due to all and determines the symmetry, beauty, good order, regulation, every apportionment, and the orders for each being according to true being.⁷¹ Although the latter names are not themselves mentioned by Plato, the Pythagorean notions of harmony and symmetry in relation to beauty are central in Dionysius' writings, notwithstanding the fact that he has, probably, taken over the idea from Proclus, who combined beauty, order and symmetry, in the sense that beauty is the reason for the two, that is, for the loving connection of being.⁷²

The question that now arises is how far the Areopagite's doctrine remains purely Platonic and to what extent Christian revisions are visible. The Platonic participation doctrine is still very present without a hint as to how one should interpret it as purely Christian. In Dionysius' eyes, all being exists by a participation in the archetypical being of the Beautiful-and-Good exceeding every measure, which directs like a visible light the diversity of things to it and binds it together in an ordered unity. Owing to this participation in the one true Being, things are beautiful and good. Furthermore, when it is said that in the plain, hyper-natural nature of all beauty, every form of beauty has its pre-existence, which is communicated to all being by means of it,⁷³ this does not sound like a common Christian doctrine. The Platonic influence in the participation doctrine becomes even stronger when the concept of harmony is again taken into consideration. The Areopagite says that by means of the "hierarchical harmony filled with God, everyone takes part in the truly Beautiful, Wise and Good, as much as he can."⁷⁴ This triad is taken from Proclus, who considered the qualities of goodness, wisdom and beauty to be constituents of the divine nature.⁷⁵ Scripture functions as a mere confirmation here, not adding any new thought: When the theologian asserts that "there is not anything which does not somehow take part in beauty,"⁷⁶ he refers to the Bible as a supporter of the idea of universal

⁷¹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 896A.

⁷² Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, III 8.

⁷³ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A. The idea of pre-existence is expressed with the Greek word 'προϋφέστηκεν' having the meaning of 'to presuppose.'

⁷⁴ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 373A.

⁷⁵ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 25.

⁷⁶ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 141C.

beauty: “All is exceedingly beautiful.”⁷⁷ Yet, this verse does not offer any indication of a participation doctrine.

What is new in contrast to Plato and Neoplatonism in Dionysius’ thought is that “that which is not partakes of the Beautiful-and-Good, because it is itself the good when hyper-beingly celebrated in God in the negation of all.”⁷⁸ This appears like the first beginnings of Cusanus’ *coincidentia oppositorum*. At a later point, the latter’s doctrine is anticipated even more clearly: “The Beautiful-and-Good – beyond all rest and motion – is cause, conservator, and limit of the three sensible motions in this world.”⁷⁹

It is now necessary to analyze what this participation means. Suchla argues that *The Divine Names* documents an unshakable belief in creation beside unmistakable formulations of emanation. She concludes that they present attempts of integration and overcoming.⁸⁰ Dionysius himself offers an explanation of how God’s causing activity has to be understood. According to him, beauty is not only the final cause of being, but also the efficient cause as the source of all.⁸¹ Although this may be true for Plato’s doctrine, where a possible effective power of the Ideas can, at least implicitly, be found,⁸² Dionysius does differ from Neoplatonism. For, in his eyes, creation is a free act that was “decided upon”⁸³ by the Trinity, whereas both Plotinus and Proclus claim that being flows out of the One necessarily.⁸⁴ Moreover, beauty is the Platonic “paradigmatic cause, since all are determined according to it.”⁸⁵ In this sense it brings forth order as the measure for the world. If we give God a name like ‘Being,’ ‘the Beautiful’ or ‘the Good’ we actually mean the powers which emanate from him into us.⁸⁶ The Areopagite presents several of these powers of Beauty as the beauty producing flow, the whole beauty, the partial beauty, the wholly beautiful, and the

⁷⁷ *Genesis* 1:31. Most of the time, the translators of the Bible replace ‘beautiful’ with ‘good.’

⁷⁸ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B. Cf. *The Divine Names*, 708A.

⁷⁹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705B-C.

⁸⁰ Cf. Suchla, 106, note 20.

⁸¹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁸² Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 509b. See p. 44.

⁸³ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 373C.

⁸⁴ Cf. Plotinus, III 2.2; Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 31; 33; 37-39.

⁸⁵ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁸⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 645A.

partially beautiful, as he expresses it.⁸⁷ In other words, beauty and the good are the cause of “the essential constitutions (αἱ οὐσιῶδεις ὑπάρξεις) of all beings” such as their identities and otherness, the commixture of all, the undissolved constancy of what is, the uneclipsed successions of what comes to be, and the rest and motion of the intellects, souls and bodies.⁸⁸ Agreements, friendships, and communion exist through beauty,⁸⁹ indicating that it is the cause of the unification of all that is.⁹⁰ This means that the wholly undiscernible archetypical Beauty has a unifying relationship to other things. This attraction can even be found in the inanimate, for it is able to share in being owing to its capability of persistence.⁹¹

Dionysius considers visible beauties to be symbols of the immaterial Good of light.⁹² The material world receives its existence from the truly Beautiful, that is, God, so that, consequently, reflections of the invisible spiritual harmony are made visible throughout the whole hierarchy of material existence. Similarities between material and spiritual principles should not be seen so much as analogies, for a quality can only be present in the respective region adequately and correspondingly.⁹³ The concept of reflection here is clearly Platonic. Even though Dionysius proceeds in analyzing the reflections independently, he does not leave Plato’s sphere of possible ideas: “God’s hidden and unthinkably well-smelling beauties are not blemishable and they present themselves as contents of thought only to the thinking ones. For they want their unperishable copies having come into existence by virtues in the souls to be similar.”⁹⁴ The copies then develop into the most beautiful ones on the face of the well-smelling intellectual beauty⁹⁵ in order

⁸⁷ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 956B.

⁸⁸ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B-C. The relationship between motion and rest is part of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Cf. Aristototele, *Metaphysics*, 1072a34-1073a2.

⁸⁹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A. The idea of friendship is also present in Proclus’ interpretation of what divine Beauty effects. Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24: “Such, therefore, in short, is divine Beauty, the supplier of hilarity, familiarity and friendship.”

⁹⁰ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁹¹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 700B.

⁹² Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 121D.

⁹³ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 144B-C.

⁹⁴ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 473B.

⁹⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 473B-C.

that a direct and undistracted view of this “well-smelling hidden beauty provides the thought painters with the spiritual image without aberration and fully in accordance with God’s nature.”⁹⁶ The link between beauty and the intellect, in the sense that the beautiful copy becomes even more beautiful when perceived intellectually, is not made by Plato, but does not contradict him either, because it is the intellect which performs the ascent from the copies to Beauty itself in the *Symposium*.

Since the term ‘copy’ is frequently used here, the question arises as to what extent Dionysius adopts the Platonic Ideas, in his writings called ‘πα-ραδείγματα,’ since, most of the time, he simply identifies that which Plato calls Ideas with God. Yet, Ivánka argues – without offering a source – that, according to the Areopagite, the Ideas including Beauty itself are God’s creating thoughts.⁹⁷ This is, however, Augustine’s attempt to integrate the Platonic Ideas into Christian theology. At another point, Ivánka denies a functioning of the Ideas as a medium of gaining insight – this should work exclusively by means of direct experience – and calls them “the merely different aspects of God’s infinite fullness of being.”⁹⁸ Vladimir Losski, on the other hand, proposes that these Ideas are not the divine essence but rather different principles according to which God’s inexpressible essence is manifested in creatures.⁹⁹ To my mind, one simply has to acknowledge that Dionysius defines the meaning of these παραδείγματα himself, so that hypotheses are not necessary. In *The Divine Names* he says, “we call the paradigms the being-producing λόγοι which singly subsist beforehand in God.” It is hard to determine definitely what ‘λόγοι’ means in this context. The Areopagite tries to explain his assertion by means of a reference to tradition: “The theology calls these the pre-determining, divine, and good wills which are determinative and productive of being. The Beyond-Being has pre-determined and brought forth all being according to these.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 473C.

⁹⁷ Cf. Ivánka, 263. In opposition to this, Balthasar denies the hypothesis. Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik II: Fächer der Stile*, 190.

⁹⁸ Ivánka, 279.

⁹⁹ Cf. Vladimir Losski, “La notion des ‘analogies’ chez Denys le pseudo-Aréopagite,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologique* XXVIII (1939): 285.

¹⁰⁰ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 824C.

3. The Beautiful-and-Good

“The complete and entire possession of every beauty and good” is dominance.¹⁰¹

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As the previous section has already shown, Dionysius very often uses the terms ‘the beautiful’ and ‘the good’ in the sense of the unity of the Beautiful-and-Good. He distances himself from Plato in this doctrine, who apart from his inconsistencies regarding this sphere pleads for a superiority of the Good. Plotinus, as well, is of the opinion that the Good is more fundamental than Beauty.¹⁰² So, too, is Proclus, who nevertheless admits that what is good is beautiful and what is beautiful is also good.¹⁰³ Dionysius’ identification of beauty with goodness is emphasized in the first Latin translation of the Greek text of *The Divine Names*. For the translator did not make a clear distinction between the two words and simply used bonum for κάλλος (pulchrum), as Albert the Great notes.¹⁰⁴ It is possible to refer this identification to the Greek ideal of καλοκαγαθία as a natural, but, in this case, not so much a moral, perfection.

‘The Good’ as the first name for God which is mentioned – as *the* Platonic name for God – is emphasized by its placement and strongly distinguished from all other names, so that it comes nearest to a designation of the divine nature.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Goodness, which flows out by itself, is the first; then in Dionysius’ eyes follow being, life and being-wise. The superiority of the Good over being originates from Plato’s *Republic* and was adopted by Plotinus.¹⁰⁶ The Areopagite takes this idea over and expresses it by means of the Plotinic principle of describing transcendence and overabundance with the prefix ὑπέρ-: The Good is the “unity unifying every

¹⁰¹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 969B.

¹⁰² Cf. Plotinus, V 5.12.18.

¹⁰³ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 329.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus. Opera omnia*, vol.37,1, ed. Paul Simon (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972) c.4, 77. Cf. also Jan A. Aertsen, “Das Schöne. Mittelalter,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol.8, 1351.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Ivánka, 231; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 596D: “the Goodness beyond name” (ἡ ὑπερώνυμος ἀγαθότης).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 509b; Plotinus, V 5.13.33.

unity, being beyond being, (...) being according to no being, cause of being to all; but itself: non-being, as it is beyond every being.”¹⁰⁷ Despite being in everything, that is, apart from the fact that God’s goodness means the revelation of himself,¹⁰⁸ it retains its absolute transcendence.¹⁰⁹ This is traditional Neoplatonic thinking, to which Dionysius adds the otherworldliness of God.¹¹⁰ Ivánka is right in pointing out that Dionysius adopts the Neoplatonic principle that all forms and levels of beings are different degrees and forms of participation in God, but is wrong in claiming that the idea that God himself is “beyond every intelligible and definable designation of being”¹¹¹ is an addendum to his source. For, as mentioned above, Plato says that the Good is beyond being. A slight difference, however, is the Areopagite’s justification for this hierarchy. The Good is superior to being on the grounds of causality: the Good reaches all existing and non-existing things, while the causality of being refers only to existing things.

Another innovation is not only that the things turn to the good, as is said for example by Plotinus,¹¹² but that God, the Good, turns to the things – an aspect that underscores Dionysius’ decision to treat this name first, since it reveals the whole procession of God and is, therefore, the most relevant to

¹⁰⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 588B. Cf. Plotinus, VI 7.32.12-13, where it is said that the One is “nothing, because actualized being is later, but everything, because actualized being has emanated from it.” Cf. also Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 123: “Directly beyond being, there must be a non-being which is unity and higher than being.”

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Siebert, 38.

¹⁰⁹ This shows how unjustified the accusation of pantheism is. For me, it is, therefore incomprehensible that Weertz can argue that God’s transcendence is weakened by his immanence, so that a dynamic pantheism should be present in Dionysius’ doctrine. This incautiousness due to his dependence on the Neoplatonists, as Weerts formulates it, should become obvious when he calls God the Being of actual being. Cf. Weertz, 24-25. To my eye’s, it is traditional Christian teaching to emphasize both the divine immanence and transcendence. Furthermore, the Dionysian teaching even seems to agree with Thomas Aquinas here when God is called the Being of actual being.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 64. Yet, it should also be noted that Plotinus constantly refers to ‘the other world,’ ‘the upper world’ or ‘the divine world’ as an opposition to our cosmos. Cf. Plotinus, I 6.9.38-43; II 9.4.26; III 5.1.59-62; V 8.7.18.

¹¹¹ Ivánka, 254.

¹¹² Cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.1-3: “Let us ascend to the good again, for which every soul strives.”

creation.¹¹³ His presence alone thereby necessarily directs events to him.¹¹⁴ Owing to the unity and identity of the Good and the Beautiful, God as the Beautiful-and-Good is, consequently, also the reason for the unification of diversity of being, and for its fitting and staying together without a loss of individuality. In other words, the Beautiful-and-Good is closely linked to the harmony of the whole of being,¹¹⁵ which is accomplished through God's devotion. This identity in the generating God is even considered by Dionysius to be Love itself¹¹⁶ – influenced by Scripture: “ὁ θεός ἀγάπη ἐστίν.”¹¹⁷ He differs in this identification of the One, the Good and the Beautiful with Love from both Plato and Proclus, who merely presented a picture of the One that shows it offering participation freely and without envy. Yet, according to the Areopagite, the identification with Eros is justified as a result of God's goodness. He says that “this Good is celebrated (...) as beautiful and as Beauty, as ἀγάπη and beloved, and by many other divine names which are suitable to its beauty producing and rich character.”¹¹⁸ The identity between the good and the beautiful is justified as well: “The beautiful and the good are the same: all beings desire the Beautiful-and-Good with respect to every cause, and no being fails to partake of the Beautiful-and-Good.”¹¹⁹

Goodness is compared with light illuminating, creating, giving life, conserving and perfecting all that is empowered. “It is the measure, eternity, number, order, encompassing, cause and end of beings.”¹²⁰ Sunlight as an image of goodness is a Platonic concept which led to light metaphysics via Philo.¹²¹ Hence, since the good is a light, it is identical with the beautiful. They behave like inside and outside. Hauskeller describes beauty as the gleaming of the good, so that the presence of the one implies the presence

¹¹³ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 680B.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 589B-C. Beierwaltes suggests, however, that love of beauty is directed towards an appearance of the good. Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 67.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A-B.

¹¹⁷ *1 John* 4:8.

¹¹⁸ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

¹¹⁹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

¹²⁰ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 697C.

¹²¹ Cf. Suchla, 13, note 61; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 697C.

of the other.¹²² With regard to the choice of words, this does, however, remind one more of Proclus, for whom all beauty is the lucid appearance of the Good itself.¹²³ Siebert supports Hauskeller's interpretation by stating that although they can be separated conceptually, one cannot do so empirically. Goodness refers to the material side, beauty to the formal perspective. Thus, they always appear together and can only be separated in thought.¹²⁴ Theologians "call goodness (...) the thearchic constitution itself, for by being, the Good as essential good extends goodness into all beings."¹²⁵ This is why Putnam suggests that, if beauty in any way differs from the good, it is at this point, where the great work of the good is to give, while the main task of the beautiful is to attract.¹²⁶ Owing to the identity just mentioned, there can be nothing in the world that lacks beauty and goodness. "Even non-being itself desires the Good beyond all beings, strives somehow to be in the Good, and is itself the truly beyond being in the denial of all."¹²⁷ In that sense, non-being has a meaning with regard to God, if it is thought hyper-naturally as an abstraction of everything in God.

¹²² Cf. Hauskeller, 73.

¹²³ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24.

¹²⁴ Cf. Siebert, 41.

¹²⁵ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 693B.

¹²⁶ Cf. Putnam, 71. She links this theory to Christ, who, as the Good, "came down to join in the fray and assure the victory." Putnam, 72. "As the Beautiful he provides fit rewards for those to win." Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 401D. With this opinion, she is in line with Otto Semmelroth, who considers God to be Beauty in the sense of being the goal, while God as the Good is the cause of all being. Cf. Otto Semmelroth, "Gottes überwesentliche Einheit. Zur Gotteslehre des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita," *Scholastik* 25 (1950): 230; 232. However, as Aersten points out, Dionysius sees the dynamic of reality in terms of the Platonic circular movement, so that the beginning must be identical with the end. Cf. Jan A. Aertsen, "'Über das Schöne' – Alberts des Großen Kölner Vorlesungen zu Dionysius Areopagita," *Dombau und Theologie im mittelalterlichen Köln*, ed. Ludger Honnefelder (Köln: Verlag Kölner Dom, 1998) 420. This is supported by the Areopagite himself, who not only says that the first Beauty causes the beauty in beings (cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C), but who constantly notes the identity of beauty and the good. Semmelroth tries to solve the first problem by claiming that "the creating God as the Good gives being to the things, that is, the material element, and as the Beautiful their peculiar form, that is, the formal element." Cf. Semmelroth, 232. By this suggestion he, first of all, ignores the identity and, secondly, the fact that Dionysius also considers beauty an efficient cause. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

¹²⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 697A.

If all being aspires to the Beautiful-and-Good, the question remains why the many demons do not desire it but, being inclined toward matter, fall and come to be the cause of all evils.¹²⁸ How then does a good which emanates into being from the Good change?¹²⁹ Dionysius tries to answer these problematic questions in several ways, most of which are to a great extent taken over from Proclus' book *De malorum subsistentia*. The Areopagite claims, at one point, that evil is not from the Good; and at another point, that evil is not wholly evil but has some mode of the Good according to which it is able to be at all. Then he suggests that evil is neither being nor non-being, since the latter is in the Good insofar as the Good lies beyond being. His preliminary conclusion is that evil has a greater absence and estrangement from the concept of the good than that which is not.¹³⁰ This whole theory is given up only a few lines later, where evil is said to exist in beings, is being, and is placed against and opposed to goodness.¹³¹ One can clearly see influences of the gnostic radical dualism here and in a later passage, where the Areopagite argues that evil is not from God nor in God.¹³² Finally, he is of the opinion that evil does not have being, but is a privation and defection of the most complete and proper goods.¹³³ This privation is not wholly evil, but less beautiful. For if a body would come to be dissolved of beauty, form and order, the body itself would be gone.¹³⁴ With this conclusion, he distances himself from Plato and Plotinus, because the doctrine that evil cannot be in

¹²⁸ He later explains that insofar as demons exist, they come from the Good, are good and desire the Beautiful-and-Good by desiring being, life and thinking. They are evil insofar as they are not, and by desiring what is not, they desire what is evil. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 725C; Proclus, *De malorum subsistentia*, transl. Guilelmo de Moerbeka Vertente (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960) c.16, n.45. Rosario Assunto claims that demons are beautiful precisely because of their deformity, since they reveal a relative perfection. Thus, everything is beautiful in its peculiar way. Cf. Assunto, 82.

¹²⁹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 716A.

¹³⁰ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 716B-D.

¹³¹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 717A.

¹³² Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 724A. At a later point, he revises this theory by saying that God knows evil as good and with God the causes of evils are good-producing powers. Cf. *The Divine Names*, 729C.

¹³³ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 728A. This is, however, held to be impossible by Suchla, who claims that evil cannot be considered the privation of goodness, *privatio boni*, since only goodness can generate being. Cf. Suchla, 19.

¹³⁴ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 728D.

matter, for even matter has a share in the world, in beauty and in form,¹³⁵ contradicts Plato's assertion of the origin of evil in matter. All in all, wherever evil might come from, it strives for its own over-coming in Dionysius' eyes: "The goal of evils is the good."¹³⁶ This becomes clear, for example, in the case of passions: "Even the passions partake of the good, for through their movement and desire they direct and return what seems to be evil to what seems to be good."¹³⁷ The church is also said to be itself an attempt to abolish evil: "The ecclesiastical hierarchy is God's experienceable presence in the area of evil: On the same level as evil, it reveals the power of God's being good; God's presence becomes experienceable for man only by the destruction of evil,"¹³⁸ as Ekkehard Mühlenberg formulates it. Incidentally, the connection of the Good and the One, that is, God, in contrast to evil and the many, existing also in the church, is traditional Neoplatonic doctrine.¹³⁹

4. Modes of Apprehending Divine Beauty

*"For every being the Beautiful-and-Good
is desired, loved and beloved."*¹⁴⁰

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a) *Cognition*

There is a basic pattern in every being consisting in emanating (πρόοδος), persisting (μονή), and returning (ἐπιστροφή) – the Platonic circle, which provides a relationality of the whole in itself and in its distinctive dimensions.¹⁴¹ The attempt to apprehend represents the third stage in this circle,

¹³⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 729A.

¹³⁶ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 732B.

¹³⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 720C.

¹³⁸ Ekkehard Mühlenberg, "Das Verständnis des Bösen in neuplatonischer und frühchristlicher Sicht," *Kerygma und Dogma* 15 (1969): 233.

¹³⁹ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 145C; Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, 1, 375; but also Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 988a14 and 1075a35-36, where he presents Plato's doctrine and that of other schools.

¹⁴⁰ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 52.

the return to one's origin. That this return is a problem for man becomes clear when one takes the phenomenon of cognition into consideration.

What has influenced Dionysius heavily is the doctrine of the *Parmenides*, where Plato says that God alone has most precise insight, namely, insight itself and of beingness in itself.¹⁴² Human insight does not have a similar capacity, even though God tries to support man's attempt by illuminating being and revealing his spirit so as to provide information for being on its origin and its disposition, and to avoid all error. This illumination shows that, by nature, man cannot perceive God. It is again Plato who has already mentioned this human problem by saying that the beautiful divinity must inspire man to make him understand true Beauty.¹⁴³ Apart from the necessary illumination, Dionysius adds the need for purification to prepare oneself for the vision of the divine. Although he refers to Scripture, namely, to Moses,¹⁴⁴ who was ordered to purify himself first, the theologian also continues the Neoplatonic tradition, such as Proclus, for whom beauty has a purgatorial function.¹⁴⁵ Purification means a freeing from ignorance; being pure signifies that the soul remains with itself always without being distracted by alien things.¹⁴⁶

The human way of gaining insight is an "ascent through denials in which the soul stands outside of what is connatural to it, travels through every divine intellection (...) and, at the final end, is joined together to it insofar as it is possible for the soul to be joined together with it."¹⁴⁷ The 'ascent through denials' shows Dionysius' division of theology into a positive method following the biblical tradition and a negative approach leading to a non-cognitive unification with God as the nameless and predicateless hyper-unrecognizable (ὑπεράγνωστον) by means of a mystical immersion.¹⁴⁸ The negative theology here originates from Plato's statement that, since the Idea is unique and, as a result, differs from what it causes, it remains unknown to man.¹⁴⁹ The principle is then developed from the Plotinic return into

¹⁴² Cf. Plato, *Parmenides*, 134c-e.

¹⁴³ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000C.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 32-33.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 209C.

¹⁴⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 981B.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Hauskeller, 73.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Plato, *Parmenides*, 134b-c.

the own self and his way to the One as a way of finding God. But Proclus is also acquainted with both possible ways leading to an apprehension of God.¹⁵⁰ What is more, the latter mentions a type of perception superior to the intellectual.¹⁵¹ Walther Völker argues nevertheless for a different source that influenced Dionysius: “It should not be overlooked that, long before Proclus, Christian theologians had the same thoughts, with whom Dionysius is probably connected.”¹⁵² The term ‘probably’ clearly shows that this assertion cannot be proven.

This ascent does not start with man, but he is dependent on God, or, more precisely, on God’s invitation in the form of a call. The realization of the calling is attributed to beauty. In this context, Dionysius refers to an etymological affiliation of κάλλος to καλεῖν, which is already present in Plato’s *Cratylus*. Yet, the latter comes to a slightly different solution with regard to this affiliation. His Socrates gives τὸ καλὸν the meaning ‘intellect’ owing to its origin in τὸ καλοῦν meaning “that which calls by name.”¹⁵³ In Proclus’ tradition, Dionysius defines τὸ καλὸν in the sense of “that which calls everything to itself.”¹⁵⁴

Man has to be led upwards by means of a diversity of symbols, which form the outer world.¹⁵⁵ Meditation on the cosmos is the necessary basis, because “we know God in terms of the order of all beings which are projected out of it and which have some similarity and likeness to his divine paradigms.”¹⁵⁶ The goal of the ascent through the hierarchy of being is Neoplatonic, for Plato still considered the One the goal and fulfillment while Plotinus extended this thought of the highest principle to the unnameable and unintelligible eternity, which nevertheless is the source of the emanation of the finite world in different steps. Whether Dionysius’ understanding of the concept of hierarchy is Neoplatonic as well has to be further

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, II 4.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 64.

¹⁵² Völker, 190-191.

¹⁵³ Plato, *Cratylus*, 416c.

¹⁵⁴ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; *Ephesians* 4:1; *1 Thessalonians* 2:12; *1 Peter* 2:9; 5:10; Plato, *Cratylus*, 416c; Plotinus I 6; V 8; Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24; *Alcibiades I*, 328.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 373A. Assunto argues that art must, in this case, emphasize the symbolic presence in the worldly appearances in order to help man to return to the beautiful and good One. Cf. Assunto, 90.

¹⁵⁶ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 869D.

analyzed. He defines ‘hierarchy’ as a “holy order, image of the beauty of the divine principle.”¹⁵⁷ According to Ivánka, Dionysius adopts only the image of a hierarchical construction of being, but interprets it in a totally oppositional way.¹⁵⁸ His starting-point is Proclus, who argues that during the ascent each level has to be gone through so that, in the end, the contact of the human soul with the One causes the annihilation of the hierarchical order. Dionysius, however, considers the ascent to be a mere breakthrough of the soul to the One through the levels of being. These levels he accepts in a sense only for the illumination, but not for the emanation of being. All creation is an emanation of the creating One, which shows the Christian influence in the theologian’s thoughts: In contrast to God, all creation is creation without a difference in being. In Proclus’ eyes, the level of being is that which is decisive for its value; for Dionysius it is the perfection to be aspired on each level of being and illumination.¹⁵⁹ René Roques proves the lack of steps in the generating of being by saying that there is an indication of freedom and the existence of a plan in the act of creation. With a gradual emanation, however, the plan for the multifariousness could not be created by the origin of the emanation, but would have to be rooted in the nature of the origin.¹⁶⁰ Ivánka criticizes Carl Schneider for the latter’s assertion that “there is not a single passage indicating a rejection of Neoplatonism,”¹⁶¹ especially in the face of a Dionysian passage like the following:

“I do not maintain that the good is one, while being is another, life another or wisdom another; nor do I maintain that there are other ruling and subordinate divinities which are productive of other beings. I do maintain that the whole good procession and those divine names which are celebrated by us refer to one God.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165B. The concept of order is important owing to the doctrine that it is the presupposition of being. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 30a; *Republic*, 500c.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Ivánka, 257.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Ivánka, 258-259.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. René Roques, *L’Univers Dionysien. Structure Hiérarchique du Monde selon le Pseudo-Denys* (Paris: Aubier, 1954) 101-102. He thereby ranks Dionysius among Christian theologians such as Augustine, who claims that God’s creation was a free act. Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, I.XIII, c.31, n.46.

¹⁶¹ Carl Schneider, *Geistesgeschichte des antiken Christentums* (München: Beck, 1954) I 234, note 4. Cf. Ivánka, 267, note 5.

¹⁶² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 816C-D.

It shows that compared to God's infinity, all creation – and everything else is creation – is inadequate and not divine. Here, Proclus' conception of the hierarchy of the divine and the cosmos is rejected. Yet, this rejection does not present an aversion to the whole of Neoplatonism, which Ivánka is keen to prove.

Apart from the question of emanation, the problem of a hierarchical structure regarding illumination has still to be solved. Roques persists in a hierarchical bestowal of illumination,¹⁶³ which means for Ivánka that the peculiar nature of the divine illumination then depends on the hierarchical position and not on God's creative intention.¹⁶⁴ In his eyes, divine emanation creates being without a peculiar form of nature. The latter is only created by means of divine illumination, for in this way, God himself decides out of a free and creative act¹⁶⁵ of will to which being he will bestow pure and to which turbid illumination. In contrast, Roques' theory of a chainlike bestowal of illumination from one being to another being resulting in a differentiation of illumination would presuppose a hierarchy, which would have had to be generated during the emanation. This, however, is unchristian for Ivánka, as shown above. The only problem with this logical theory is that Dionysius' own words contradict it – which Ivánka, of course, did not fail to notice.¹⁶⁶ The Areopagite's use of the analogy of the

¹⁶³ Cf. Roques, 324, note 4.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Ivánka, 269.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 373C.

¹⁶⁶ This is why he decided to claim that Dionysius uses Neoplatonism as a mere language. He gives two references where the theologian “explicitly states that, even though he makes use of the terms of Hellenistic philosophy, he does not want to teach anything else regarding the content than that which Holy Scripture has bequeathed us.” Ivánka, 262. To my mind, the two references do not give this indication. Dionysius says, “For if someone be wholly opposed to the λόγοι, he will be entirely opposed to our philosophy. If he has no regard for the wisdom of God which is in the λόγοι, how will we care for his guidance in theological knowledge?” Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 640A. The other reference states, “For the substance (οὐσία) of the hierarchy (...) are the λόγοι of the divine revelation.” Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 376B. Ivánka seems to identify ‘λόγοι’ with Holy Scripture, which is not possible. Dionysius defines them as the immaterial teaching of those holy men, mystagogues filled with the divine, who gave us the θεολογιαῖ. Cf. *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 376B-C. Günter Heil writes that the Neoplatonists used ‘λόγοι’ to denote Plato's writings, which were the holy scripture for them as they were for Dionysius. Cf. Günter Heil, introduction and notes, *Über die himmlische Hierarchie. Über die kirchliche Hierarchie*, by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, transl. Günter Heil (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann,

seal written in the style of Plato's sun allegory¹⁶⁷ does not explicitly refer to illumination, but that seems, nonetheless, likely to be the case:

“Nevertheless, someone will say that the seal is not the whole and the same in the totality of its impressions. The seal is not the cause of this, for it freely gives all of itself in a single and identical way to each impression. The dissimilarity of the difference of those participating in it is what produces the dissolution and removal of the one whole and identical archetype.”¹⁶⁸

According to this allegory, it is not the creator but the recipient who determines the grade of communication. The second passage is even clearer and directly influenced by Proclus' gradual bestowal of illumination:

“And yet, it [the power of the divine principle] shows itself appropriately to all thinking beings and hands over the good of its own light to the highest creature in rank and disposes it through them to those below in a well-dosed order according to the degree of divine vision that every grouping is capable of. (...) Impinging on denser matter, however, its light becomes more turbid during the dispersion owing to the insufficient suitability of the illuminated matter. (...) The ordering principle lets the gleaming of its own donation of light light up first in the highest levels of being, and through them the levels of being behind them take part in the divine radiation.”¹⁶⁹

Here, a hierarchical structure in creation precedes a hierarchically structured illumination. Consequently, Dionysius simply cannot be interpreted in a purely Christian way.

1986) 73, note 3. Thus, to refer them to the Bible exclusively produces the problems with which Ivánka is faced.

¹⁶⁷ “The measure of what every being absorbs from the radiating light lies in itself.” Plato, *Republic*, 507e-508a. Dionysius explicitly uses the image of light as well: “The manifesting image of divine Goodness (...) illuminates all of those which are capable of sharing its light. (...) If some do not share in this light, this is not due to the weakness or slowness of its ability to distribute light, but of a non-openness to sharing light which is due to an unsuitableness to receive light on the part of those illuminated by the sun.” Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 697C-D.

¹⁶⁸ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 644B. Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.12, transl. Harold N. Fowler, 194c-195a; Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, V 71-73.

¹⁶⁹ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 301A-C. Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 139-140.

The last topic to deal with in this field is the question of how the Areopagite interprets and reinterprets the Platonic ‘ascent.’ For McGinn, there is no ascent to God, but a need to become acquainted with the inner meaning of the steps which are the means to attaining the inner unification with its source, that is, with the hidden God.¹⁷⁰ In Ivánka’s eyes, too, Dionysius does not take up the hierarchical structure for the ascent, that is, there is no spiritual step-by-step ascent, but an immediate unification with God as a result of the ecstatic impact. This is thought to imply a difference from Platonic thought in its most essential point.¹⁷¹ Beierwaltes criticizes Ivánka for his attitude that this notion of love explicitly shows a departure from Platonic thinking. According to the former, there has never been an identity of the soul with God, but a similarity to Proclus’ ‘the One in us,’ which serves as a starting-point for a possible punctiform unity or identity in the ecstasy. Dionysius does not diverge from the affirmation of such a possibility. Even the step-by-step ascent should be present in the Areopagite’s theology, namely, in the transition towards the ἀγνώστια, which presupposes a reflexive inner ascent.¹⁷² To my mind, Beierwaltes is right in his criticism, because Ivánka obviously does not take a passage like the following into account:

“We ascend from the lowest to the most original forms of being, removing everything in order to know undisguisedly the unknowing which is covered round about by every knowledge in beings; we do this that we may see the darkness beyond being which is hidden by all the light in beings.”¹⁷³

The Areopagite makes it clear that a hierarchical structure is necessary for man:

“For our human thinking is not capable of a direct swinging upwards to an imitation and a spiritual vision of the heavenly hierarchies free from every reference to material images, if it would not have made use of a guide appropriate to it in the form of concrete images and

¹⁷⁰ Cf. McGinn, 252.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Ivánka, 283.

¹⁷² Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 75-76, note 99; Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000C; 1025B; *The Divine Names*, 869D-872A.

¹⁷³ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1025B.

become conscious that visible beauties are copies of an invisible harmony.”¹⁷⁴

Man is in need of a “step-by-step introduction,”¹⁷⁵ for even Scripture says that “not all have the insight.”¹⁷⁶ It is an ascent from “the most obscure images to the cause of all.”¹⁷⁷ This is, of course, a definite reference to Plato’s cave allegory.

According to the Areopagite, there are three ways to attain insight, called the threefold motion of the soul. This obviously hierarchical structure is originally from Proclus.¹⁷⁸ The Neoplatonist calls this a cataphatic-logic and an apophatic-mystical way of realization. Man has the former $\acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ as a realization of himself, and the latter $\acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \mu\grave{\eta}\ \nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ in the form of mystical drunkenness.¹⁷⁹ What distinguishes Proclus from Dionysius is that the Areopagite reduces the four steps of the original to three. The achievement of insight which starts from sensuous things and proceeds to higher and higher perceptions up to the absolute causality of the world is called a straight motion of the soul and represents the method of abstraction: The soul “proceeds away from those outside of it to those about it.”¹⁸⁰ Even Plato says that a mere act of abstraction is not enough, so that it has to turn into a spiral motion in the Neoplatonist’s eyes by being illuminated by divine knowledge in a manner appropriate to it, namely, “not intellectually and simply, but logically and discursively according to its mixed and changing activities.”¹⁸¹ Hence, thinking is not tied to what is sensuously given, but is purely dialectical. This method leads to the circular motion of the soul, where the latter leaves the outside world and its confusing diversity behind to concentrate on itself – a Plotinic principle. It thereby joins together all its powers given by the solid motion free from erring and is united with them. Dionysius inserts the stage of $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\upsilon\sigma\alpha$, of becoming one, between self-communion and God’s tangency.¹⁸² This

¹⁷⁴ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 121C-D.

¹⁷⁵ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 140A.

¹⁷⁶ *I Corinthians* 8:7.

¹⁷⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 821B. Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 514a-516a.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Hugo Koch, 150-151; Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, VI 52.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Hugo Koch, 152.

¹⁸⁰ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705B.

¹⁸¹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705A-B.

¹⁸² Cf. Plotinus, VI 9.5.

self-gathering serves as a presupposition of the soul so that it is ready to be led to the “Beautiful-and-Good beyond all beings,”¹⁸³ because the One has to be met by a certain oneness: It is the mystical stage. The three stages can be also found in the divine intellects, that is, in angels. They move in a straight way, since they proceed into the regions of their inferiors accomplishing everything in a straight way. Despite their care, they circle about the Beautiful-and-Good in their spiral motion. The circular stage demonstrates not only their circulation about the Beautiful-and-Good but their unification with the illuminations of the Beautiful-and-Good.¹⁸⁴ Thus, both in the angels and in the human soul, the three perspectives of being turned outwardly, of oneness and of a certain stage in-between can be found. The angels, however, do not think God in such a way that subjects think objects, but must be seen as spiritual evolvments of God, as the Platonic Ideas are evolvments of the One. With respect to their nature, they are thoughts and as such free from change and always revolving around God.¹⁸⁵ They satisfy themselves with the sight of the archetypical Beauty in three forms, which means that they perceive the beautiful Trinity.¹⁸⁶ This is a passage where something explicitly Christian is connected with a Platonic thought. In contrast to man, angels are able to apprehend God’s nature: “They are led to the immaterial harmony graspable in pure thinking and, as far as it is possible, to the vision of his nature.”¹⁸⁷ In his highest fulfillment, man can try to assimilate his way of gaining insight to that of the angels, but it never becomes part of his nature.¹⁸⁸

This latter point is the main problem in human life. “The beauty adequate for God”¹⁸⁹ as simple (ἀπλοῦς) and good does not establish a connection with anything dissimilar to it, since it is “the undividable unity, target value

¹⁸³ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705A. Different kinds of motions of the soul can already be found in Aristotle (cf. Aristotle, *Physical Problems*, 261b28) and in the Platonic tradition. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 40a-b; Plotinus, VI 9.8; Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, VI 112.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704D-705A.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Heil, 80, note 3; Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 63.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 208B-C; *The Divine Names*, 641A-644A; 701C.

¹⁸⁷ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 208D.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247a-b.

¹⁸⁹ Heil interprets beauty in this context as the entelechy of hierarchical life. Cf. Heil, 78, note 2. Aristotle considers order to be a kind of beauty. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1078b1.

and cause of perfection.”¹⁹⁰ On the other hand, it offers help in the form of providing participation in its light for all and leads in a consecrational act those who are included in the consecration “to a fulfillment that each deserves with regard to how he allowed himself to be formed in the harmony of the whole without aberration.”¹⁹¹ Thus, divine beatitude works in a purifying way, and illuminates and creates perfection by expurgating man of every admixture alien to his nature.¹⁹² A system in which God’s initiative causes all development owing to his goodness is per se necessarily dependent on his help.¹⁹³ On the other hand, Dionysius presupposes the same common synergism as all other eastern church fathers do: There has to be a self-awareness of one’s own state followed by a wish to improve it.¹⁹⁴ This awareness is established by the soul as a result of its realization of divine archetypal beauty, in accordance to which an image of God is created in man.¹⁹⁵ The wish to improve is activated, because he who is conscious of archetypal Beauty wants to match it adequately. It becomes the beloved and the goal of aspiration: “Beauty is the final cause of everything and as this highest cause it is the beloved, for all beings emerge for the sake of the beautiful.”¹⁹⁶

With all the positive characteristics of beauty, Dionysius does not forget its problematic side. In fact, it does not always lead man to divine Beauty, but can mislead him: “For the more beautiful images can mislead easily by supporting the belief that the heavenly creatures were certain men gleaming as gold or light,”¹⁹⁷ and – even more influenced by Platonism – “one is only true to oneself, if one does not point one’s desire to what appears beautiful on first sight, but to that which is truly beautiful.”¹⁹⁸ Proclus makes a very similar assertion, namely, that Eros represents the return from what appears

¹⁹⁰ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 164D. The fact that beauty brings forth unity can also be found in Proclus’ writings. Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, III 8.

¹⁹¹ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 164D.

¹⁹² Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165C-D.

¹⁹³ Cf. Völker, 43. The idea of the divine ἀγαθότης (goodness) can already be found in Proclus’ philosophy. Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 120; 131: Every God is hyper-plentitude and “spreads the communication of overflowing goodness to others.”

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Völker, 54; Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 400C.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Völker, 55; Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 436C.

¹⁹⁶ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

¹⁹⁷ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 141B.

¹⁹⁸ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 476A.

to be beautiful to divine Beauty.¹⁹⁹ In order to make this return, one has to “judge beauty and minor things by themselves, as God does.”²⁰⁰ Ignorance of the truly Beautiful is comparable with a life in which the relationship to God dozes, that is, with the inactivity of the νοῦς. This is a reference to Aristotle, for whom “the actuality of thought means life.”²⁰¹

Be that as it may, “through and for the sake of the Beautiful-and-Good, the inferior love the superior in order to improve.”²⁰² This thought originates from Plato, who emphasized the lover’s striving for his own perfection and that of the beloved.²⁰³ It is interesting that the adverb ἐπιστρεπτικῶς, which Dionysius chooses to express the idea of improvement, means etymologically “capable of returning to one’s source.” This indicates that the state one attains by the improvement is one’s original state. Völker emphasizes that the concept of improvement is not only Platonic but at the same time truly Christian: “For Dionysius, it is virtually a characteristic of a Christian that he strives upwards unremittingly and that all progress should animate to further progress.”²⁰⁴ The whole creation strives from the many, as the general signature for created being, to the One. What is explicitly Christian in this idea of striving is that Dionysius considers it to be an imitation of Christ, even though this imitation also has a Platonic feature in the adjustment of the εἰκῶν to the ἀρχέτυπον. The execution of the praised divine activities has, “according to the principle of the Good, justified our being and life, and formed in us that which is similar to God after the model of the divine beauties, and has provided our participation in a state closer to God and in a higher level of cognition.”²⁰⁵ The major presupposition of the vision is an ethical preparation, which is indicated by Dionysius by means of the mirror analogy. The clearer the mirror, the clearer the shining light will gleam in it.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, there should actually be no relationship at all between man and God – let alone a similarity – owing to the latter’s transcendence. Therefore, Dionysius demands a “dissimilar

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 30-31.

²⁰⁰ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 476A. Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e-211b.

²⁰¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b26-27. Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 396A.

²⁰² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A.

²⁰³ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 252e-253a.

²⁰⁴ Völker, 55.

²⁰⁵ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 436C.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 440B; Völker, 176.

similarity” (τὸ ἀμίμητον μίμημα)²⁰⁷ apart from the imitation of Christ. This imitation is to be found in the actualization of the divine ἀγαθότης, “the luminous flux of which pervades the whole cosmos,”²⁰⁸ as Völker expresses it. The ceaseless striving for the divine is for Dionysius not an exclusive characteristic of man but belongs to every creature.²⁰⁹ The idea of an incessant progress rules the whole system. With this principle, he is in the same tradition as Proclus²¹⁰ and Aristotle, who says that “the good is that at which all things aim.”²¹¹ Even Plotinus keeps this axiom, although in one case he restricts it to souls: “Let us ascend to the Good again, for which every soul strives.”²¹² In another book, however, he quotes the Aristotelean assertion that covers every existing thing.²¹³

McGinn claims that the return leading back to God is not an independently taken path, as it is in Plotinus, but a coordination of three aspects in church life, namely, the right understanding of the holy words in and by means of the celebration of the holy rites, which are performed in correspondence to one’s position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.²¹⁴ That this is only partly true is indicated by the passage on the three motions of the soul. According to this doctrine, the third and ultimate motion presupposes a separation from the outside world to reach one’s goal, namely, the adjustment to God with a constant view of his purest divine beauty (εὐπρέπεια).²¹⁵ This idea of adjustment is traditional Platonic thought,²¹⁶ but is also legitimated by Scripture: “But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with him.”²¹⁷ It is a “divine longing” for a participation in the “pure and highest

²⁰⁷ Dionysius, *Epistulae*, 1068A. Cf. *The Divine Names*, 916A.

²⁰⁸ Völker, 66.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Völker, 174.

²¹⁰ Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 113.

²¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a1-2.

²¹² Plotinus, I 6.7.1.

²¹³ Cf. Plotinus, I 7.1.22.

²¹⁴ Cf. McGinn, 252.

²¹⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165A.

²¹⁶ Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176b: “To become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise.” In *Timaeus*, 47c it is said that “by imitation of the absolutely unvarying revolutions of the god, we might stabilize the variable revolutions within ourselves.” Cf. also Plotinus, I 6.6; VI 9.3.

²¹⁷ *I Corinthians* 6:17.

clarity, and the harmony generating such transcendental beauty.”²¹⁸ Even the uncontrolled part in this longing should be understood in the sense of an “unmixed, unchangeable drive for divine Beauty and the total addiction to the really desirable.”²¹⁹ Nonetheless, God’s power precedes every human longing and impulse.

b) *Eros*

Dionysius’ doctrine on love is not directly taken over from Platonism, which becomes obvious when one takes into account the fact that he leaves out Plato’s doctrine of begetting upon the beautiful to attain immortality and his ἀνάμνησις-doctrine. For the Areopagite, man does not love beauty because it reminds him of his visions during his pre-existence, but because it is a sensuous manifestation of the divine – though this does not mean that Plato does not also argue for this latter point. Dionysius is again more influenced by Proclus, who describes unhappy souls as having a loving nature but as being separated from the one source of love and having fallen for its copies.²²⁰ Hugo Koch calls this imitation most unfortunate, since Proclus considers the pre-existence of the souls a presupposition of a physical and metaphysical process, in the course of which these souls fall off from true love, courting wrong material love. Dionysius, on the other hand, is said to intend only to criticize the epistemological weakness of those who reject the expression ‘ἔρως’ while speaking of theology.²²¹ This latter point is definitely not true, for the Areopagite writes too extensively about love and presents too many of Eros’ qualities to be merely defending or fighting for the use of the word. For him, the phenomenon is the connection between God and humanity.

The question is now what kind of phenomenon love is. Here already the Areopagite does not depart from Proclus’ theory, which becomes obvious from the fact that Eros is actually not one: “The irrepressible cause of every Eros, which is beyond all, presides over and precedes these powers. It is that towards which the total Eros of all beings is extended in such a way that is

²¹⁸ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 144A. Here, again, the two major characteristics of all beauty are mentioned together.

²¹⁹ Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 144A-B.

²²⁰ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 89-90.

²²¹ Cf. Hugo Koch, 68-69.

natural for each being.”²²² The theory of the many ἔρωτες emanating from the one Eros and returning to it is based on Plotinus²²³ and was developed by Proclus. The starting-point of the doctrine is the distinction between the cosmic soul and the individual souls, which all have their special Eros. Every single Eros is related to the overall Eros as the individual soul is to the cosmic soul.²²⁴ Dionysius must be seen in the same tradition. Proclus’ notion of a chain of love with different levels of love is also taken over by Dionysius, namely, in the sense that the love of the upper level to the lower is characterized by πρόνοια (caring), while the love of the lower to the upper level expresses an idea of ἐπιστροφή (a return to it).²²⁵ This caring has its ultimate origin in God. Not only is he, the Good, celebrated as the beloved, but also as ἀγάπη.²²⁶ McGinn claims that the divine name ‘the Good’ is given a preference owing to its identification with Eros or divine longing.²²⁷ Being influenced by Origin and Plotinus,²²⁸ the Areopagite goes beyond Plato, for whom Eros is not a god, but a mere mediator, a means of approaching god. Even though Dionysius takes over this notion, too, in calling God ‘the beloved,’ he tries to integrate the scriptural identification of God and love, since it was out of love that God created the world:

“This cause of all – thrust beyond goodness – loves all (...). Indeed, the divine Eros is good through the Good. This good-working Eros of beings – before being – is thrown beyond into the good and does not permit it to abide in itself, but has moved it to a fitness for doing through the generative thrusting forth of all beings.”²²⁹

Dionysius refers to Saint Ignatius of Antioch (“ὁ ἐμὸς ἔρωσ ἐσταύρωταί.”²³⁰) and Scripture with regard to his passionate defense of his use of the

²²² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 713C.

²²³ Cf. Plotinus, III 5.4.

²²⁴ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 30-31.

²²⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A; Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 82 and 153; *The Elements of Theology*, 15. In Proclus’ eyes, however, caring does not concern the One, so that for him a divine incarnation would not be possible.

²²⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

²²⁷ Cf. McGinn, 246.

²²⁸ Cf. Plotinus, VI 8.15.1: The archetype of all things is “that which arouses love and the desire of love; it is love for itself.”

²²⁹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708B.

²³⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, “Brief an die Gemeinde Rom,” *Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia*

word ‘ἔρως.’ Thus, he criticizes those who misunderstand Eros as a name for God. In his eyes, they have “slid off into the parted and divisible love of the body (...), which is but an image of the true Eros, a falling away from the true Eros.” For him, the names ‘ἡ ἀγάπη’ and ‘ὁ ἔρως’ bear the same meaning.²³¹ In contrast to Plato’s doctrine, God is, therefore, both ἐραστὸς (lovable) and ἀγαπητὸς (beloved) owing to his beauty and goodness. He is ἔρως and ἀγάπη, for he is at the same time “movable all at once and an upward power to itself, the only beauty and goodness being beautiful and good through itself.”²³²

God is called almighty “as being desired and loved by all, and as placing a voluntary yoke and the sweet pangs of the Good and of the almighty and indissoluble love of its goodness upon all.”²³³ God’s love is ecstatic by nature.²³⁴ Generally, for Dionysius ecstasy means to be out of oneself and to surrender oneself to God; with regard to God, however, it refers to an overabundance of goods beyond everything terrestrial²³⁵: Only God is able to go out of himself completely in an absolute ecstasy of self-giving, because he alone is capable of remaining in himself absolutely and transcendent to all being. However, this ecstasy must be seen in the Neoplatonic tradition and its regard of the doctrine that the origin generates through the throwing force of erotic goodness. The erotic impulse pulls him downwards to the sphere of being.²³⁶ This is the opposite direction from the ecstatic way man should take, namely, a freeing from all earthly being owing to God’s superiority to every creature. Man’s being thereby experiences an enhancement. McGinn states that “God loves himself in all things for the same reason that he loves himself apart from all things. (...) [Dionysius] is the first to evolve this dialectical notion primarily in a concept of God as Eros.”²³⁷ Yet, as already mentioned, God’s ecstasy means a remaining in itself. Hence, it

und der Brief des Polykarp von Smyrna, ed. Henning Paulsen (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985) 76.

²³¹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 709B-C.

²³² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712C.

²³³ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 937A.

²³⁴ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712A; Gabriel Horn, “Armour et extase d’après Denys l’Aréopagite,” *Revue d’ascétique et de la mystique* 6 (1925): 278-289; John M. Rist, “A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966): 235-243.

²³⁵ Dionysius, *Epistulae*, 1112C.

²³⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712A-B.

²³⁷ McGinn, 248.

does not change his nature but remains in him as a quality of his unity and goodness. As a consequence of this apparent paradox and, moreover, his teleologic attraction in the form of goodness and beauty, the loving God causes – the Platonic idea of – an eternal circle.²³⁸

This principle of ecstasy applies not only to God, but also to a human being in love: “The divine Eros is ecstatic; it does not permit lovers to be among themselves but bids them to be among their lovers.”²³⁹ McGinn explains this analogy by pointing to the hierarchical principle: “God as a Trinitarian thearchy is the principle of the universe primarily constructed as a hierarchy, that is, as a diverse but ordered manifestation of the divine.”²⁴⁰ Since the thearchy is overall erotic, so is the hierarchy, which justifies a cosmic Eros.²⁴¹ Hence, love is not only present in the motion of the heavens, as it is in Aristotle’s writings, but also forms a cosmic power on all levels of being. Here, again, love brings forth the Platonic circle, a cycle of love with a God who becomes ecstatic in the emanation and a universe the ecstasy of which is realized in the return, the ἐπιστροφή, that is, the love of the lower level to the upper level in Proclus’ chain of love.

Eros is the hidden driving force behind man’s striving to the divine. The Areopagite and Proclus consider love for beauty and love for God to be an inseparable unity. Because of beauty’s sensuous manifestation – in contrast to God – the love for it can be interpreted as being directed to an appearance of the Good and divine, while love for God is directed towards the archetype of beauty, which is, at the same time, the absolute cause of beauty in the sense of the Idea. Thus, Dionysius takes over Proclus’ concept of return with its ontological, cosmological and mystical aspects and connects it also with the pair of beauty and Eros, following Plato in his definition of the nature of philosophy.²⁴² Beierwaltes interprets the close connection between beauty and Eros in Dionysius and other Neoplatonists either as an active relationship – grounded in love – between the origin and

²³⁸ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712D; Beierwaltes, 74.

²³⁹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712A. Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 63. This assertion of Dionysius’ seems to be the only passage where the romantic side of love and, consequently, of beauty, which is so important for Plato, is mentioned. Dionysius’ notion of love is very centered on God, so that his understanding of beauty is most of the time sublime.

²⁴⁰ McGinn, 243.

²⁴¹ Cf. McGinn, 248.

²⁴² Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 66-67.

its emanation or as its answer to the origin's attraction.²⁴³ For God “folds together our many diverging peculiarities into a unity by means of the erotic impulse to Beauty – being pointed at him and aligning us – and perfects them to a divine life, behavior and acting appropriate to the One.”²⁴⁴ The process of folding together (συμπύσσειν) represents the retraction of the evolvment into difference and diversity. Eros must, consequently, be seen in the Platonic tradition as the urge to become one. This moving power of the return, that is, love for beauty, refers to all dimensions of the intelligible and material; “for every being, the Beautiful-and-Good is desired, loved and beloved.”²⁴⁵

The name ‘Eros’ has the advantage of expressing “a unifying and binding power which moves superiors to provide for the weaker,”²⁴⁶ thus resulting in Christian charity. Because it exists in and for the sake of the Beautiful-and-Good and is given forth from out of it on account of it, it “conjoins equals in communion with one another, moves those who are first toward the providence of their inferiors and founds inferiors through a return to their superiors.”²⁴⁷ In this context, Dionysius quotes a Pauline verse: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”²⁴⁸ With reference to Proclus, a soteriological ecstasy of man as an answer to God's love is present in Dionysius' thoughts, too. As a true lover (ἀληθῆς ἐραστῆς) of God, man should no longer lead his own life, but his beloved's life.

All in all, the principle of Eros emphasizes that Dionysius cannot be reduced to the merely noetic. The fact that both the attempt to gain insight and love are presented as possible ways, which are, however, interlinked, shows that the theologian still thinks very platonically. For it is Plato who emphasizes this connection in his notion of a philosopher,

²⁴³ Cf. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 71.

²⁴⁴ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 372B.

²⁴⁵ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A. Proclus (his source) expresses similar ideas on beauty as the goal of man's desire. Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 25: “For these mortal animals (...) despise all other things, and even life itself and being, through a desire of the nature of the good; and all things have this immovable and ineffable tendency to the good.”

²⁴⁶ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 713B. Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 53: “Where there exists both unification and separation of beings, there, too, love appears as a medium; it binds together what is divided.”

²⁴⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 709D.

²⁴⁸ *Galatians* 2:20.

a lover of wisdom. Proclus, as well, calls Eros the driving force of the philosopher searching for truth in the dialectical ascent.²⁴⁹ Hence, knowledge is not merely of a theoretical kind, but all philosophy is only possible with a loving life referring to God.²⁵⁰ In the end, however, both cognition and erotic longing come to rest, when divine Beauty itself is apprehended.

5. Perception of Divine Beauty Through Non-Perception

“We shall share in the unity beyond the intellect.”²⁵¹

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The way of perceiving God, the Beautiful-and-Good, in transient things is by means of an analogy, that is, through the fact that they partake of the eternal world: “We know God in terms of the order of all beings which are projected out of it and which have some similarity and likeness to its divine paradigms.”²⁵² At the same time, Dionysius claims that God is inexorable, which turns our knowledge into non-knowledge – an idea that is also expressed by Plato in regard to the One, of which we cannot have any knowledge.²⁵³ Yet, the latter point, that is, the basis for negative theology, holds priority over the positive way of gaining insight, since it frees the soul from everything sensuous and leads it to a conjunction with God more safely.²⁵⁴ According to Neoplatonism, the creature loses its individuality, its own nature and being, in the unification with the One.²⁵⁵ As a Christian, Dionysius rejects this teaching of true identity. Divine love alone is

²⁴⁹ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 61.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Völker, 176.

²⁵¹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 592C. The Areopagite uses the Platonic term ‘μετέχοντες’ here to express the principle of partaking.

²⁵² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 869C-D.

²⁵³ Cf. Plato, *Parmenides*, 142a.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 981B.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Plotinus, V 5.8.10-12. That the non-unification is a peculiarity of Christianity becomes clear when one also takes into account what Augustine remarks on the question, namely, the same as Dionysius does. Cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, c.XXXV, n.79.

capable of effecting a resemblance to the divine nature.²⁵⁶ Ivánka calls this the beginning of a doctrine of grace.²⁵⁷

Man is in need of God's support, because his

“intellect has a power toward thinking, through which it sees the intelligibles and sees that the unity through which the intellect is joined to what is beyond it lies beyond the nature of the intellect. In this, therefore, we are not to comprehend God in a merely human manner, but we are to step completely out of ourselves so that we come to be wholly of God,”²⁵⁸

who is neither intelligible, sensible, nor in general a being among other beings.²⁵⁹ The presupposition of this is that we predicate non-intellect and non-sensibility of God in terms of preeminence and not in terms of defect.²⁶⁰ It is our defect that we are bound to our intellect and the senses, neither of which can attain knowledge of his nature, because this is beyond the intellect. Even the nature of God's incarnation is unrecognizable. But Dionysius goes further by referring to Proclus' assertion that Eros unifies the spirit with the original and hidden Beauty in a life higher than thinking.²⁶¹ The Areopagite expresses this in a similar way: “The most divine knowledge of God is one which knows through unknowing in the unity beyond the intellect,”²⁶² and this knowledge comes as a gift; the divinity is suffered.²⁶³ For man will hereby “be ineffably and unknowingly joined to what is ineffable and unknowable in a far greater union than we can attain through our rational and intellectual powers and activities.”²⁶⁴ This is because, if all knowledge is of beings and has its limits in beings, then that beyond every being can only

²⁵⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712C.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Ivánka, 285.

²⁵⁸ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 865D-868A.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 869C.

²⁶⁰ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 869A.

²⁶¹ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 64: “It [love] makes the intelligible intellect one with primary and hidden beauty according to a certain mode of life superior to intellectual perception.”

²⁶² Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 872A-B.

²⁶³ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 648B.

²⁶⁴ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 585B-588A. Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 123; *Alcibiades I*, 141.

be apart from every knowledge.²⁶⁵ The mystical vision alone offers a foreshadowing of the divine nature and, hence, brings about some insight.²⁶⁶

The knowledge of the angels as the purest form of ecstasy is expressed with the word “ἀγγελομιμήτως,”²⁶⁷ which is no longer a successive gaining of knowledge built up from partial observations. This mature type is possible for man only because of a direct connection with God.²⁶⁸ It even resembles the creator’s knowledge: “God does not consider individuals according to kind but knows and contains all things due to a single encompassment of their causality.”²⁶⁹ However, this ultimate apprehension – usually restricted to angels – means a non-apprehension. If the soul intends to apprehend the unapprehendable, perceive the unperceivable, it has to transcend the intellect in order to submit itself to the mystical ecstasy, as Plotinus has already expressed it.²⁷⁰ This means an abstraction from everything to a “pure indeterminateness,”²⁷¹ to an unrestricted receptiveness. The vision, θεωρία, is according to Dionysius only possible owing to the pervasion of man by God’s πνεῦμα and δύναμις. Thus, this apprehension must be a special kind of perception differing from normal rational perception. The Areopagite uses the metaphor of light and illumination²⁷² to express the divine influence, which conveys a proper section, but not the whole of God’s being. A unification of illumination with the hyper-lucid darkness of the one Beautiful-and-Good takes place in the mystical vision by means of a non-seeing and non-realizing perception. The illuminated soul should respond to the divine initiative with satisfaction as to the amount of illumination and with reservation to a fuller revelation. Here, a difference from traditional Neoplatonic thinking is implied. The soul reaches and sees God not because of its own divine nature, but as a result of God’s initiative, his illumination.²⁷³

²⁶⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 593A.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 648A.

²⁶⁷ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 593B.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 208D.

²⁶⁹ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 869B.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.35.

²⁷¹ Siebert, 25.

²⁷² With this metaphor, Dionysius is close to Holy Scripture.

²⁷³ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712C. God is characterized as an “upward power” here.

That this apprehension is explicitly Christian can be seen in the fact that Jesus plays a major part in human happiness, namely, more in terms of a mediator – like Eros – than in terms of the substance of happiness: “Jesus is the reason for their joy; it is he who can be stored up, who attends on them, who provides eternal peace, who, at the same time, supplies them the saturation with goods and lets them overflow over them.”²⁷⁴ At this point, the Areopagite draws a connection to beauty: “Since Jesus leads us to light, we will view the magnificent sight of the objects of pure thought, in which the sanctified beauty of the archetypes shines visibly. (...) There, we have to enucleate the intellectual content of the first images and face the divine-like beauty in it.”²⁷⁵

But not only Jesus is important for the vision. Since in Dionysius’ eyes both the Old Testament and Platonic philosophy are components of Christianity, he integrates scriptural references and Neoplatonism into his doctrine on the mystical vision. He recalls the story of Moses, who does not see God himself – for God is invisible – but the place where God is. On the other hand, he integrates the Plotinic principle of a perception through non-perception,²⁷⁶ so that, in the end, he is able to describe the apprehension in terms of a most excellent unification with a “completely unknowing inactivity of every knowledge, and a knowing beyond intellect by knowing nothing.”²⁷⁷ As Heil emphasizes, we are not confronted with a process of gaining insight according to the subject-object-pattern, but with a real unification beyond the categories of being and thinking.²⁷⁸ For not only does Dionysius say that God is unintelligible, but that he is more than unintelligible. This marks the anagogic process leading to a unification with God, where negation is superior to the affirmation, but where both have to be transcended.

The Plotinic notion of the $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ in a close connection with the intellect is still very influential in the case of Dionysius. Yet, the $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ is in need of illumination and cannot perceive God independently, since the divine secret

²⁷⁴ Dionysius, *Epistulae*, 1113A.

²⁷⁵ Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 428C-D.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000D; *Exodus* 20:21; Plotinus, V 5.7. Gregory of Nyssa mentions this idea, too. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, ed. Herbert Musurillo (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991) II 152-170.

²⁷⁷ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1001A.

²⁷⁸ Cf. Heil, 23.

has to be kept safe from profane contact. Thus, it can only be revealed in the most sacred form. All in all, Dionysius is not very consistent with regard to the determination of the organ of the vision. He suggests, for example, that its deepest level²⁷⁹ is an adequate organ for the task. Völker argues that this presents a first example of what is called a “spark of the soul”²⁸⁰ in the mysticism of the Middle Ages, when Master Eckehart uses the phrase to denominate the divine part in man. The latter was probably influenced by Aristotle, who had first expressed the idea that there is a divine element in man, namely, the intellect. Apart from the medieval term, the concept is already present in Proclus’ writings, even though in a very peculiar way in his phrase “ἄνθος τοῦ νοῦ.”²⁸¹ At a different point, Dionysius considers the inner eye to have an important role with respect to the gaining of insight: Man should try to take in God’s original and hyper-original outpour of light “with the immaterial and calm eyes of the mind.”²⁸² He seems to change freely between the two possibilities, that is, the νοῦς and the spiritual senses, as organs for the vision.

If someone claims to perceive God consciously, “he does not perceive God himself, but only something of him belonging to the world of being and, accordingly, being cognizable.”²⁸³ Unification with God means a deification (θέωσις), a becoming similar to God as far as possible. In contrast to the Plotinic doctrine, the soul is divine for the Areopagite only in the sense of manifestation and is only deified through God’s ascending Eros.

²⁷⁹ “εἰς τὰ θεοειδέστατα τῶν νοερῶν” Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 480A.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Völker, 173. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized again that Dionysius does not support the idea of a divine part in man – such as the soul in Plotinus’ doctrine. As a Christian, he considers all being a creation separated from the transcendent God.

²⁸¹ Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 248.

²⁸² Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 121B: “ἀύλοις καὶ ἀτρεμέσι νοδὸς ὀφθαλμοῖς” His use of the word ‘ἀτρεμέσι’ indicates a connection with Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “They saw the blessed sight and vision and were initiated into that which is rightly called the most blessed of mysteries, which we celebrated in a state of perfection, when we were without experience of the evils which awaited us in the time to come, being permitted as initiates to the sight of perfect and simple and calm and happy apparitions, which we saw in the pure light, being ourselves pure and not entombed in this which we carry about with us and call the body, in which we are imprisoned like an oyster in its shell.” Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250b-c. Both associate a state of calmness with insight and refer to some influence of light.

²⁸³ Dionysius, *Epistulae*, 1065A.

Deification is a good, but not a natural right.²⁸⁴ The natural state is transcended and becomes a deified state by means of ecstasy. Ecstasy is beyond positive and negative assertions of God and leaves behind the discursive procedure. Love is, therefore, much more important than intellectual cognition, for the latter is transcended. The highpoint of existence consists in an absolute concentration on the divine without the possibility of distraction and is based on a mood glowing with love. Hence, the force of Jesus – who is, normally, not central to the Dionysian doctrine – is presented as love.²⁸⁵

Even the idea of an apprehension beyond the intellect is derived from Proclus, who states that something similar can only be apprehended by something similar.²⁸⁶ Since God transcends the intellect, he cannot be perceived in this way. In contrast, God is identical to the uniform (ἐνάδεις), so that the power which is able to perceive the divinity is considered to be the uniform nature of the soul.²⁸⁷ At one time, it is said that, having gone through all preparatory stages,²⁸⁸ the ecstasy finally offers a direct vision without any secrets: “ἀπερικαλύπτως καὶ ἀληθῶς.”²⁸⁹ As soon as the human soul has attained its unification with God, all other sources of cognition are completely superfluous. This idea originates from Proclus as well. Plato never mentions that the νοῦς is transcended – despite his belief that the lover of beauty is instigated by a divine madness which influences the way a person sees and evaluates reality. For Dionysius, on the other hand, intellectual perception can be surpassed, because the soul is not merely illuminated by God, but it has become similar to him and views him directly by looking into the rays of the inaccessible light as with an eyeless gaze²⁹⁰: “In the wholly imperceptible and invisible, that beyond all that is most evident fills to overflowing the sightless intellects with the

²⁸⁴ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708D; *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 378A; McGinn, 264.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 592B; 648D-649A.

²⁸⁶ Cf. Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, 1, 232. He took this over from Empedocles, “Fragment 109a,” *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol.1, 352. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 45b-46a.

²⁸⁷ Cf. Hugo Koch, 153-154; Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, 1, 242.

²⁸⁸ Gregory of Nyssa emphasizes the Plotinic ascetic presuppositions for the ascent in contrast to Dionysius. Cf. Völker, 216.

²⁸⁹ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000C.

²⁹⁰ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708D; Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 64.

glories beyond all beauty.”²⁹¹ The vision of and love for the Good unifies the souls and provides harmony and community between them. The intention of the vision is to reveal God’s hidden beauty in the darkness beyond all light.²⁹² The idea of hiddenness originates from Proclus, who says that Eros unifies the spirit with the primary and hidden Beauty.²⁹³ With respect to the content of the divine apprehension – how exactly it takes place in the soul is not mentioned – Völker argues that it is the “reverent state of being lost in the secret of the Trinity and its plan of salvation.”²⁹⁴ This is a good indication of Dionysius’ inconsistency, namely, that a direct vision without any secrets cannot altogether be upheld. For he says himself that “the most divine and highest of what is seen and intelligible are hypothetical *λόγοι* of that which is subordinate to what lies ‘beyond-having-everything.’”²⁹⁵ Völker calls this insight into God’s incomprehensibility “*docta ignorantia*”²⁹⁶ and is, for sure, influenced by Cusanus, who popularized this phrase.

However, a mystical vision is not the only vision in Dionysius’ eyes. As a Christian, he adds the *visio beatifica* – although it has to be emphasized that Plotinus, in particular, but also Plato presents an apprehension of Beauty not only in this life, but in life after death as well.²⁹⁷ That we will not see God himself even in the afterlife is expressed by the Areopagite with the word ‘*θεοφανεία*’: “Hereafter, when we have come to be indestructible and immortal and have attained a most blessed and Christ-like lot, we shall (...) be always with the Lord and shall be filled with his visible theophany.”²⁹⁸ Beierwaltes tries to emphasize this problem of describing what happens during the apprehension by means of the image of silence:

“Silence is, therefore, a sign for the fact that the One can only be experienced by means of an ‘intuitive’ unification with it in a dimension absolutely beyond the word and, thus, of discursive thinking as well as of any kind of seeing which refers to something. This [unification] takes place

²⁹¹ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 998B.

²⁹² Cf. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1025B.

²⁹³ Cf. Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 64.

²⁹⁴ Völker, 207.

²⁹⁵ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000D.

²⁹⁶ Völker, 217.

²⁹⁷ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 256a-d; Plotinus, I 6.8.42-44.

²⁹⁸ Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 592B-C.

as an ecstasy of man founded by dialectics, exceeding the term through the term, and thereby abandoning every inner reference of thinking and talking. This act is (...) essentially different from a dull or enthusiastic irrationalism that rejects the term on principle.”²⁹⁹

6. Summary

Dionysius deals with the notion of beauty mostly as a possible name for God, without concealing the fact that the latter cannot actually be grasped by an earthly category like beauty owing to his transcendence. Thus, calling him beautiful does not touch his essence itself but describes his relationship to his creation. As a result of his creative act, all being and even non-being partakes of him, as the unity of the Beautiful-and-Good. The beautiful creation can, therefore, serve as a means of gaining analogous knowledge about God. But what he is remains, nonetheless, unknowable, so that an attempt to deny all earthly categories at least reveals what he is not. Both *viae* must be transcended in the end in order to approach him truly, that is, in order to attain a non-cognitive unification with the Beautiful-and-Good. Since this is beyond human capacities, man needs God’s support apart from his own attempt to lead a life in the sense of an *imitatio Christi*. God purifies, illuminates and deifies man, who must submit himself to the mystical ecstasy which follows, in a loving urge to become one with the divine instead of merely perceiving God intellectually. Although his hidden beauties are revealed in the process, it remains for Dionysius an apprehension of theophanies, even during the beatific vision.

²⁹⁹ Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 55.

Chapter V

The Doctrine on Beauty in Albert the Great – The Implicit Aspiration of the Beautiful

1. The Notion of Beauty

“Beauty is the splendor of the substantial or accidental form upon the proportional and limiting parts of matter.”¹

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Albert combines traditional empirical notions of beauty with the Aristotelian doctrine of hylemorphism, in which a particular form ($\mu\omicron\rho\rho\phi\eta$) comes together with matter ($\upsilon\lambda\eta$) to generate a concrete and individual thing.² In his eyes, the form is crucial for the beauty, goodness and perfection of a reality, so that the latter must possess all characteristics determining a form. Albert derives these characteristics from *The Book of Wisdom*. A form is defined according to the mode (modus), meaning the proportion (mensura) of the principles of being to their goal. It sets being within the limits of a species in respect of a number (numerus) of constituting elements. Finally, it directs being to an appropriate goal, the perfection of which is attained by the right order (ordo) by means of a particular weight (pondus).³

¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

² This Plotinic doctrine seems to have reached Albert via Dionysius. Cf. Plotinus, V 9.2.13-15; I 6.2.13-15; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; 704B. Cf. also Umberto Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1987) 46.

³ Cf. *The Book of Wisdom* 11:21; Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, 46; Johannes Schneider, *Das Gute und die Liebe nach der Lehre Albert des Großen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1967) 90: “A reality is constituted under a form (modus), defined as a form (species),

In his commentary *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, Albert deals with the question of beauty together with the issues of light and the good, since these three concepts can be found one after the other in the Dionysian original. Yet, Albert interprets their interrelation quite differently. For him, the good must be considered in a twofold way. Firstly, insofar as it moves the intellect in the form of light,⁴ which possesses a beautiful essence,⁵ and, secondly, with regard to the affect in the form of love, which moves the soul.⁶ Beauty, on the other hand, is the effect of the shining light,⁷ a definition that differs from Dionysius, for whom beauty is the cause of splendor.⁸ Albert deems this an essential quality of beauty and, therefore, a part of the definition of his notion of the concept: It includes “the splendor of the substantial or accidental form upon the proportional and limiting parts of matter.”⁹ This is actually a combination of the two classical definitions of beauty, that is, harmony of the parts and splendor, with special regard for Aristotle’s emphasis on a definite form as a presupposition of beauty.¹⁰ Albert compares this with a body, which can be called beautiful because of a reflection of the color distributed proportionally upon the parts. Although, according to him, beauty is an aspect of the more general concept of the good,¹¹ the former’s splendor is for Albert the specific aspect necessary for a definition of the beautiful, that is, it serves as the specific difference

directed to a goal (ordo).” Since these three elements cannot be taken away from being, its goodness cannot either, or else it would cease to exist. Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae. Opera omnia*, vol.34,1, ed. Dionysius Siedler (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978) I, tr.6, q.26, c.1, a.3, III. The triad can already be found in Augustine’s reference to the notion of the good and the beautiful. Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XII, c.18.

⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 78.

⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 50.

⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

⁸ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

⁹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72. Cf. *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 206, where he adds that this reflection is even in accordance with the proportion of accidents, in which the being of reality consists. In another commentary, he considers beauty to be “in the proportion of the comparability of the members to one another and to color.” *Physica. Opera omnia*, vol.4,2, ed. Paul Hossfeld (Münster: Aschendorff, 1993) I.VII, tr.1, c.7.

¹⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1078a38.

¹¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 77.

that distinguishes the beautiful from the good.¹² However, beauty cannot be found in the form per se, but in the latter's relation to matter insofar as beauty unifies the diversity of matter in a form.¹³ Hence, "beauty does not consist in the relation to the final act, as the good does, but in the harmony of the subordinated parts of substance with the form." A further difference between the notions of beauty and the good is that "the material principle belongs to beauty essentially. But since the form does not move the efficient cause as beauty, but as a goal, beauty per se is not constitutive of being."¹⁴

Apart from this aspect of splendor, the notion of the beautiful includes for Albert three further elements which more or less explicate his first definition. Firstly, as Dionysius taught before him, it consists in a certain harmony of different things¹⁵ – meaning in a proportional structure with regard to the placement of the parts in the whole, of which the hyper-substantial of beautiful things is the cause – and in clarity,¹⁶ even though the coming together of these qualities prompts his question of how a simple can be composed of two components: "A simple cannot consist of two simples as if of material parts or as if of essential parts," yet two can "come together to the being of a simple, of which the one is like a subject and the other like the essence of the thing." Therefore, in the notion of beauty, harmony as the subject can come together with clarity as its forming essence,¹⁷ the inherent virtue¹⁸ of the form originating in being. Nevertheless, he perpetuates the Platonic principle that unity is more valuable than diversity, since if a thing's beauty depends on one form, it possesses more perfect beauty than that whose beauty is caused by multiple forms.¹⁹ In the commentary *Super Ethica*, he asks a related

¹² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

¹³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 78.

¹⁴ Johannes Schneider, 94.

¹⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

¹⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 76. Albert says that otherwise a body could not be called beautiful. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

¹⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 76.

¹⁸ Balthasar calls this "Selbstmächtigkeit." Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 349.

¹⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 79.

question, quite similar to Plotinus' symmetry-question, namely, how beauty can consist in consonance, if consonance exists in compositions only, but beauty can be found in simples. He does not solve the problem by simply rejecting consonance as a necessary element of beauty, as Plotinus did, but by stating that consonance has a merely metaphorical meaning in spiritual things and is praised in the harmony of the perfect to the perfectible.²⁰

Despite his general opinion that the distinctive aspect of beauty as beauty does not consist in a reference to the goal, Albert nevertheless takes over the Neoplatonic and Dionysian doctrine that beauty draws desire to itself insofar as it is good and, consequently, a goal. Finally, it is said to unite everything, and this is so on the part of the form, the reflection of which makes it beautiful. By simply assuming this Dionysian aspect, he fails to make a closer analysis of it, as, for example, Plotinus does in his teaching that beauty also presupposes unity.²¹ In contrast to him, Albert shifts at once to the question of how the two aspects of drawing to oneself and unifying influence the issue of the identity of the good and the beautiful. With regard to the first, "they are not separated in any way, because the good can be found in the beautiful insofar as it is in the same subject in which the good is." With regard to the aspect of unifying,

"they actually match with regard to the subject, because it can be found both in the beautiful and the good insofar as both are a form – for every congregation refers to the form as the limit of the multiplicity of possibilities of matter. But they differ in thinking, because, insofar as the form is the goal of matter, so the good takes on the notion of gathering together. But insofar as it reflects over the parts of matter, the beautiful has the notion of unifying."²²

This means that Albert sees a rational distinction, occurring only in thought, as opposed to a real distinction. In respect of the subject, 'unifying' corresponds to the beautiful – and to the good – insofar as it is a form, and 'to call to itself' corresponds to it insofar as it is a goal. Its peculiarity

²⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica. Opera omnia*, vol.14,1, ed. Wilhelm Kübel (Münster: Aschendorff, 1968-72) I.I, lect.9.

²¹ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C-D; Plotinus, I 6.2.20-21.

²² Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.28.

becomes obvious only when its essence or notion is taken into account, namely, clarity together with harmony.²³

Dionysius' fourth – or actually first – aspect is referred here exclusively to divine Beauty, which is by its essence the cause of beauty and, hence, the maker of all beauty.²⁴ Owing to the fact that it is, moreover, the cause of its own beauty – it does not have another cause that makes its beauty,²⁵ but is beautiful according to itself, that is, its essence,²⁶ – it possesses perfect beauty incapable of being mixed with ugliness²⁷ either in its essence or in its relation to creation: “The nature and form of heaven is beauty, with which nothing ugly can be mixed.”²⁸ This perfection – exclusively characteristic of the divine sphere, as Dionysius has already stated – is underscored by God's eternity, for that which is always beautiful possesses more perfect beauty than that which is sometimes not beautiful. Consequently, a reality whose beauty is not increased or diminished possesses perfect beauty.²⁹ Albert even uses the fact that this beautiful is neither made nor destroyed as a reason for claiming that it does not have a cause through which it is beautiful. It must be a cause in itself having beauty which cannot be lost, since, as Avicenna explains, everything that has being from something else, is per se potential and tending on its own towards non-being, that is, towards losing its beauty at the same time.³⁰

Umberto Eco criticizes Albert's approach of leaving out human perception as a constitutive of the definition of beauty and classifying it as an objective quality of being.³¹ This becomes obvious both in the latter's absence of an art theory and in his objection to Cicero, namely, Albert's claim that virtue possesses a certain clarity in itself, so that it shines beautifully

²³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 78.

²⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 74; 72; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

²⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 79.

²⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 83.

²⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 82.

²⁸ Albert the Great, *Super Matthaenum. Opera omnia*, vol.21, ed. Bernhard Schmidt (Münster: Aschendorff, 1987) c.6, 9.

²⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 79; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701D.

³⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 80.

³¹ Cf. Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, 46-47. He mentions Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Cicero as opponents in this question.

even if not seen by anybody. This is due to the fact that clarity is naturally inherent in the form, while the perception of it by others is a mere accessory possibility, neither determining the question nor interfering with it.³² Thus, the hyper-substantial Beautiful is beautiful to each of its effects according to a single nature, for a universal thing is “always and everywhere.”³³ On the other hand, Albert does imply the Platonic notion of perceptibility in this understanding of beauty. By pointing out that light is the cause of cognition insofar as it is incorporated in color, which is the outer limit of clarity in the limited body,³⁴ beauty as the splendor of color possesses the same characteristic.

2. The Univocal Cause of Beauty

*A creature is either God’s “image or
his vestige.”³⁵*

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In his commentary on *The Divine Names*, Albert integrates the Neoplatonic and Dionysian circular pattern, stating that all being comes from a source which is at the same time the goal, yet without incorporating a gradual emanation or ascent. With regard to beauty, this pattern shines through, although in a slightly different way than it does in the Areopagite’s original. This section is concerned with the beginning of the circle, analyzing how, why and through what means beauty comes into being.

Albert is obviously influenced by Plato’s doctrine of Ideas with regard to his explanation of how being is related to its origin. However, he finds himself in a conflict instigated by Aristotle’s criticism of Plato’s teaching. As a result, he tolerates the doctrine, but only in a particular sense, so as not to

³² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, 76; Cicero, *De officiis/Vom pflichtgemäßen Handeln*, transl., comments and ed. Heinz Gunermann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976) I, 4, 14; I, 27-28, 93-100.

³³ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol.2, transl. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) 87b30-33. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 80.

³⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 50.

³⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Matthaëum*, c.5, 34.

become disloyal. Consequently, he criticizes the Platonic – or rather, Neoplatonic – emanation doctrine as contradictory to the Aristotelian entelechy, that is, to the condition in which a potentiality has become an actuality. Not only does it seem to suggest a notion of identity between form and species, that is, in Aristotelian terms, between the cause and its effect, but it also seems to indicate – as a result of the first point – a pantheistic concept of the world.³⁶ In respect of the doctrine of Ideas itself, he interprets it according to Aristotle as two separated worlds and rejects it.³⁷ What he does accept is an understanding of the Ideas as inborn principles in the intellect emanating from “the light of intelligence in us,” such that cognition is not merely Platonic recollection.³⁸ Then the formal principle does not originate in matter, and the Peripatetic condition that the forming virtue refers to the first mover only, since in him alone movement does not depend on anything other than himself, is not violated.³⁹ All in all, he concludes that actually there is no real contradiction when interpreting ‘Idea’ as Aristotle’s τέλος in the sense of “pure form being ground and principle of the existence of realities,”⁴⁰ as Bach expresses it. If it is, however, taken as an epistemological principle, Platonism cannot be harmonized with Aristotelism that easily, for the latter emphasizes concreteness as the basis for cognition.⁴¹

Owing to this fraternization of the two Greek philosophers, the notion of form becomes important in Albert’s theology; so it is not surprising to see

³⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*. *Opera omnia*, vol.17,2, ed. Winfrid Fauser (Münster: Aschendorff, 1993) I.I, tr.4, c.5.

³⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *De intellectu et intelligibili*. *Opera omnia*, vol.9, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1890) I.I, tr.1, c.5; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096b33.

³⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Metaphysica*. *Opera omnia*, vol.14, ed. Bernhard Geyer (Münster: Aschendorff, 1960 and 1964) I.I, tr.1, c.1. In Albert’s eyes, Plato’s ἀνάμνησις-theory undermines true cognition, since it could not be considered an act, if the Ideas were said to be preformed and pre-existent in the soul. Cf. *Metaphysica*, I.III, tr.3, c.9-10; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250a-e. This, then, excludes the possibility of regarding love as the reaction to a re-encounter with beauty, as Plato teaches it. For Albert, the splendor of beauty obviously has sufficient power to arouse love.

³⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1074a33. Albert shows in *De natura et origine animae*. *Opera omnia*, vol.12, ed. Bernhard Geyer (Münster: Aschendorff, 1955) tr.1, c.3 that an understanding of the Platonic Ideas must be fought which cannot be harmonized with the ontological and noetic principles found in Aristotle’s writings.

⁴⁰ Bach, 9.

⁴¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De unitate intellectus*. *Opera omnia*, vol.17,1, ed. Paul Simon (Münster: Aschendorff, 1975) pars III, § 2.

it connected with beauty as well: “Beauty expresses one form as a principle in respect of all realities.”⁴² Since every being has a form – or else it would not exist – and beauty is seen as the latter’s splendor, all being is truly beautiful.⁴³ Albert is influenced by Boethius in his claim that the beautiful is a universal concept, so that it must be considered, in terms of an attribute of the substance, to be a structure of the immediate cause, insofar as it is the univocal cause of universals.⁴⁴ For Dionysius, even the non-existing participates in the Beautiful-and-Good. Albert takes over this assertion, but interprets ‘non-existing’ differently than his source: “The non-existing, meaning not perfectly existing, but in potentiality only or mixed with privation, namely, matter, partakes of the Beautiful-and-Good, because in some way it has a form.”⁴⁵ Albert concedes that, for example, matter does not partake of the Beautiful-and-Good simply, but in potentiality. It is, consequently, called a non-existing thing, because it is not being in reality, but in potentiality.⁴⁶ In general, the defect of the form originates in matter – which is redolent of Plotinus’ belief that ugliness is due to matter⁴⁷ – although this is not anything evil but the good of being in an undeveloped state.⁴⁸ This notion offers a reason for Albert to combine Aristotle with Plato. The potentiality of matter is an Aristotelian concept corresponding to the forming virtue of the intellect seen as the principle of the natural forms. Albert suggests now that Plato had the same idea in mind, but was not able to express it as a result of a failure in terminology. Thus, the inherent possibility of matter as the beginning of form cannot be found in his writings explicitly, although he does not differ from his pupil in re.⁴⁹

Albert differentiates between ‘pulchrum’ and ‘pulchritudo.’ In existing things, there is no identity between these two notions, for ‘existens’ is called ‘ex alio sistens’ according to Richard of St. Victor, meaning that it

⁴² Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 84. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁴³ Cf. Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, 45.

⁴⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 89; Boethius, *Quomodo substantiae bonae sint. Patrologia Latina*, vol.64, 1314C: “Bonum quidem generale est.”

⁴⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 90. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

⁴⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 91.

⁴⁷ Cf. Plotinus, V 7.2.16.

⁴⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 37.

⁴⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De natura et origine animae*, tr.1, c.2.

has being from something else.⁵⁰ Thus, in caused things, “the beautiful is not beauty”⁵¹ and the sphere of beauty can be structured into “participating and participation itself or the participated, because beauty is named participation itself or a participated given by the first, but the beautiful is called participating itself.” However, they are the same in God. At this point, Albert implicitly criticizes Dionysius’ notion of the non-existing differentiation in God, since it is too obvious for Albert: “In the first cause Beauty and the Beautiful are not separated, as if the one were beautiful, the other Beauty.” For Beauty, because it is the first, embraces as one simple concept the whole, which means all things with regard to influence and what it contains.⁵² Hence, “about God it is said truly that he is beautiful and that he is Beauty, and nevertheless it is not necessary that they differ in reality, but only according to the mode of signifying.”⁵³ One can, therefore, make a terminological distinction if God’s qualities of perfection and simplicity are to be described:

“It is necessary that in the first cause simplicity and perfection exist, if it is the first. But that which is signified in the abstract is not signified as a perfect being, because essence does not express anything perfect in itself. And, thus, in order to signify the perfection of the first cause, which is truly in it, it is necessary to speak of it as beautiful; and in order to signify its simplicity, it is necessary to say that it is beauty. For the term ‘beautiful’ does not imply simplicity, but rather a mode of concretion.”⁵⁴

As mentioned above, God is the first and highest Beauty, which means in this particular case the Neoplatonic hyper-substantial of beautiful things.⁵⁵ Albert comes to this conclusion owing to the fact that God exceeds everything, so that it is necessary that the goodness of all things be removed from him. But then, that is, after a removal of everything, his goodness and beauty could not be revealed to us. “For what asserts nothing, signifies nothing.” Hence, negation must be transcended and God’s being must

⁵⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73.

⁵¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 74.

⁵² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

⁵³ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73.

⁵⁴ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73.

⁵⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 74; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

be considered beyond being: “By negating everything caused by the first, excluding only being itself out of the negation, there remains the fact that it has being which lies above the being of everything caused.”⁵⁶ With this doctrine, Albert stands in the Plotinic and Dionysian tradition. Despite this subtlety, all do call God nevertheless the Beautiful and the Good, since they start from the earthly point of view. Then God receives this name not because he effects beauty, but because he defines beauty by his essence, which leads thus to a formal similarity between him and reality. God, as the first Beauty, the form of beautiful things, the exemplary cause, makes things beautiful as whiteness makes something white.⁵⁷ Therefore, God is called a univocal cause in the sense that this univocality is one of analogy⁵⁸: God does not effect like a univocal cause, such as man, for example, passes on his own essence by means of reproduction, but through the exemplary form which is to be displayed.⁵⁹ Owing to the fact that there is nothing lacking in the first, it is called the most perfect and beautiful and richest among the beautiful things.⁶⁰ It is a characteristic of the first Beauty to make every beauty and whatever rich character⁶¹ there might be

⁵⁶ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 92.

⁵⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73. This sounds very Platonic. However, Albert also offers an Aristotelian explanation for the assertion that every reality is dependent on God: “In every order, the first controls everything that follows.” He is influenced by the *Liber de causis*, where it is said that “the first cause controls all created realities without intermixing with them.” *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 12.

⁵⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.1, 1; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 693B, for whom there is a mere analogous relationship. Albert’s expression is uncommon in the Middle Ages and actually combines two concepts which were considered mutually exclusive at that time. Aertsen treats the problem of Albert’s “univocatio analogiae” in detail. Cf. Aertsen, “‘Über das Schöne’ – Alberts des Großen Kölner Vorlesungen zu Dionysius Areopagita,” 423; “Die Frage nach dem ersten Grundlegenden. Albert der Große und die Lehre von den Transzendentalien,” *Albertus Magnus. Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, ed. Walter Senner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001) 99-101.

⁵⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.2, 83; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A, where it is said that everything exists exemplarily for the sake of the Beautiful-and-Good.

⁶⁰ Albert uses the word ‘in’ for what I translated with ‘among.’ This apparent integration of the beautiful God into the sphere of other beautiful things is abandoned only a few lines later, when Albert uses the prefix ‘hyper-’ to characterize God.

⁶¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

as a result of its perfection: “The richest itself is in good things, lacking in nothing of the deeply beautiful and good things, but pouring out of itself to all.” Thus, it is both rich and richly giving. Moreover, it is the only source of goodness and beauty, for “all things acquire from it the richness of beautiful and good things.”⁶² This shows that there is a similarity between God and his creatures, namely, an analogical one: “Although not all participate in the first Beautiful-and-Good, as intellectual things participate through cognition and enjoyment, each participates nevertheless according to analogy.”⁶³ The consequence is that beauty and goodness are more eminently present in the first Good than in created realities, which are only good and beautiful through partaking⁶⁴ and, moreover, according to their peculiar disposition. Thus, creatures manifest divine Goodness, but their essence is not identical with it,⁶⁵ so that they do not belong to the same genus.⁶⁶ They are only perfectly beautiful in the divine form, but lose this perfection as a result of privation as soon as they are created.⁶⁷ The divine influence present in every reality is called ‘light’ by Albert insofar as everything participates in the form.⁶⁸ God’s essence is, however, not adequately described by the term ‘light.’ The latter is rather a manifestation of his goodness.⁶⁹ In this sense, the non-existing can be called beautiful

⁶² Albert the Great, *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, I.II, tr.4, c.5.

⁶³ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 115.

⁶⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.26, c.1, a.1; I, tr.6, q.27, c.1, a.1.

⁶⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.26, c.1, a.3, I.

⁶⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.2, 83.

⁶⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum. Opera omnia*, vol.26, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1893) d.35, a.13.

⁶⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 82. Cf. also *De XV problematibus. Opera omnia*, vol.17,1, q.10: “Every form of a reality is the light of an intellectual being. Since every form is bestowed by an intellect which is an intellect with regard to substance and essence, but not by an adapted or acquired or possessed intellect (...), every form of being must be caused by the universally generating intellect which brings forth all forms of every intelligible thing. But this is only possible, because the light of the human agent intellect is itself the form of that which is actualized in the soul by the universally acting intellect.” At this point, he criticizes Plato’s doctrine of Ideas: “This comic philosopher should think of a possibility of how such a form should be constituted, if it is not constituted in a particular.”

⁶⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 50; *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, I.I, tr.1, c.10, where light is called the principium fontale. With regard to Dionysius’ doctrine on light cf. *The Divine Names*, 697C-701B. He says, for

and good, namely, when it is praised as beautiful and good in the hyper-substantial God.⁷⁰ But the latter also makes beauty effectively: “The first Beautiful effects beauty effectively without physical action, but acting by means of its essence.”⁷¹

Owing to this movement through essence, beauty is in God and he is his beauty, which is the condition of the first agent. He, as the first Beauty, prepossesses in himself the beauty of every beautiful thing extraordinarily, which implies that he does not draw back from the things. Albert concludes that this pre-existence “in the simple and supernatural nature of all beautiful things” occurs uniformly as in the cause.⁷² From his beauty, the essence of beauty as the form of beautiful things emanates into all beautiful things,⁷³ so that “all participate in beauty according to a causing of gleam from the source of beauty, and according to this, beauty is said to be in the cause by means of a causing of clarity.”⁷⁴ This is possible owing to the fact that God, although he is simple in substance, is nevertheless multiple in attribute, so that beauty is predicated of him and of the cause of beauty. It is a fact, in particular, that he is the creator, thus emphasizing his diversity, namely, in his relation to creation.⁷⁵ Albert uses this argument to show also that God’s beauty does not contradict the definition of beauty as consisting in a certain proportion. He can, therefore, say that “the highest Beauty comes from out of the proportion of the one to the other.”⁷⁶ As a result of the analogical relationship, the same Platonic and Plotinic principle of unity and variety

example, that God as intelligible light fills every rational being which has surpassed inner-worldly thinking with intelligible light.

⁷⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 92; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

⁷¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 75. Cf. *De bono. Opera omnia*, vol.28, ed. Henrik Kühle, Karl Feckes, Bernhard Geyer and Wilhelm Kübel (Münster: Aschendorff, 1951) tr.1, q.2, a.3, §48, where Albert refers to both the beautiful and the good as effective. Grosseteste had already given an indication of this. Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 348, note 57.

⁷² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 84; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁷³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73.

⁷⁴ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 76. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

⁷⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 9.

⁷⁶ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73.

must be applied to the causing of beauty. For it is one in its notion, but multiple in its effects: “The divine essence is the notion and the idea of all caused things, but they have a certain difference only in respect of different caused things.” This means that there is number only in the relations but not in the subject or in the essence.⁷⁷

That multitude truly refers to the aspect of relation becomes clear in a short analysis of the origin of the opposite of beauty, that is, ugliness. For “the nature of beauty, which is one in itself as flowing out of the first principle, is effected in each peculiar thing according to its peculiar nature,”⁷⁸ meaning that the quantity and quality of beauty in concrete things does not depend on God as the first principle of beauty, but on the reality partaking of his beauty. The nature of beauty in general is common to all beautiful things as their form and is made peculiar according to the nature of those things which receive it.⁷⁹ Albert takes this over from Dionysius, who presents the same principle in his allegory of the seal. At this point, the former can now explain the existence of ugliness, for all forms are in the first, and in God no ugliness is capable of occurring. Consequently, ugliness is founded in the nature of the recipient of the form of beauty, since all realities on earth are capable of mixing and becoming ugly.⁸⁰ This means that beautiful things are likely to tend continually towards deformation, because a caused thing is always unconditionally less beautiful than its cause.⁸¹ From this Plotinic basis, Albert switches to an Aristotelian explanation. Each creature is a mixture of potentiality and reality insofar as it is moved, and thus a communion of imperfection, which can be called evil, arises. The result is again a Platonic one in terms both of forms, that is, Ideas, and of the doctrine of participation, namely, that the ugly, insofar as it has an aptitude to the beautiful – Albert says in *De causis et processu universitatis a prima*

⁷⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 84; 93: “The notion of beauty is in relation with a certain multitude.”

⁷⁸ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 74. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

⁷⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 75; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 644B. Cf. also Plato, *Theaetetus*, 194c-195a; Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, V 71-73.

⁸⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Matthaeum*, c.6, 9.

⁸¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, I.II, tr.4, c.3; Plotinus, V 5.13.35-38.

causa that beautiful things clean the ugly⁸² – partakes to some extent of the beautiful, but insofar as it is ugly, it does not have a model in it. God is only the cause of evil by way of the intention of the exemplary form, but since he is the cause of reality, his cognition is directed towards being, while the ugly is moved in the opposite direction, that is, to the ugly.⁸³ For to the degree that something possesses beauty, it also possesses being.⁸⁴ However, the same can be the cause of ugliness per se and of beauty per accident: “Every beauty per se is caused in God, but by accident by evil.” This implies that evil can have the indirect effect of being the reason for beauty in another. Albert, for example, states that the evil of Nero was an occasion of constant beauty in the apostle Peter, who died the noble death of a martyr under Nero’s reign. Moreover, “by the relation of evil to the Good, the Good reveals itself more beautifully.”⁸⁵

3. The Good as the Cause of Causes

*“Every good is good in accordance
with the notion of the goal.”⁸⁶*

≈

God is the first Good, the hyper-substantial Good implying an eternal being, such that he is without an ultimate limit,⁸⁷ since that would presuppose something outside of him. As a result of his oneness and simpleness owing to the identity of his being and quiddity, he is considered perfect.⁸⁸ Hence, the composition of potentiality and actuality, typical for creatures, is missing in him.⁸⁹ God’s goodness does not originate from something else, but

⁸² Cf. Albert the Great, *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, I.II, tr.4, c.5.

⁸³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 82; *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, I.II, tr.4, c.3.

⁸⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 85; Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XI.

⁸⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 165.

⁸⁶ Albert the Great, *De bono*, tr.1, q.1, a.1, § 2.

⁸⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *De bono*, tr.1, q.1, a.3, § 14.

⁸⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.2, a.2.

⁸⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.4, q.20, c.3.

from his very nature as a result of his perfection.⁹⁰ Albert agrees with Dionysius' belief that man, however, does not have any knowledge about the divine nature, and, therefore, can reliably connect his goodness only with his relationship to creation. Thus, one can say that the Good is the common cause of all divine processions;⁹¹ it is the cause of all causes ("causa causarum").⁹² Owing to this identification of causality ("causa in actu") with divine Goodness, God's goodness must be considered prior to his being – as opposed to *causa in habitu* – which becomes clear in the philosopher's evaluation of a verse in *The Letter to the Romans*, where God is said to call those who are not, as well as those who are. One commentator on this verse justifies this ranking by alluding to non-being, which is, in this way, integrated into the participation of goodness as well. However, this refers to creation, whereas Albert also intends to say something about God's causing as it remains in himself.⁹³ By referring God's goodness to the quality of a cause instead of to his nature, Albert then does not contradict Dionysius' assertion that God is inaccessible.

This concentration on God's causality does not fully exclude hypotheses as to his nature. Actually, the two are closely linked to one another, for not only is it in the Neoplatonic tradition to emphasize God's inaccessibility, but it also corresponds to the Neoplatonic tradition to say that the divine processions can be found preformed in God's nature.⁹⁴ This means that the Good as the formal cause facilitates the effective cause in the latter's ability to cause. This assertion somehow contradicts Albert's claim in his early work *De bono* that the first Good is the efficient and exemplary cause of creation, but that, strictly speaking, no created good is good from the first

⁹⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 9.

⁹¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 1.

⁹² Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 57. Andreas Speer points out that the causing activity has to be understood as *causans actu*. God has to cause now and always in actuality. Cf. Andreas Speer, "Lichtkausalität. Zum Verhältnis von dionysischer Lichttheologie und Metaphysik bei Albertus Magnus und Thomas von Aquin," *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, 349; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 3.

⁹³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 3; *The Letter to the Romans* 4:17.

⁹⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 9.

Goodness.⁹⁵ The first Good should rather congregate all goodness because the latter is directed to it as the goal. A paragraph in his later commentary on *The Divine Names* clearly demonstrates that Albert's early understanding of the concept of the good became obsolete. There, he differentiates between "ex bono," "in bono" and "ad bonum." To the first he adds "sicut ex forma." Accordingly, reality flows out of the Good as out of a form, is in the Good as its image and moves back to the Good as its goal.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the philosopher even remarks that "the form is the goal of nature."⁹⁷ Yet, it is still possible to accept both positions without having a contradiction, namely, when regarding the good under the aspect of the beautiful: "But the beautiful, which expresses a reflection of the form over the proportional parts of matter, is related to the reception of the ideas of three causes," and, thus, it fits better with the beautiful than with the good to be both efficient and formal cause – apart from being final cause when taken as good and a goal.⁹⁸

The Dionysian hierarchical structure of creation is characterized by the nearness to or distance from goodness. Since the highest Good, that is, God, is the cause of the members of this hierarchy, they can be understood only in their relationship to the first Good.⁹⁹ It was easy for Albert to connect this Neoplatonic doctrine to an Aristotelian principle, since, as a final cause, the good is a teleological principle aspired by all: "Divine Goodness is the goal of the universe, not because God is effected by essence, but insofar as the admirable beauty of the universe, in which the perfection of divine Goodness shines back maximally, is constituted out of all things."¹⁰⁰ As the final cause of reality, "the Good taken in itself is related to nothing but the ideas of an end." As a result, Albert interprets the calling of the Good as

⁹⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *De bono*, tr.1, q.1, a.2, § 13: "Dicendum, quod formaliter loquendo nullum bonum creatum est bonum bonitate prima. Si vero loquatur exemplariter et effective, tunc omne bonum est bonum primae bonitatis, in quo relucet prima bonitas, sicut exemplar in exemplo."

⁹⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 136; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 709D.

⁹⁷ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 56: "Forma est finis naturae."

⁹⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 86; Henryk Anzulewicz, " 'Bonum' als Schlüsselbegriff bei Albertus Magnus," *Albertus Magnus. Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, 118-119.

⁹⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.46, a.17.

¹⁰⁰ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.9, 24.

final insofar as it calls the non-existing, that is, the non-perfectly existing, into being according to the “terminus a quo.”¹⁰¹ He explains this in an Aristotelian scheme of thought, namely, that all being is being in potentiality directed to actuality as its goal. Since this goal is the Good, Albert adds that being is good because it is directed to the Good. Accordingly, the form is the good of matter because of its relation to the goal. Despite the Aristotelian dominance, a Neoplatonic spark still shines through, namely, in the coming-together of unity and variety in this goal. Consequently, the concept of the good is one with regard to the community of its relations (“*communitas proportionalitatis*”), not in terms of number.¹⁰²

In his attempt to define the notion of the good – which does not undermine its oneness – Albert’s procedure reminds one of Socrates’ attempt to define the beautiful in *Hippias Major*. So, for example, Albert also treats the useful, coming to the conclusion that it “is not simply the good, because it is related to something else owing to which it is good.”¹⁰³ He then comes across an apparent contradiction in the definition of the attributes of the good in Augustine and Dionysius. The former claims that mode, nature and order are necessary to consider something to be perfectly good, while the latter enumerates the good, the beautiful and light. Since Albert’s aim is more to interpret authorities favorably than to try to refute them, he combines the possibilities presented. Thus, he refers order to the good, nature to the beautiful and mode to the pleasurable.¹⁰⁴ Only the Dionysian light is missing in this system. This does not mean that the philosopher has reached a final answer, for the concept of order connects, at another point, the good with the beautiful, which “can never be separated from the good”¹⁰⁵ anyway. Albert includes the pleasurable in this consideration: In corporeal things, the good is according to something beautiful and pleasurable. But the pleasurable in this sense is not simply good, because it is not pleasurable in its nature and not in all things. Only the noble is simply good in all things and always, since it draws to itself through its power and dignity.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.5, 2.

¹⁰² Cf. Albert the Great, *De bono*, tr.1, q.1, a.1, § 2.

¹⁰³ Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, 1.I, lect.9.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, 1.I, lect.9.

¹⁰⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Cicero, *De inventione rhetorica*, ed. Theodor Nüsslein (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998) II, 1.157-159.

On the other hand, if the noble as the spiritual good is considered from the point of view of convenience, appropriateness and naturalness, it is pleasurable, but if from the perspective of its effect, it can be called ordered and, consequently, beautiful.¹⁰⁷ The connection of the beautiful and the noble originates in the former's inherent virtue, which makes it desirable for others: "The beautiful sets the evenness of the true thing and the good thing in accordance with the notion of the noble. For the beautiful is what is to be aspired for its own sake, which is in the notion of the true good."¹⁰⁸

The relationship and Dionysian identity of the beautiful and the good has already been described in detail. Only one idea has to be added to round off the problem. For Albert asks himself which of the two comes prior if there is an identity in their subject and a difference merely in thinking. He suggests that, even though beauty presupposes the good as genus, it comes prior, because the perception of truth is followed by the perception of the good under the aspect of the beautiful. Albert describes this process as reason followed by affect. Something must be perceptible owing to its form, which constitutes the ontological truth of a certain reality, before the apprehension of the visible harmony, that is, of the beauty insofar as the truth is taken as good, influences the affect, which responds with pleasure and a desire to attain the reality.¹⁰⁹ Johannes Schneider points out that Albert could have expressed this as "pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent,"¹¹⁰ as his pupil Thomas Aquinas did, but that he remained – in accordance with Dionysius – within the concept of a cosmic harmony, where beauty is the center between the descending and ascending Good, between efficient and final causing.¹¹¹ Moreover, Albert concentrates on the ontological aspect of beauty as opposed to the aesthetical one, as mentioned above.

In spite of the unity in its nature, the good is in need of variety. This leads Albert to the field of morality. He understands the good often in a moral sense – such as in the book *De natura boni* – as a result of Aristotle's influence, which comes together with the ontological notion of Neoplatonism, so that Albert attains a holistic description of the phenomenon.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, 1.I, lect.9.

¹⁰⁸ Albert the Great, *De bono*, tr.1, q.2, a.3, § 48.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1.

¹¹¹ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 97.

As an introductory question, he asks himself what would have happened if there had not been original sin. He comes to the conclusion that, even if there would not be an election of a good as opposed to an evil, there would nevertheless be an election of a greater good as opposed to a lesser good. He sees this confirmed by Augustine, who says: "If all things were equally good, admirable beauty would not appear in the best possible way."¹¹² To my mind, Albert is correct, though not yet as mature as Thomas Aquinas, who considered every evil to be a lesser good in a particular situation. In general, every moral act is good as long as it is a real act (*actus ut ens*). This again originates in Aristotle's doctrine on the superiority of actuality over potentiality. Hence, a true act has gone beyond mere potentiality: It has reached a certain perfect state owing to its actualization. This means that it has attained its destined goal, and everything is good which is a goal.¹¹³ An intention is morally good if one wants to do that which one knows must be done.¹¹⁴ Hermann Heyer calls this the congruence of *opus operandum* and *opus operantis*.¹¹⁵ He tries to offer reasons for a possible misdirection of man's intention: On the one hand, it is the nature of the intention insofar as it is not subordinated to necessity. Man can act contrary to his reason (*scilicet contra rationem*)¹¹⁶ and choose a "bonum ut nunc,"¹¹⁷ comparable to the preference of the beautiful copy to the perfectly beautiful original in Plato's teaching. On the other hand, the misdirection is due to the matter toward which the intention is directed. Furthermore, the different needs and strivings in man's nature give rise to the misdirection, for a moral deed is a structure of spiritual and sensual strivings.¹¹⁸ It is good only when they are harmonious with each other, so that both elements, desire and reason, are present in the happiness that arises when one has reached the goal.¹¹⁹ In every act, God has to be the final goal

¹¹² Augustine, *Enchiridion*, I.I, c.10. Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.40, a.17.

¹¹³ Cf. Hermann Heyer, *Die läßliche Sünde nach Albertus Magnus* (Kaldenkirchen: Steyl, 1963) 49-50.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *In II Sententiarum. Opera omnia*, vol.27, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1894) d.41, a.2.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Heyer, 53.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *De bono*, tr.1, q.1, a.1, ad.5.

¹¹⁷ Albert the Great, *In II Sententiarum*, d.5, a.2.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Heyer, 58.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *In II Sententiarum*, d.26, a.8.

of one's intention: "The Good itself becomes visible whenever man gives himself away through his inborn goodness." This goodness is exhibited by a mode in one's moral activity, by an order in it, so that the intention of the act is directed toward the glorification of God, and by a certain gleam (species) in the beauty of the moral conduct: "It [the moral conduct] becomes beautiful by not having anything obscure in itself,"¹²⁰ by which Albert means the darkness of sin. If this relation to the final goal is missing, a moral deed can no longer be considered good. Since every good has an inherent attraction because it is a vestige of the original Good, it offers some kind of pleasure, so that it can also misdirect man's attention and will.¹²¹

4. The Transcendentals

*"One, true and good add to being
only certain modes of existing which consist either
in a negation or in an ensuing effect."*¹²²

≈

The origin of the assertion that there is a certain number of defined and determined characteristics in every existing reality must be seen as a reaction to the Catharist heresy and its accompanied Manichaeian revival, which radically divided the cosmos into opposing forces of good and evil fighting one another. Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, emphasized the goodness of all being, thus negating the existence of evil in the metaphysical sense.¹²³ Phillip the Chancellor was the first one to treat this problem systematically in his summa *De bono*. Albert's doctrine on the transcendentals – the term was still unknown in his time – is influenced by Phillip's initial treatment of

¹²⁰ Albert the Great, *De natura boni. Opera omnia*, vol.25,1, ed. Ephrem Filthaut (Münster: Aschendorff, 1974) tr.1, p.2, c.1, § 2, 5. Cf. *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, l.II, tr.4, c.5, where Albert argues that virtue extends itself by itself in beautiful and good things.

¹²¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae. Opera omnia*, vol.32 and 33, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1895) II, tr.1, q.3, a.3.

¹²² Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.28.

¹²³ Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 21-22.

the concept. In respect of the general idea, the roots are more Neoplatonic than Aristotelian, so that Albert remarks:

“The philosopher does not assert that the true and the good are general dispositions accompanying being (...) because the philosopher does not consider being insofar as it flows out of the first, one, wise and good Being, but he considers being insofar as the intellect comes to rest in it when it merges the prior in the latter and the composite in the simple.”

Moreover, Aristotle does not consider the good a quality of every being, but the goal of motion, as Albert points out.¹²⁴ Dionysius, on the other hand, offers a transcendental approach in his position that there is nothing that does not partake of the Beautiful-and-Good,¹²⁵ a doctrine that qualifies as a basis for Albert’s philosophy on the transcendentals.

The qualities of being, oneness, truth and goodness can be found in every existing and possible reality, without which there would be no intellectual cognition. *Ens* is the first in the order because it is the basis for the following qualities. It alone comes through *creatio*, while the others are generated by *informatio*. The second quality is *unum* in the function of, firstly, adding the impossibility of dividing *ens* and, secondly, limiting it, so that this being is separate from that being. *Verum* creates the perceptibility of *ens*. Thus, it is the truth of being that each *ens* can be distinguished from other *entes*.¹²⁶ Albert states that “the truth of a subject can be found in its relation to the first idea,”¹²⁷ while *bonum* establishes that being is directed to a goal.¹²⁸ As a consequence,

¹²⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.46, a.14.

¹²⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

¹²⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.28.

¹²⁷ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 5.

¹²⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.46, a.14; *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.28; *In I Sententiarum*, d.1, a.20: “The good adds to being a relation to the goal. However, the relation to the goal is twofold, namely, insofar as the goal is the limit of the motion of the efficient cause, or insofar as the goal is in the efficient principle through the intention. And in the first case, those things are called good which are by the good, in the second case those which are directed to the good, which the efficient cause intends, that is, which moves it towards activity, are called good.”

“goodness and the good point to a goal outside of themselves.”¹²⁹ The ontological ranking is explicitly Scholastic, leaving behind the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition in the sense that being precedes oneness and that the good is not beyond being. Apart from the ontological point of view, it is, however, possible to regard at least the good as the first in the order, namely, from the perspective that it is the first cause, in the sense of the Aristotelian final cause as the presupposition of all other causes. Then being is only generated as a result of the existence of the good.¹³⁰

This treatise shows that Albert ignores the possibility that beauty might be a transcendental as well. As Aertsen remarks, the beautiful is only discussed in its relation to the good – in his eyes, this is due to the Dionysian original, which I cannot support, since the Areopagite teaches not a hierarchy between the two concepts, as seems to be the case with regard to his commentator, but a true identity. The omission of beauty as a transcendental is a bit strange, since Albert describes the relationship between it and the good in such a way that almost forces the former to be ranked among transcendentals. The two are the same in *subiecto*, but different in *ratione*, as transcendentals are the same in the subject and different in their notion. However, in order to prove that beauty is a transcendental, its relationship to being would have to be shown. Albert does not do this, although he presumes a universality of the concept.¹³¹ But the identity of the beautiful and the good in respect of their subject is an implicit affirmation of the former’s state as transcendental. Balthasar explicitly pleads for calling the beautiful a transcendental, which he wants to see in Albert’s assertion that insofar as something possesses beauty it possesses being, since being and form mutually include each other: Being is the actualization of a form, while a form directs everything to its actualization, which means that it gives being.¹³² To my mind, this does not, however, imply that beauty illuminates an aspect of being that is not illuminated by one of the other

¹²⁹ Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.46, a.14.

¹³⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 2.

¹³¹ Cf. Aertsen, “‘Über das Schöne’ – Alberts des Großen Kölner Vorlesungen zu Dionysius Areopagita,” 427.

¹³² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 89.

transcendentals, so that Balthasar's approach seems to miss the decisive point.

5. The Striving for One's Goal

*“Every beauty is not the goal
of motion per se,” but the goal of motion
accidentally in all things.*¹³³

≈

God – beyond all rest and motion – determines everything by means of letting it partake of the Beautiful and the Good, and moves all according to a motion which is in him.¹³⁴ Since the Dionysian original calls God ‘the Beautiful-and-Good,’ Albert can, thus, say that “the Beautiful-and-Good is the cause of every motion.”¹³⁵ Of course he connects this principle to Aristotle, for whom a motion is a procession from a potentiality to a reality. Albert also integrates the Aristotelian teleological principle into this notion, stating that all natural events are the work of a spirit who gives them a sense and a goal.¹³⁶ He finds something similar in Boethius' Neoplatonic writings and their traditional emphasis on the One, namely, in the sense that “every multiplicity is led back to the unity which is the substantial cause of this multiplicity.”¹³⁷

As mentioned above, beauty can be considered a final cause – owing to the objective identity of the good and the beautiful – apart from being efficient and formal cause; but in the majority of cases, Albert concentrates on the good with regard to this question. This means then that one only implicitly strives for the divine Beautiful. In the philosopher's eyes, the beautiful is not searched for as a result of a motivation. If one sees God,

¹³³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 75.

¹³⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 94; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705B-C.

¹³⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 95. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704C, where it is said that the Beautiful-and-Good is the origin of the motions of rational beings, souls and bodies.

¹³⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *De XV problematibus*, q.1.

¹³⁷ Albert the Great, *De XV problematibus*, q.5.

the Good, one sees the Beautiful implicitly and unconsciously. A conscious realization of the identity does not come about naturally, because one usually differentiates in thought between the beautiful and the good. Thus, a return to God as the Beautiful is most of the time only implicated in the possible forms of approaching the goal. As a result of this concentration on the good, Johannes Schneider even claims that Albert's intention was not to present a coming together of the three causes in God, since being a formal cause applies rather to the beautiful, but to show a connection between created and uncreated beauty. He concludes that the final cause is not identical with God, but with the goal of action. This would mean that it signifies the created good¹³⁸ which is directly striven for. God would then remain the goal only indirectly. To my mind, Schneider tries to emphasize Albert's Aristotelian side too much at this point, resulting in an unjustified suppression of the – at that time – traditional Neoplatonic influence.

Realities aspire to the divine Good in accordance with the disposition peculiar to their nature.¹³⁹ This implies that they are not perfect and are in need of an actualization of coinciding as an image with the form. There are certain divine processions – such as the beautiful, the noble, the good and the lovable – that is, certain gifts flowing from God into creatures, with which they are perfected into divine assimilation.¹⁴⁰ The basis for the opinion that there is a need for an assimilation at all originates from Plotinus. He, however, considers the process to be something that man can manage on his own. In contrast, Dionysius underscores the necessary divine support apart from accepting that man can take the initiative by leading a morally good life.¹⁴¹ His commentator adopts the idea of an assimilation to God by means of a moral life. Accordingly, divine beauties are said to search for incorruptible images in our souls which conform to divine beauties through virtue.¹⁴² Here, the Platonic concept of unity and

¹³⁸ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 95-96. He even suggests that the falling together of forma and efficiens forms the Aristotelian concept of the forma exemplaris. Cf. Johannes Schneider, 95, note 245.

¹³⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 37.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.30-32; Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165C-D.

¹⁴² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De ecclesiastica hierarchia. Opera omnia*, vol.36,2, ed. Maria Burger (Münster: Aschendorff, 1999) c.4.

multiplicity again appears, for it is a striving of the composite being of all creatures for an assimilation with the simple being of God. The goal is to overcome the difference in the accomplishment of a certain participation in divine perfection¹⁴³: “For if something strives for something else, it does so solely with regard to the similarity with that which is to be gained. And if something moves to something else, it does so solely owing to its own deficiency compared to the perfection that is searched for.”¹⁴⁴ This also makes it clear that the aspiration of perfection cannot be understood exclusively in a moral way, for morality cannot be found in God, but that an ontological perfection is meant, an attempt at the self-realization of being.¹⁴⁵ Albert underscores this by emphasizing that a moral life is not the most important factor in life: “Happiness is the actual good of man; virtuous acting is a partial good.”¹⁴⁶

According to Albert, and the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, there are two successful ways leading to the Beautiful-and-Good. One is affective, the other is intellectual: Dominance is “the perfect possession of all beautiful and good things and a true and unchanging solidness of all beautiful things in which the intellect reflects, and of all good things in which the affect rests.”¹⁴⁷ This dominance is achieved when the goal is finally reached, that is, when the two ways melt together.

a) *Desire*

Albert asks the question of why Aristotle sets the most desired in the sphere of the most Beautiful. He answers this with his standard definition – conforming also to the Platonic philosophy on the encounter with concrete beauty – of what the beautiful is: Since it reflects in the soul by its clarity

¹⁴⁴ Albert the Great, *De XV problematibus*, q.5. Albert's claim that even adulterers and murderers are not moved in their operations if not by something which has a similarity to the first Good and Beautiful is typically Scholastic. One never strives for evil in itself, but for a good. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 115.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 37, where Albert distinguishes *prima perfectio*, that is, God, from *secunda perfectio*, which is attainable by creatures.

¹⁴⁶ Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.I, lect.2.

¹⁴⁷ Albert the Great, “Sermo fratris Alberti de Colonia” (Dominica XX post Pentecostem) *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 3 (1966): 49.

and uniformity, it provokes desire.¹⁴⁸ For every beauty has passion in the sense that it arouses an emotional reaction,¹⁴⁹ so that “all things desire the Beautiful-and-Good”¹⁵⁰ as a goal insofar as it is amiable and lovable.¹⁵¹ In a more Aristotelian way one could say that the first mover directs all to the first Beautiful-and-Good, and the desire of it is in all those who are moved by it.¹⁵² To a certain extent, this already indicates Albert’s usual imprecision. Is it now the Beautiful which draws desire to itself, or the Good, or the Beautiful-and-Good? According to Albert, Cicero’s definition that the beautiful and the noble, that is, that which is good in itself, draw us with their power and allure us with their dignity corresponds to both owing to the universality of the subject. Nevertheless, beauty adds a certain difference over the common genus which completes its own notion.¹⁵³ He explicates this difference in the familiar way: “The same notion of desire is in respect of the good, which limits the motion of the agent – and this is the form – and in respect of the beautiful of it, which is from that which gleams over the matter in the form giving being to it.”¹⁵⁴ Yet elsewhere, he seems to say just the opposite: He does not accept the Dionysian principle that beauty calls all to itself, for “it seems that this is not a condition of beauty but rather of the good. For that which all desire ambitiously is the good and not the beautiful.” The only solution to the problem is to refer again to the identity of the good and the beautiful in their subject, so that the drawing to itself “does not correspond to the beautiful according to a peculiar difference, through which its notion is completed, but to a notion of its subject, in which it communicates with the good as if from a nature of genesis.”¹⁵⁵ He concludes that beauty, insofar as it involves a notion of the good, includes a motion of desire to itself.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, 1.I, lect.9.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

¹⁵⁰ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 115. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 114.

¹⁵² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 115.

¹⁵³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72; Cicero, *De officiis*, I, 6, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 89.

¹⁵⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 77.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

Since “desire is not in respect of that of which it is impossible to partake,”¹⁵⁷ there is a possibility of reaching the goal. Those who still partake imperfectly of the Beautiful-and-Good go on desiring their perfection in it, whereas those who participate simply and perfectly partake either absolutely of it – which brings desire to rest because the desired has been attained – or according to a relationship to the model.¹⁵⁸ Most people do not attain the latter possibility, but are stuck in imperfect participation, even to the degree of being ugly. Regarding them, Albert says that the ugly, too, “insofar as it is ugly, desires the beautiful, as is said in the first book of *Physics*.” For its constitution is through the beautiful, and so it desires it as the imperfect desires the perfect.¹⁵⁹ However, this assertion seems to contradict Albert’s claim that the ugly is moved to the ugly.¹⁶⁰ A possible solution to this problem could be that this latter assertion applies merely to apparent beauty. Then the ugly would indeed be moved to the ugly, but in the belief that it is the beautiful. In this case, true Beauty is not attained: “Although not all stretch to divine Beauty or desire it, insofar as it is in God, they desire it nevertheless in its similarity, and so they do not reach it.”¹⁶¹ The teaching implies Plato’s classical accusation that people misinterpret images as the true reality, which ties them helplessly to the cave.

b) *Amor*

God generates created love as an image of his own love,¹⁶² a love that spurs man to return to him and finds the union which is thereby effected in the congregation with him.¹⁶³ The idea of the Platonic circle is present here. At another point, Albert is neither in the Neoplatonic tradition nor influenced by Aristotle, yet his assertion corresponds with Augustine and Dionysius qua Christians. For both, the communication of the good presupposes a will.¹⁶⁴ The assertion that “the love of the first cause gives reason to produce

¹⁵⁷ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 89.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 89.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 86.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 82.

¹⁶¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 86.

¹⁶² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 133.

¹⁶³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 140.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 70.

all things”¹⁶⁵ shows that amor precedes causality. The creation of the world is an effect of divine love. The essence of this love is divine Goodness,¹⁶⁶ which is loved in God’s love for himself preceding or including his creation, which comes thus into being.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, the Aristotelian definition of love as benevolence is closely connected with this concept of creation, since, according to Albert, “the highest Good does not produce while creating if it does not want [its creatures to be] good.”¹⁶⁸

A closer analysis of beauty as a causing principle underscores the Dionysian influence on the doctrine on love: “Love and the lovable belong to the Beautiful-and-Good, because the Beautiful-and-Good itself is lovable and the object of love.” The former are founded in the first Beautiful-and-Good, and were created essentially and exemplarily as love. Moreover, love exists also because of the Beautiful-and-Good, namely, when the pair is regarded as a goal.¹⁶⁹ Then all agreements, friendships and communion can be said to exist because of it in the sense that with these agreements, friendships and circles of communion people try to attain as well as they can the first Beauty.¹⁷⁰ Consequently, divine Beauty can be considered the notion of love resulting in peace.¹⁷¹ Albert cites Empedocles, for whom no peace is attained, since “friendship moves elements to mixture.” The friendship Albert has in mind “is directed from the form to the One.”¹⁷² Fortunately, this concept of an attracting God is, in a way, also compatible with Aristotle’s beautiful first mover, who moves the bodies of the outmost sphere of heaven not in a mechanical or efficient way, but through his love, drawing them to himself as the goal of their striving. This mover neither effects anything nor passes anything on to the world. He is not even interested in it

¹⁶⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 114. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705D-708A, where it is merely said that the Beautiful-and-Good – and not its love – is the cause of all realities.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *De IV coaequaevis. Opera omnia*, vol.34, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1895) tr.1, q.1, a.7.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 119.

¹⁶⁸ Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.26, c.2, a.2.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 132; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712C-D.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 85; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, c.5.

¹⁷² Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 94.

and is aspired exclusively by the bodies of heaven.¹⁷³ For a Christian, this theory needs, of course, a reinterpretation. Albert achieves this by making use of the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, according to which the creator is involved in the world beyond simply being – for Dionysius, at least – the goal of every reality moved by him to its peculiar fulfillment. As Ingrid Craemer-Ruegenberg points out, this reinterpretation was easier for Albert because of the Latin translation of Aristotle's text via the prior Arabic translation of the Greek text. For the Arabic translators knew only one form for 'actualized' and 'being active,' so that someone who is in reality was easily turned into a creator. As a result, Albert's reinterpretation of the actualized first mover as the first cause did not attract any attention.¹⁷⁴

Albert distinguishes different levels of love which are structured hierarchically in the Dionysian tradition.¹⁷⁵ It represents the closest resemblance to what Plato wanted to express in his ascent to the Idea of Beauty in the *Symposium* and, moreover, the only passage where romantic love implying romantic beauty, which is of such great importance for the Greeks, is at least hinted at – although not explicitly. Albert's focus is more directed toward the intellectual part of the phenomenon. The lowest form in this hierarchy is natural love characterized by a natural striving,¹⁷⁶ which means that it is not a willful, but a necessary act.¹⁷⁷ The second form is a passion, namely, sensuous love directed towards that which is considered good by the senses. The next two levels are human and angelic love, the former characterized by an imperfection of cognition in contrast to the latter.¹⁷⁸ This shows that love becomes more and more intellectual in the progression to its apogee in divine love, for which man needs divine grace through faith or a mystical vision.¹⁷⁹ In this hierarchy, love has the role of a unifying force, for the Beautiful holds all creatures together with the love of a peculiar beauty.¹⁸⁰ In this context, Albert mentions the Dionysian and Proclian doctrine that the

¹⁷³ Cf. Aristotle, *Movement of Animals*, 699a12-699b11; *Metaphysics*, 1072b1-13.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Ingrid Craemer-Ruegenberg, *Albertus Magnus* (München: Beck, 1980) 63-64.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 713A.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 138.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.3, a.15, q.1.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 145.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 110-113.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 85; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 709D.

Beautiful-and-Good moves superiors to care for inferiors, so that the latter are firmly set in them as in conserving causes.¹⁸¹ In general love is, therefore, not characterized by the subject's advantage, but by the object's goodness.

Albert must be seen in contrast to Plato in his statement that "everything can be said to desire the Beautiful-and-Good, insofar as it is imperfect itself, but to love it, insofar as it already participates in the already perfect in being through the form,"¹⁸² because for Plato, Eros is a striving principle lacking perfection. On a more general basis, that is, without concentrating on the kind of moving force, Albert's statement suggests that the insight that something is lovable¹⁸³ is followed by an aspiration for the lovable goal, for its enjoyment and possession. Albert expresses this with the word 'intentio.' He concludes that the possession of the goal of the aspiration brings forth intellectual delight¹⁸⁴ – and not so much something as fruitful as virtue, as is the case in Plato's view on the possession of the goal.¹⁸⁵ How is this intention carried out?

As in Dionysius' doctrine, amor is closely linked to ecstasy. However, the Greek word 'ἐκστατικός,' meaning 'inclined to depart from' is translated into the Latin 'extasim faciens,' indicating that love is not identical with ecstasy, but that it generates it.¹⁸⁶ Ecstasy is always suffered,¹⁸⁷ except by God, for whom it is not a passive passio, but an active force generating reality.¹⁸⁸ Yet, Albert mentions an influence of force: "[God] is drawn as by his goodness and love (dilectione) and amor; for he can know nothing else but amor, (...) so that he enters all realities through processions of his goodness."¹⁸⁹ With regard to creatures, ecstasy must be considered a

¹⁸¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 125; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 709D; 713B; Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 53.

¹⁸² Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 115.

¹⁸³ Johannes Schneider calls love "an informatio of the affect by means of a good." Cf. Johannes Schneider, 107.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 122.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 212a.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 116.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 128.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.16, q.64; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712A; *Epistulae*, 1112C.

¹⁸⁹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 129.

moving force which does not create, but which supports the striving for the transcendent goal. This movement is described by the term 'excessus' indicating a step beyond one's own capabilities:

"For it becomes always an excess by the virtue of another more superior light, when the soul is elevated to that which is not possible for itself according to its own virtue regarding the state of the way, and it does not harmonize with the fact that the soul exceeds itself with regard to operations in accordance with any peculiar capacity."¹⁹⁰

At first sight, this seems to be close to Plato's divine madness, Plotinus' enrapture and Dionysius' teaching on the ecstatic nature of Eros, but it actually indicates that ecstasy cannot take place in amor, because love is not elevated to something more perfect owing to its own perfection. Albert concludes that "ecstasy is possible in the cognition preceding amor and in the pleasure following it."¹⁹¹ Love itself does not lift the lover beyond his natural capability, since he is active in love, but passive in cognition and pleasure, so that there, ecstasy can happen to him in the form of illumination, which is then not an affective experience, but a "subtle incursion into the intellectual life of the soul,"¹⁹² as Markus Führer formulates it.

c) Cognition

Another way of approaching God is by gaining knowledge about him. The questions remain, what kind of knowledge, and how it is to be attained. In his commentary on *The Divine Names*, Albert appears to be opposed to the method of negative theology, for, as I have already mentioned above, "what

¹⁹⁰ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 127.

¹⁹¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 127. This is contrary to what Albert says in his commentary on *The Mystical Theology*, where he negates the possibility of rapture in the contemplation of God. With that he is also opposed to Dionysius, for whom the mystical vision is a true ecstasy. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mystical theologiam. Opera omnia*, vol.37,2, ed. Paul Simon (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978) c.1: "Dicendum, quod non in omni divina contemplatione est raptus et ea quae hic de contemplatione dicuntur, conveniunt omni contemplationi et non raptui, qui est melior pars contemplationis."

¹⁹² Markus Führer, "The Theory of Intellect in Albert the Great and its Influence on Nicholas of Cusa," *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991) 53.

asserts nothing, signifies nothing.”¹⁹³ This seems to support the hypothesis that philosophical knowledge of God is possible, even though truly positive affirmations of God are not, since he transcends being.¹⁹⁴ Yet, they are not totally inadequate because he is the creator. Thus, based on his creation the philosopher can induce a cause, for a cause is apprehended in correspondence to its creation. But since God is more than the cause of his creation, so that there are no similarities between him and reality,¹⁹⁵ the possible philosophical knowledge is reduced to his existence and his causing relationship to his creation: “It is clear with regard to the world that nothing inner-worldly can be the cause of the world and that the parts of the world were led into being by a wise being, whose power exceeds every inner-worldly power.”¹⁹⁶ Hence, there are truths about God that man can know and demonstrate without negation or revelation.

In *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, on the other hand, he approves of the method of negative theology, a procedure which he takes over from Dionysius: By negating qualities like ‘being,’ we learn something about God¹⁹⁷: “The forms themselves are images of divine Beauty, through the negation of which we come to these hidden things represented in them as hidden.”¹⁹⁸ By removing other things from him, God’s hidden beauty appears.¹⁹⁹ Ignorance in this method is not irrational, but a result of too great a challenge for the natural human intellect.²⁰⁰ Man has no natural

¹⁹³ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 92.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2. This has to be understood in such a way that, for example, calling him ‘Being’ does not say anything about him, although being is in him. Cf. *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.5.

¹⁹⁶ Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.3, q.17.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2.

¹⁹⁸ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2. At another point, too, the connection between beauty and a lack of hiddenness is made, for Albert says that an interaction is beautiful if nothing is hidden in it. Cf. Albert the Great, *De natura boni*, tr.1, p.2, c.1, § 2, 5. Cf. also Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 64 and Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1025B, where the discovery of the hidden beauties is referred not to negative theology, but to a mystical vision.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1. At this point, Albert uses Aristotle’s comparison of the human mind with a nocturnal bird incapable of seeing the sun because it is too bright for its eyes.

ability beyond the intellect to provide extensive insight. The Dionysian “ὕπερ νοῦν”²⁰¹ is interpreted by Albert not as a human ability beyond the intellect, but as a characterization of God's being.²⁰² The commentator, however, does not go as far as the original here by stating that what we learn is then the divine Being. Rather, he refers this insight to a supernatural source instead of a natural ability of the human intellect.²⁰³ He therefore forms the Dionysian proposition that one realizes nothing into “one realizes nothing with natural cognition.”²⁰⁴ The conclusion that God's grace is necessary to be able to perceive *that* he exists (“quia est”)²⁰⁵ represents a true contradiction to what he says in the *Summa theologiae*.

Here, the importance of the doctrine of illumination originating in Augustine is indicated. Man is constantly illuminated by divine grace as a support to attain God's beauty: “Although there is no renewal in the Beautiful itself, there is nevertheless a renewal in that which is moved to the beautiful, because it is continually renewed by the illuminations descending from the first Beautiful.”²⁰⁶ Führer claims that there are – at least – two views on illumination which are dissimilar.²⁰⁷ Andreas Speer, on the other hand, is of the opinion that despite the problems that arise, Albert tries to connect the models: an epistemology based on Aristotelism is explicated by means of a Neoplatonic doctrine of illumination.²⁰⁸ The

²⁰¹ Dionysius, *Epistulae*, 1065B.

²⁰² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Epistulas. Opera omnia*, vol.37,2, Ep.I.

²⁰³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1. On the other hand, there seems to be a supernatural element in the sense of an illumination through faith. For the latter is not restricted to the natural abilities of reason. Craemer-Ruegenberg even suggests that “it is not performed in the form of theoretical cognition, but as an ‘affect,’ as a form in which the intellect and the will are affected in their turning to God.

²⁰⁴ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1.

²⁰⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Epistulas*, Ep.I.

²⁰⁶ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 98.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Markus Führer, “Albertus Magnus’ Theory of Divine Illumination,” *Albertus Magnus. Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, 141.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Speer, 256. In the field of epistemology, in particular, Albert esteems Plato's contribution to humanities highly, since the Greek presents a specifically active cognitive principle, that is, the νοῦς, as the only valid principle in opposition to sophistic sensism. Cf. Bach, 7. Moreover, the first indication of a need for illumination can be found as early as Plato's writings indicating that the wise divinity must inspire man to make him understand true Beauty. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d. The doctrine is slightly changed in Neoplatonism and its connection of the divine principle with the metaphor of light.

basic idea is the following: The human intellect, infused into man by the divine intellect through emanation,²⁰⁹ is divided into the active agent intellect – imperishable, separated from the body but directed towards it – and the passive, receptive possible intellect, the result of the unification with the body. Yet, its participation in the agent intellect makes an activity possible in which it can partially overcome the ontological distance by means of assimilation.²¹⁰ It has to be illuminated, and thus the agent intellect, because of its insufficiency as a creature, needs the illumination by the gracious divine Light. The basis for the illumination can already be found in man, since, in the substance of the soul, all beauties of contemplation, truth and divine goodness reside, so that, when God’s increased light flows into it, containing “all beauties of divine Truth,”²¹¹ these beauties are generated and shown to be the beauties of truth in our intellect. Albert refers to this light as “the imprinted sign in us” reflecting to the visible appearance of the imprinting.²¹² The first part of this theory is Aristotelian, the second part Neoplatonic. In contrast to Georg Engelhardt, Saskia Wendel emphasizes that nature and grace come together in this intellectual process: Man’s mental activity and God’s grace are not mutually exclusive, as if grace were something subsequent, engrafted on the autonomous human thinking. It is rather “something preceding it [human thinking], setting it, so to speak, into its freedom.”²¹³

²⁰⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De anima. Opera omnia*, vol.7,1, ed. Clemens Stroick (Münster: Aschendorff, 1968) I.I, tr.2, c.13.

²¹⁰ Cf. Jörn Müller, *Natürliche Moral und philosophische Ethik bei Albertus Magnus* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001) 112. Craemer-Ruegenberg even suggests that illumination is undertaken through faith, for the latter is not restricted to the natural abilities of reason. The only problem is that this would mean that “it is not performed in the form of theoretical cognition, but as an ‘affect,’ as a form in which the intellect and the will are affected in their turning to God.” Craemer-Ruegenberg, 49. Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.1, a.4: “Intellectus ordinatur ad affectum ut ad finem.”

²¹¹ Albert the Great, *Super Matthaicum*, c.5, 34.

²¹² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Matthaicum*, c.4, 9.

²¹³ Saskia Wendel, *Affektiv und inkarniert. Ansätze Deutscher Mystik als subjekttheoretische Herausforderung* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2002) 153. Cf. Georg Engelhardt, “Das Glaubenslicht nach Albert dem Großen,” *Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Johann Auer and Hermann Volk (München: Zink, 1957) 371-396. On the other hand, “to understand is to suffer,” implying that the human intellect is not just active, but that there is a cooperation. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 104.

Throughout his scholarly life, Albert fills the theory of the intellect with different secondary ideas in order to propitiate the tension between the two approaches. In his early years, he maintains that the divine Light does not infuse forms, but that the immanent rational principles are the forms themselves and are illuminated in such a way that they are seen in a new light.²¹⁴ Consequently, corporeal forms are only then made visible by the agent intellect. Nevertheless, there is a link to divine forms, the beauty of which functions as a model for those forms which are created by the human intellect.²¹⁵ This has its origin in Augustine's concept of truth illumination.²¹⁶ Later in his life, Albert sets up a system of similarity. Accordingly, "man alone is the nexus of God and the world insofar as he has the divine intellect in himself, through which he is sometimes elevated beyond the world."²¹⁷ This elevation is the realization of his similarity to God. Moreover, Albert identifies the Good with the divine intellect: "But the Good, which is good for every nature, is the participation in the divine intellect insofar as it is universally the efficient principle and the form and the goal of being without universality."²¹⁸ Consequently, man has the greatest ability to partake of it owing to his own intellect. Divine Goodness is perceived intellectually, while this intellectual ability of man mirrors the first Good – even though he tends more to the present than to the true Good as a result of his creatural imperfection. Yet, this theory does not mean that man is the only one who is assimilated with the source of the illumination ("per similitudinem effectus") or, as Führer suggests, with what he learns to know.²¹⁹ God, as well, has to make himself similar to the target of his illumination ("per similitudinem causae") to create the possibility that the target can become similar to him.²²⁰

To describe the assimilation in a more detailed way, it has to be mentioned again that there are certain divine processions – such as the true, the good and the beautiful – that as gifts flowing from God into creatures

²¹⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2.

²¹⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2.

²¹⁶ Cf. Führer, "Albertus Magnus' Theory of Divine Illumination," 141.

²¹⁷ Albert the Great, *De animalibus. Opera omnia*, vol.12, ed. Ephrem Filthaut (Münster: Aschendorff, 1955) l. XXII, tr.1, c.5, n.9.

²¹⁸ Albert the Great, *Metaphysica*, l.I, tr.2, c.5.

²¹⁹ Cf. Führer, "Albertus Magnus' Theory of Divine Illumination," 154.

²²⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.3, q.15, a.3.

serve as a means of perfecting the latter into this divine assimilation. Since they cannot be perfected in matter, the human intellect (“intellectus assimilans”) abstracts them from matter and refers them back to the divine origin²²¹: The first procession occurring in man is according to an apprehension of a truth visible in the form, and takes place, consequently, in the intellect. Then this truth inflames (“excandescit”) the viewer and is accepted as good; and so desire is finally moved towards it. Albert distinguishes a twofold apprehension preceding the motion of desire: The one is in the speculative intellect, which is concerned with Truth itself; the other is in the practical intellect by an extension of a truth under the aspect of a good, which is then followed for the first time by the motion of desire toward the good. Albert relates the human capabilities of perception to God’s processions which form man’s capabilities. Accordingly, man’s apprehension of Truth itself refers to the divine procession of light, whereas the divine procession of the beautiful forms man’s apprehension of a true thing insofar as it has an aspect of the good. Although the encounter with a beautiful reality, that is, with a reality judged to be good, is followed by a movement of desire, making it possible for man to regard the specific reality as lovable,²²² he remains on the concrete level. A further step is still required to direct one’s desire towards the origin of the divine processions. Although Albert appeals here to the method of abstraction, as mentioned above, I do not really see how that could work, if one considers that the philosopher’s definition of beauty is based on a concrete coming together of form and matter. How can something apply to God when it is by nature constituted of a unification of an abstract forming principle with matter, thus resulting in something concrete? Nevertheless, Albert does not seem to see a problem in simply negating this duality of form and matter in God’s case. Yet, this would mean that earthly beauty is essentially other than divine Beauty, so that it would be impossible for man to search for the latter by means of abstracting from the former. What is more, Albert’s thesis that the

²²¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, I, II, c. 12. Albert disagrees with Dionysius’ assertion that the divine beauties in the form of gifts are secret and not shown to the outer sense, but only invisibly to the inner sense by participation, because they are beyond the soul; for example, Albert points to sacramental gifts shown in visible elements. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, c. 4.

²²² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c. 4, 71.

process of esteeming a reality as good after having judged it to be true corresponds to what is meant by the divine gift of the beautiful implies a dependence of the concept of good upon that of the beautiful. For the medieval theologian admits that Truth itself can be regarded on its own, but as soon as a concrete reality is considered to be good, it is said not to refer to an abstract notion of the good, a divine procession of the good, but to the procession of the beautiful. Does it then still make sense to establish a notional difference between the good and the beautiful? If being good means being a goal, and if a good reality is always beautiful, the beautiful will always be aspired. If a good reality is always beautiful and being beautiful means splendor of form upon matter, there cannot be any peculiarity of the beautiful, so that splendor of form upon matter will apply to the good as well. Be that as it may – for the knots cannot be undone perfectly – it can be asserted that, should the abstraction from the triad of the true, the good and the beautiful be possible, and man is led to their origin, then Albert's position on this point is fundamentally different from Plato's. According to the latter, Beauty and Truth ultimately coincide, but the Good itself is not attained by man. In Albert's eyes, however, all three can be grasped in their coincidence in God. This shows that, although he includes many of his own ideas and definitions in his commentary on *The Divine Names*, Dionysius' identification of the good and the beautiful exert an influence upon him from which he cannot clearly distance himself, despite his attempts to do so.

Albert applies this doctrine on cognition in his interpretation of the Dionysian text on the three motions of the soul and the angels. The frame corresponds to the original, but Albert makes special use of the Aristotelian concept of the intellect mentioned above, sometimes even via Arabic philosophers such as Averroes, so that new aspects appear. The Beautiful-and-Good is said to be the cause of these motions, of emerging things, of the abiding, of rest, with regard to its conserving form, and of foundations with regard to conserving things outside. The cause is effective and preserving, in which creatures are preserved as in the exemplary form,²²³ “for what bestows being on something, keeps

²²³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 109.

it also in being.”²²⁴ It is even their goal,²²⁵ which Albert expresses in the phrase, “for the sake of the Beautiful, as for the sake of an ultimate goal, to which the intention of the agent is directed.”²²⁶ The straight motion of the soul corresponds to the procession towards exterior things,²²⁷ implying that the rational soul searches by means of symbols.²²⁸ The circular motion presupposes a retreat from external things, so that man becomes conscious of his inner nature.²²⁹ This retreat finds its goal in “its simplest and noblest potency,” as Johannes Schneider interprets the agent intellect.²³⁰ “The circular motion is essential for the soul,” taking in “the light of the agent intellect, which gives its form to all intelligibles and illuminates the possible intellect with the power of the divine Light gleaming in it.” That from which the motion of light begins is itself the first Beautiful, and thus it is perceived by the soul. According to Albert, “the leading to the first Beautiful-and-Good refers then to the inclusion of the circle itself, namely, insofar as it is the Beautiful-and-Good itself, which is in the soul ontologically.”²³¹ Hence, the convolution conducts the soul to God, the Beautiful-and-Good, who is beyond all existence as one and the same.²³² The spiral motion of the soul is according to the progress of the intellectual light in the knowledge of reason. But “the light of the intellect is bent and veiled by space and time insofar as it comprehends by the senses and by imagination, as Isaac says that reason shows itself

²²⁴ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 113. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705D.

²²⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 109; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705C.

²²⁶ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 113.

²²⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 106; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705B.

²²⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 107; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705B.

²²⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 102; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705A.

²³⁰ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 191. This is the only implication in Albert where the approach to God is connected to a Plotinic and Augustinian inward motion.

²³¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 103.

²³² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 104. Dionysius adds that it is identical, without beginning or end. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705B.

in the shadow of cognition.” However, if someone wants to direct his knowledge to this reality, it is necessary to approach the quiddity of reality.²³³

Every motion is an imperfect reality and, therefore, not appropriate to angels. On the other hand, a motion which is an operation of an intellectual nature is a perfect reality, and, as a result, proceeds not from potentiality to reality, but from reality to a more perfect reality. Consequently, even angels are moved to the Beautiful-and-Good.²³⁴ Albert describes the straight motion in the tradition of Avicenna: “The first agent goes through all inferior agents up to our souls by throwing its light on them. But although they go over in this way, they nevertheless do not remain in the inferiors, but return further to the first by reducing themselves to it through an assimilation to its light.”²³⁵ Hence, the motion of the angels is straight insofar as they proceed to the providence of the inferior. It is circular in the sense that it is through beauty, which they obtain from the first Light. Accordingly, the first Good illuminates in the manner of an agent intellect, the spirit receives the light as the possible intellect and turns into the adapting intellect:

“The beginning of illumination descending into angelic minds is the first Beautiful-and-Good, which occurs in the manner of an agent intellect. But through the descending illumination they who have beauty and goodness are effected with regard to the mode of the intellect acquired from an illumination of the agent intellect.”

To make it circular, a certain return followed by a union has to supervene: “There is a return from the same to the same, namely, from the first Beautiful to the first Beautiful.” However, “this circle is not included in the angelic mind, but in the first Beautiful-and-Good itself.” This motion finally turns into a spiral motion composed of the two former motions when the angels proceed through beauty, which is in them from a descent of light from the first to the inferiors.²³⁶

²³³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 105.

²³⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 95; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704D-705A.

²³⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 99; Avicenna, *Metaphysica* (Louvain: Bibliothèque S.J., 1961) tr.9, c.3.

²³⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 98.

d) *Contemplative Happiness*

Influenced by Aristotle's philosophical doctrine on happiness, Albert does not refer the latter exclusively to eternal life, when the hyper-beautiful and hyper-good goal is finally reached. By showing that human life has a sense and a meaning in itself, he can conclude that happiness, namely, in the form of contemplation, is already possible on the way to the goal²³⁷: "The natural desire for knowledge is satisfied in the attainment of contemplative happiness and, thus, proves to be a specific form of man's natural desire for happiness."²³⁸ This is because "civil happiness cannot be determined from the view of the end of life, but is grounded in man's way of living."²³⁹ Georg Wieland calls this a "moral measure."²⁴⁰ This philosophy is orientated by rational and, hence, moral human accomplishments: "Contemplation is to be found in the field of moral philosophy insofar as it represents a choosable good connected to delight, the pursuance of which is due to a deliberate act of the will."²⁴¹

Morality and contemplation are closely linked to the intellect, so that Albert states: "It is presumed that among human activities that one is the most blissful which is most related and most similar to divine activity. Contemplation with the adapted intellect is the most similar. Thus, it is the most blissful one."²⁴² 'Adapted intellect' means in Averroes' tradition that the agent intellect and the possible intellect converge more and more in order to be unified and turned into the 'adapted divine intellect.'²⁴³ But

²³⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.X, lect.12: "Etiam ante mortem aliquis potest habere hanc felicitatem." He thereby integrates not only Aristotle but also Plato, for whom the non-eschatological vision means happiness but not the utmost fulfillment.

²³⁸ Beroald Thomassen, *Metaphysik als Lebensform. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Metaphysik im Metaphysikkommentar Alberts des Großen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1985) 104, note 308. In my eyes, this does not mean that contemplative happiness on earth is the ultimate happiness for man. Although Georg Wieland suggests that "only the philosopher who experiences his contemplation as purifying and illuminating can experience it as perfection" (Georg Wieland, "Albertus Magnus und die Frage nach dem menschlichen Glück – zur ersten Kölner Ethikvorlesung," *Albert der Große in Köln*, ed. Jan A. Aertsen [Köln, 1999] 32), this interpretation can only refer to an earthly stage of perfection.

²³⁹ Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.I, lect.11.

²⁴⁰ Wieland, 27.

²⁴¹ Müller, 110.

²⁴² Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.I, lect.10.

²⁴³ Cf. Albert the Great, *De anima*, I.III, tr.3, c.11.

is man capable of such an intellectual activity? He is distinguished from angels in his mere participation in the intellect, while they are identical with it substantially.²⁴⁴ On the other hand, since the human mind is created in the shadow and in the horizon of intelligence, it partakes of their intellectual way of gaining insight, which is not solely receptive and deductive, but includes the possibility of apprehending things in their essence.²⁴⁵ This means an apprehension of truth. Hence, “contemplative happiness is a certain imitation of the divine intellect.”²⁴⁶ Albert goes even further by identifying man with his intellect: “The intellect is the whole of man.”²⁴⁷ Consequently, the human good is identical with the good of the intellect, so that the intellect is authoritative in all matters of life. Jörn Müller concludes that “all other goods are to be directed towards the bonum intellectus.”²⁴⁸ As a result of his intellectual facilities, man acts appropriately in his contemplations.

6. Cognitio, Unio and Visio

*“In the coming of Christ, our concern is the study of Beauty; within the boundaries of the world, work is taken up.”*²⁴⁹

≈

According to Albert, there are three ways of apprehending God. Although he presupposes that God as the Good, as Beauty and as Truth itself is meant, he frequently leaves behind the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition and its use of these abstract symbols for God, which try to make him more understandable for earthly thinking. As a consequence, he does not depict either Plato’s ascent to the Idea of Beauty or a Plotinic return to

²⁴⁴ Cf. Müller, 111-112.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.I, lect.7.

²⁴⁶ Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.X, lect.1.

²⁴⁷ Albert the Great, *Ethica. Opera omnia*, vol.7, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1891) I.X, tr.2, c.3: “Et hic quidem intellectus totus homo est.”

²⁴⁸ Müller, 117.

²⁴⁹ Albert the Great, *Super Matthaicum*, c.12, 42.

the Hyper-Beautiful in oneself, or even Dionysius' highest vision of the Beautiful-and-Good. Only sometimes does he use language rich in images like his predecessors, namely, when quoting the Bible or a passage of Dionysius'. In most other cases, his language appears rather "naked." Yet, the content of his threefold apprehension of God is entirely comparable to his predecessors. Accordingly, he distinguishes between *cognitio*, that is, mystical theology, and *unitio*, that is, mystical union, which is attained through the former: "It is necessary that one is unified with God through the intellect," namely, by means of negations controlled by reason.²⁵⁰ The third kind of apprehension is the beatific vision, to which the other two forms are directed. Mystical theology is an ignorant knowledge implying "in a hidden way what will be shown to us openly and without disguise."²⁵¹ This is why this theology and union is called mystical. In contrast to the beatific vision, they end in clandestineness: "God is seen in his unknowability,"²⁵² implying that both non-knowledge and knowledge come together: "Although we are denied a full knowledge of the divine eminence owing to the darkness in which we are left as a result of the eminence of splendor, we nevertheless do have some contact." The human mind is illuminated, which does not consist in a "message asserting something, but in a reality which draws the intellect to itself in such a way that it agrees with it beyond everything else."²⁵³ Through this light, it then "reaches a vision of God in which he apprehends the 'that' (*quia*) – although neither clearly nor in a determined way."²⁵⁴ Moreover, the intellect is deified by abandoning all other ways of gaining knowledge.²⁵⁵ Albert gives an example of a tonsured man to make his theory more concrete: "The tonsured man contemplates divine Beauty not through human beauties, but through simple and spiritual beauty," which means a perfect

²⁵⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2.

²⁵¹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1.

²⁵² Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Epistulas*, Ep.I.

²⁵³ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1. The same idea of an impression of darkness owing to God's magnificent brightness is also present in the original. Cf. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 998A-B.

²⁵⁴ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708D.

assimilation to God.²⁵⁶ This is very close to the Dionysian text. Yet, as already mentioned, Albert changes the original idea of *The Mystical Theology* that God cannot be grasped by the intellect, to “he is apprehended with no natural cognition.” Thus, a substantial correction takes place from ‘non videre’ to ‘non videre naturale.’²⁵⁷ Instead, Albert employs the term ‘supernaturale,’²⁵⁸ so that the intellect remains active even at this stage, which is important for Albert in his attempt to integrate Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions.

In his commentary on Dionysius’ *The Divine Names*, Albert takes up the former’s suggestion, grounded in Proclus and opposed to Plato, that in the mystical vision, intellectual activity is superfluous owing to God’s superiority over the intellect. He comes to the conclusion that the human intellect is moved by theophanies: “Intellectual operations are superfluous insofar as the divine Light and divine things, through which one is illuminated (...), are beyond the principles of our intellect, but one is moved in this motion by theophanies.”²⁵⁹ This procedure can be substantiated by Augustine, who said that divine Truth must reveal itself to us as an interior magister supporting exterior teachings in their function as an instrument,²⁶⁰ and by Bernard of Clairvaux, who recommended the method of praying to hear the interior message.²⁶¹ In order to show what kind of theophanies appear in the mystical vision, Albert analyzes their notion in a more differentiated way. Firstly, it can be thought of in terms of Dionysius’ positive approach to be a vision in corporeal forms directing one’s attention to God by their dissimilar similarity; secondly, to be a vision connected to a divine light, but revealing something which is different from God – comparable to the Areopagite’s negative way. These are the only forms appearing in a mystical

²⁵⁶ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, c.6.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2: “Et ideo dicitur, quod per non-videre videtur deus, scilicet per non-videre naturale.” Cf. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1025A.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1: “Sed cognoscimus eum quadam supernaturali cognitione sub quadam confusione.”

²⁵⁹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 123. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708D; Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 64.

²⁶⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De magistro. Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, c.XI-XII, n.38-40; c.XIV, n.45-46.

²⁶¹ Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, *De consideratione. Patrologia Latina*, vol.82, l.5, c.14, n.32. Albert refers to Gregory the Great here, who does not, however, mention this idea. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1.

vision. The third kind of theophany is a vision in the divine Light of something which is really God without him being the light; while the fourth form consists in a vision in which God is both the light and the object of perception. This light assimilates the beatified with God, as Dionysius has already expressed.²⁶²

In contrast to the mystical vision, the beatific vision is not based on theophanies of the two first steps,²⁶³ even though both presuppose divine illumination.²⁶⁴ For light “effects the place and throne of all beauties of the highest divine truths.”²⁶⁵ The human intellect is elevated by God’s grace and his glorious light so that it is able to reach the highest Good, which satisfies its needs.²⁶⁶ This state is characterized by permanence; consequently, all striving and all activity come to a rest in the coming together of all goods.²⁶⁷ More precisely, man’s intellect and his will are united with God as Truth, as the Good and, thus, as the Beautiful, a belief comparable to Plato’s doctrine that reality itself is perceived in the Idea of Beauty. As a result, the whole of human striving, including the bodily, ceases to yearn, for the ultimate goal is reached.²⁶⁸ This notion of rest finds its original in God, who rests in the eternal Good.²⁶⁹

²⁶² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De caelestis hierarchia. Opera omnia*, vol.36,1, ed. Paul Simon and Wilhelm Kübel (Münster: Aschendorff, 1993) c.4; Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165C-D.

²⁶³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De caelestis hierarchia*, c.4. Hence, Moses, as a living person, “did not see God himself, but God in his noblest effects of grace and theophanies being only distinctively similar to divine Goodness.” Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1. This is an interpretation of “the place where God is” as Dionysius’ description of what Moses really saw. Cf. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000D.

²⁶⁵ Albert the Great, *Super Matthaëum*, c.5, 34. Interestingly, this interpretation of a biblical verse corresponds to Plato’s assertion that one is confronted with pure reality, that is, truth, in the ultimate apprehension of beauty. Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 212a.

²⁶⁶ This does not mean that the soul loses all its faculties and must depend wholly on God’s support. “The vegetative and the sensuous is included in the outliving of the human soul, although not in actuality, but in the potentiality of the rational soul.” Albert the Great, *De XV problematibus*, q.7.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *De homine. Opera omnia*, vol.35, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1896) tr.1, q.70, a.4.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.2, q.7, c.2.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.45, a.1: “Sed deus quiescit in aeterno bono.”

This satisfaction causes pleasure (*frui*), an idea found in Augustine.²⁷⁰ At this point the close connection between the intellectual ascent and love becomes clear, for Albert considers *frui* to be enjoyment originating in the love of the Good and True.²⁷¹ With regard to a mystical vision, the cessation of the intellect does not mean that “contemplation ceases, because love always inclines one to see, as it is said that ‘where there is love, there is an eye,’ but it ceases from the attempt to comprehend.”²⁷² Consequently, man no longer merely tries to see, but actually sees. However, it does not follow that love precedes knowledge in the mystical vision. In all possible senses, knowledge comes before love, because of the human succession of becoming conscious of something, considering it to be something true, judging it to be good and then approving of it. The only sense in which love can also occur prior to knowledge is as a predisposing condition. Without an inciting love, the mystical vision and its insight into the existence of God would not be possible. Nevertheless, love is a constantly appearing fruit of this apprehension.

In respect of the beatific vision Albert teaches something similar. The intellectual vision does not go far enough, since, as Johannes Schneider rightly states, “the goal does not move only as *verum*, but also as *bonum*,” so that it has to turn into an affective vision to provide perfect beatitude.²⁷³ The kind of love in this rest is a love of perfection which includes the highest form of uncreated happiness,²⁷⁴ which does not search anymore, but which

²⁷⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana. Patrologia Latina*, vol.34, l.I, c.4, n.4. He defines *frui* as “*amore alicui rei inhaerere, propter seipsam*.”

²⁷¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De resurrectione. Opera omnia*, vol.26, ed. Wilhelm Kübel (Münster: Aschendorff, 1958) tr.4, q.3, a.1; tr.4, q.3, a.7, § 1.

²⁷² Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.1, 46. Cf. c.4, 127: “*secundum cognitionem, quae praecedit amorem*”; Edouard Henri Wéber, “L’interprétation par Albert le Grand de la Théologie Mystique de Denys le PS-Aréopagite,” *Albertus Magnus. Doctor Universalis*, ed. Gerbert Meyer OP and Albert Zimmermann (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1980) 428. With regard to ‘*ubi amor, ibi oculus*’ cf. Richard of Saint Victor, *Beniamin minor. Patrologia Latina*, vol.196, c.XIII.

²⁷³ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 206; Albert the Great, *De resurrectione*, tr.4, q.1, a.9, § 2.

²⁷⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *In III Sententiarum. Opera omnia*, vol.28, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1894) d.27, a.1. The fact that this happiness cannot be experienced earlier than in one’s eternal life is a contradiction to Aristotle. As a Christian, Albert is not able to follow the Greek as far as allowing it any other way.

surpasses every other kind of love.²⁷⁵ Hence, salvation is not restricted to an intellectual process:

“Eternal life is considered in a twofold way, namely, according to that which is its substance – and this is quasi materially – and according to that which informs – and this is quasi formally. And in the first mode, vision is eternal life. (...) But in the second mode, the pleasure attaining love of the possessed divinity is eternal life.”²⁷⁶

Even here, Albert tries to connect his explanation to Aristotle’s doctrine that a purely speculative vision is the cause of the happiness of intellectual theory. At first glance, he seems to take over the philosopher’s teaching by saying that since the human soul is specified by its intellect, its actualization is contemplation, so that its goal and greatest accomplishment is contemplative happiness.²⁷⁷ Yet, in another book he goes further. For, according to Albert, the will is required to approve of the theory, and must, consequently, be presupposed.²⁷⁸

This does not mean that, according to Albert, the intellect is eliminated in the beatific vision. By the phrase ‘motio intenta,’ he means an intellectual apprehension of the highest Beautiful-and-Good carried out by the love for God. His essence itself is present in the transfigured intellect, so that the latter is elevated to the divine level by the possession of the divine life through partaking. This means that in order to be prepared for the beatific vision, man has to undergo a unification with God in his being in order that the experience of God finally reaches at least the degree of self-experience.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Cf. Johannes Schneider, 182.

²⁷⁶ Albert the Great, *In IV Sententiarum. Opera omnia*, vol.29 and 30, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1894) d.48, a.4.

²⁷⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.X, lect.16.

²⁷⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De caelestis hierarchia*, 7.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De resurrectione*, tr.4, q.1, a.9, § 1: “Et sic, sicut intellectus convertitur supra se sine medio, ita convertitur in deum sine medio.” Even though this is opposed to Plato and Augustine, who emphasize a vision in opposition to a unification (cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e; Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, XXXV, n.79), it does not go as far as Plotinus’ abandonment of the self (cf. Plotinus, V 5.8.10-12). Thus, Albert orientates himself by Dionysius, for whom the conjunction is not connected to a loss of individuality, for the soul does not become God, but similar to him. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708D. This does not mean that Albert merely adopts Dionysius. The latter’s suggestion that one has to “disengage oneself unrestrictedly from oneself” in order to be brought to the “hyper-substantial ray of divine darkness” (Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000A)

However, it does not follow that either the unification or the reception of the divine essence into the soul are elements foreign to the spirit. Even though its natural ability is superceded, it experiences something which is pursuant to its nature: “The perfection of grace in glory brings with it the perfection of man’s natural sonhood having begun with creation (...), and the perfection of the divine image, founded in being the natural image of God.”²⁸⁰ Then man is able to use his basic abilities of *memoria*, *intelligentia* and *voluntas* to view the original instead of the copy. God is apprehended there without the need for abstraction²⁸¹: “The naked intellect sees the naked divine essence,”²⁸² a theory contradicting Dionysius, for whom there is no boundless vision.²⁸³ According to Albert, God himself is possessed, and man participates in his *beatitudo increata*.²⁸⁴ But indeed, this vision is not wholly conscious, since the lover forgets himself as a result of encountering the beloved face to face.²⁸⁵

As a Christian, Albert even explicitly includes the body in this beatific vision. All philosophers and theologians whom I have analyzed before him only vaguely hinted at this possibility. William Hoyer points out that the sensuous experiences during this apprehension must be identical with those from one’s life on earth in order to be able to call it resurrection instead of a new creation.²⁸⁶ It is the origin of these experiences that is different.²⁸⁷ But

seems to go too far in the field of self-abandonment for Albert to take it over. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1025B.

²⁸⁰ Herbert Doms, *Die Gnadenlehre des seligen Albertus Magnus* (Breslau: Müller & Seiffert, 1929) 123. He underscores that the way in which God is possessed is similar to the way in which the mind possesses itself, but that this does not mean that God is only possessed indirectly as if the mind, made godlike, possessed only itself, so that God would only be apprehended in one’s own supernatural image of him. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 128.

²⁸¹ Cf. Albert the Great, *In Evangelium secundum Lucam. Opera omnia*, vol.22 and 23, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1894) c.XI, 2.

²⁸² Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.3, q.13, c.4.

²⁸³ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 592B-C.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *In I Sententiarum*, d.1, a.9.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De caelestis hierarchia*, c.7. Albert also points to the ‘*motio intima*’ as the affective motion flowing from the lover into the beloved.

²⁸⁶ Cf. William J. Hoyer, “Heil und Auferstehung nach Albert dem Großen,” *Miscellanea Mediaevalia*, vol.14. *Albert der Große. Seine Zeit, sein Werk, seine Wirkung*, ed. Albert Zimmermann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981) 64.

²⁸⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *In IV Sententiarum*, d.43, a.2.

since Albert considers the intellectual vision the reason for the corporeal resurrection,²⁸⁸ sensuousness is only realized insofar as it can be subordinated to intellectual cognition.²⁸⁹

7. Summary

According to Albert, God transcends all worldly concepts, but man is restricted to knowledge about the latter. Thus, he describes God, on the one hand, as the hyper-substantial Good in order to express this transcendence; on the other hand, he tries also to say something which the human intellect can more easily grasp. This is achieved by an illustration of the relationship between God and the world, namely, in terms of the divine function of causality. For God is not only the cause of himself, but also the cause of all causes. At the same time, Albert calls God hyper-substantial Beauty, in whom there is no difference between Beauty as the participated and the Beautiful as the participating, because his being is identical with his essence. The medieval theologian brings the two concepts of univocity and analogy together in God, insofar as the latter is the univocal cause of all existing beauty, that is, his univocity is analogous owing to the fact that he defines beauty formally by his essence. In Albert's eyes, all being is beautiful, even non-perfectly existing being, namely, according to its peculiar disposition. In concrete realities, this beauty is defined as the splendor of the substantial or accidental form upon the proportional and limiting parts of matter. On a more general level, Albert argues that whenever something true is esteemed as good, one is confronted with something beautiful. This indicates that the beautiful can never be separated from the good, for they are identical in their subject and differ only for thinking. Thus, if it is said that all being is directed to the good as its goal, the same is true for the beautiful insofar as it is seen as identical with the former in *subiecto*. Yet, owing to the notional difference, beauty is actually not directly aspired, but merely implicitly. When regarded as good, it can nevertheless be said that earthly beauty is desired, namely, insofar as it is still imperfect. Divine Beauty, on the other hand, is not so much desired as loved because of its perfection. The presupposition of this love is the lover's own ontological

²⁸⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.2, q.7, c.2.

²⁸⁹ Cf. Albert the Great, *De resurrectione*, tr.4, q.5, a.2.

perfection. This implies that one has to overcome all multiplicity, including earthly beauty as composed of matter and form, in order to attain the oneness of divine Beauty. By means of certain divine processions, man is supported in the process of assimilation. Furthermore, God illuminates the human intellect, which is not capable of apprehending him by nature. The divine contemplation by an illuminated intellect on earth already provides the viewer with a certain degree of happiness. However, both a mystical vision and a mystical union only reach God's 'quia.' Ultimate and permanent happiness is reserved for the beatific vision, in which a unification with God in his being takes place, accompanied by a vision of the divine essence.

Chapter VI

Beauty in the Teaching of Thomas Aquinas – The Repose of Desire in Cognition

1. The Notion of Beauty

*“We call those things beautiful which
please when they are seen.”¹*

≈

The overall structure of Thomas’s doctrine on beauty can be summarized in the following way: The notion of beauty viewed from the perspective of the anima mirrors the coming together of the two essential faculties in man, the intellect and the appetite. These are grounded in the two concepts of the true and the good, with which the beautiful is partly identical, but to which it is also directed. Only by taking this into account, can one understand the notion of beauty observed from the perspective of being, which consists in clarity, integrity and harmony.

A starting-point for the analysis is given by Thomas’ distinction between the good and the beautiful:

“Although the beautiful and the good are the same in the subject – because both clarity and consonance are included in the nature of the good – they are conceptually different. For beauty adds something to the good, namely, an order which enables cognition to know that a thing is of such a kind.”²

Thus, he, in the same way as Albert, does not accept a complete identification of the good and the beautiful as Dionysius does, but sees a difference in

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, transl. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns & Washbroune, 1920) I, q.5, a.4, ad 1.

² Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, ed. Ceslai Pera (Taurini: Marietti, 1950) c.IV, l.5, n.356.

their notion, in ratione, in the way in which they are conceived. This is the reason for Pöltner's suggestion that the difference can even be perceived exclusively by the ratio.³ On the one hand, this shows that Thomas distances himself from Albert with regard to what is traditionally considered distinctive for beauty, namely, harmony of the parts and splendor, since here the elements also refer to the good. On the other hand, an indication is given of the immense difference in the definition of beauty by the two philosophers, teacher and pupil. While Albert considers beauty the splendor of the substantial or accidental form upon the proportional and limiting parts of matter,⁴ Thomas goes further. He integrates all of Albert's elements – splendor, proportion and form – into his own theory, but does not see the quality of form as distinctive for beauty. In his eyes, it refers to both the beautiful and the good. In the *Summa theologiae*, the relationship between the good and the beautiful – and the distinctive element with regard to the latter – is presented, in which he goes beyond his teacher:

“The beautiful is the same as the good, differing solely in the notion. For since ‘the good is what all things desire,’ it belongs to the notion of the good that the appetite comes to rest in it. But it belongs to the notion of the beautiful that the appetite comes to rest in its view (aspectu) or cognition. (...) Thus, it is clear that the beautiful adds to the good a reference to the cognitive power, so that that is called good which simply pleases the appetite; but that is called beautiful the mere apprehension of which pleases.”⁵

The object of experience is in both cases the same. It is the mode of experience that is different. The good is desired in every realm of being. In contrast, delight in the case of the beautiful is seen under a different aspect, namely, from a cognitive perspective. This reference to the sensuous factor can already be found in John of La Rochelle's teaching, who differentiates between the good and the beautiful in terms of their intention: “For the beautiful displays a disposition of the good insofar as it pleases the apprehension, but the good pertains to a disposition

³ Cf. Günther Pöltner, *Schönheit. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung des Denkens bei Thomas von Aquin* (Wien: Herder, 1978) 19.

⁴ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.27, a.1, ad 3.

according to which it gives pleasure to the affections.”⁶ This psychological approach, taking the relationship between the perceiving subject and its beautiful object for the first time into account, must be seen in contrast to Dionysius’ attempt to solve the problem of beauty solely by considering earthly beauty an image of God’s perfect beauty. Despite the deep analysis in *The Divine Names*, it is scarcely fruitful owing to man’s inability to actually say something definite about God. Thus, Josef Koch criticizes this method and opposes our mere inkling to Thomas’ down-to-earth analysis on beauty, which is orientated by the human world from the outset.⁷

At another point in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas proceeds similarly, mentioning the importance of vision, but this time with a special emphasis on the notion of form – thus setting him apart from Albert:

“To the first objection I reply that the beautiful and the good are the same in any subject. For they are grounded in the same thing, namely, a form; and this is why the good is esteemed as beautiful. But they differ in the notion. For the good, which is what all things desire, is properly concerned with the appetite. And, hence, it has the notion of an end, for the appetite is a kind of movement towards a reality. But the beautiful is concerned with a cognitive power (*vim cognoscitivam*): for things are called beautiful which please when they are seen.”⁸

From the fact that the notion of form is here the common denominator, Eco somehow deduces that, as far as man is concerned, the good and the beautiful are not to be seen as abstract notions but in their concreteness, in actuality. Even though the text gives a slight indication that the latter must be considered a concrete being, for otherwise it could

⁶ Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica*, ed. Bernard Klumper (Quaracchi: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1924) p.I, inq.1, tr.3, q.3, a.2c (103). Even though this work is ascribed to Alexander of Hales, the part of interest was written by John of La Rochelle: “Nam pulchrum dicit dispositionem boni secundum quod et placitum apprehensioni, bonum vero respicit dispositionem secundum quam delectat affectionem.” Cf. also Albert, who analyzes the connection from the perspective of truth: “The procession of the beautiful corresponds to the apprehension of a true thing insofar as it has an aspect of the good.” Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

⁷ Cf. Josef Koch, “Zur Ästhetik des Thomas von Aquin,” *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 25 (1931): 270.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1.

not be seen – this is only true under the condition that ‘videre’ merely refers to a visual perception – there is no such hint with regard to the good. For a ‘res,’ to which every appetite is directed, need not be an actual thing. Moreover, why should the form be the reason for an actualization? It is true that a form is necessary for a reality to exist, but a form does not necessarily induce an actual reality. Finally, what seems to be nonsensical to my mind is Eco’s conclusion that this actualization is the proof for an identification of both the good and the beautiful with ens, or, in other words, with being simply as being (ens qua ens).⁹

What Thomas really means by his connecting beauty with form can be seen when he interprets Dionysius’ assertion that particular things are beautiful according to their own nature in the sense that “according to their own nature” must be understood as “according to their own form.”¹⁰ This implies that a form partakes of divine Beauty according to its nature insofar as this form is constitutive of the being of a reality. The Dionysian approach to the topic is thought through in Aristotelian terms, which shows how well Thomas is able to integrate Neoplatonism into his own metaphysics. Accordingly, the form is itself beautiful,¹¹ and beauty is established by a form which comes together with the potential beauty of matter,¹² namely, in such a way that due proportion is attained – proportion being one of the elements of beauty. In other words, a form causes order in an object, which is the presupposition of its beauty – or more precisely, the beauty of its essence or species according to Aristotle’s teaching that a form is signified by the species of

⁹ Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 34.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.349. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A. This connection between beauty and the notion of form also corresponds to Augustine’s teaching. Cf. Augustine, *De ordine*, l.II, c.15, n.42.

¹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos 26. Opera omnia*, vol.6, ed. Roberto Busa (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980) n.3. His teacher says exactly the opposite, namely, that beauty cannot be found in the form per se. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 78.

¹² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.21, n.560; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 729A. This recalls Albert’s definition of beauty, in which form and matter come together. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

a reality.¹³ Finally, “the beautiful properly brings about the notion of a formal cause”¹⁴ as a result of its relation to the cognitive faculty – that is to say cognition proceeds by assimilation and similarity refers to the form.

Thomas mentions three classical and necessary elements constituting the nature of beauty given through form: “Three things are necessary for beauty: firstly, integrity or perfection, for things that are lacking in something are for this reason ugly; also due proportion or consonance; and again clarity, for things are called beautiful when they are brightly colored.”¹⁵ This enumeration appears, in particular, in his treatment of questions on the Trinity where he assimilates the elements to the divine number three. However, since Dionysius names only two, Thomas usually reduces the triad to clarity and proportion or their synonyms – apart from one passage where he refers to Aristotle’s mention of magnitude, which Thomas interprets as perfection.¹⁶

A closer look at the element of due proportion shows that it is not per se beautiful, or, in other words, that proportion exists only under the

¹³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Metaphysicae. Opera omnia*, vol.4, l.2, lect.4, n.5: “Everything is constituted in its species through its own form. Hence, the definition of the species signifies above all the form of the thing.” (Unumquodque constituitur in specie per propriam formam. Unde definitio speciei maxime significat formam rei.) Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 998b2-999a23.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.39, a.8c. Francis Kovach suggests that Thomas can only describe the nature of beauty instead of defining it owing to its transcendental character. This means that beauty is a transcendental quality of ens qua ens, and since ens cannot be defined, beauty cannot be either – without having to blame Thomas for this defect in his doctrine. Cf. Kovach, 104-105, note 7. The only problem with this theory is the presupposition that beauty is a transcendental. The evidence for this hypothesis is the same as in Albert’s writings. Neither of them mention it explicitly, but they are said to do so implicitly in the Dionysian quote that all being is beautiful. Yet, Albert offers a definition of the nature of beauty. Moreover, Kovach analyzes the order in which the three elements appear in this quote. He concludes that, firstly, integrity is necessary to create beauty, secondly, proportion and, thirdly, clarity, since integrity is the *causa materialis remota*, proportion the *causa materialis proxima* and clarity the *causa formalis* of beauty, which are bound to this order. Consequently, proportion can only exist with integrity, and clarity presupposes both elements. Cf. Kovach, 164-165.

¹⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum. Opera omnia*, vol.1, dist.31, q.2, a.1c; Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b34-1451a1.

condition of adequateness: it must correspond to reality, which implies an appropriateness to it. Beauty is, then, a disposition of elements in proportion to the nature.¹⁷ That is why the word ‘debita’ is assigned to proportio.¹⁸ Thomas thereby sets himself apart from the traditional interpretation by which proportion means a harmony of the parts. The connection of the two words recalls rather the Platonic functional beauty and its demand of appropriateness. To express this principle in other ways, Aquinas uses the terms ‘consonance,’ ‘harmony,’ ‘commensuration’ and ‘order’ for the same idea: “A commensuration being directed to order is required for beauty.”¹⁹ This indicates that all harmony, being a kind of proportion,²⁰ underscores the inborn tendency of the world to strive for unity: “When parts are arranged in this way, they form a composition resulting in a whole, so that one totality of things is constituted from all parts of the universe.”²¹ Thomas adds that all creatures having some kind of unity have it from beauty.²² This unity is already present in God and does not have to be sought after. Thus, the type of proportion in him is unique: it refers to the unity of his essence with his existence. In this context, the Platonic and, even more, the Neoplatonic background becomes visible, since in this traditional system the One is the most general and real concept of all. Furthermore, reality implies a fullness of being which applies to God. Earthly being lacks this fullness and, yet, it can be called beautiful. Thomas explains this by means of the element of proportion:

¹⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.54, a.1c.

¹⁸ Winfried Czapiewski criticizes Kovach for separating the two terms, as if the adequateness of proportion to nature were added from outside subsequently – so that harmony on its own were fully graspable – instead of seeing proportion as being internally characterized as adequate to nature. Cf. Winfried Czapiewski, *Das Schöne bei Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964) 137. What Kovach does say is that the proportion of a beautiful object must be conditioned and predetermined by the essence of the object to be due proportion. Cf. Kovach, 176-177. To my mind, this does not seem different from what Czapiewski demands.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.21, n.554.

²⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri De anima. Opera omnia*, vol.4, l.3, lect.2. Thomas uses the word ‘symphonia’ instead of ‘harmonia’ here.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.6, n.364.

²² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.6, n.361; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

“For in whatever thing we find two, one of which is the complement of the other, the proportion of one of them to the other is like the proportion of a potentiality to a reality. For nothing is completed except by its proper reality. (...) But Being itself is the complement of the existing substance.”²³

Since proportion is a characteristic of beauty, this quote shows that something is beautiful insofar as it has being, that is, insofar as its potentiality is actualized. Proportion is then not simply an attribute of being, but a due relationship between form and matter, the unification of which in actuality brings about this being.²⁴ The same idea appears in the assertion that all things have consonance and, therefore, lead back to the causing of the beautiful.²⁵ Being and beauty are closely related, though this does not mean that beauty must necessarily be a transcendental, as will be shown later. Finally, Thomas concludes from the fact that beauty is concerned with a cognitive power that “the beautiful consists in due proportion, for the sense is delighted in things of due proportion as similar to themselves; for the sense faculty is a sort of proportion itself like every other cognitive faculty.”²⁶ This due proportion, in which the senses are delighted, is the reason for our defining beautiful things as pleasing when seen. Proportion even depends on man’s intellectual faculties, since order can only be actualized through the realization of the possible relations. Therefore, Thomas says that “order refers to reason.”²⁷

Despite all these aspects, proportion is not enough. To call something beautiful in itself, it needs something else as well. The Augustinian element of integrity or perfection does not occur very often in Thomas’

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles. Opera omnia*, vol.2, II, c.53.

²⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri De anima*, 1.1, lect.9, where Thomas says that the form disappears as soon as the assimilation of matter and form ceases to exist. Although the vocabulary appears to be Aristotelian, the idea is more one of Plotinus, for whom an actualized thing is beautiful precisely as a result of its reality. Cf. Plotinus, I 6.5.18-19; I 6.6.22.

²⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, 1.6, n.361.

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1. Cf. *Sententia libri De anima*, 1.3, lect.2.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De virtutibus. Opera omnia*, vol.3, a.9, obj.2 and ad 2.

enumeration of the elements of beauty – a fact that offers the possibility of asking the question of whether it is an element in its own right. Integrity and perfection presuppose harmony and vice versa. The definition of perfection already indicates the connection with the other necessary element, for both refer to the actualization of being: “A thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality, because we call that perfect which lacks nothing of the mode of its perfection.”²⁸ Consequently, we consider a thing perfect if all its possibilities are actualized. Owing to the particular capability of ours to notice perfection, we, in contrast to other creatures, are able to have a notion of beauty. In detail, Thomas states that “the first type of perfection is present when a reality is perfect in its substance. And this perfection is the form of the whole object arising out of the integrity of the parts.”²⁹ Hence, perfection is a clear and completed formal disposition, where an organic whole is composed. The aspect of form evidently functions as an indicator of beauty. On the other hand, ugliness as the negation of beauty is described from the point of view of integrity. If a reality is not adequate to itself but lacks something which should not be missing, it can be called ugly.³⁰ Something which is ugly has, thus, a defect with regard to beauty and is, therefore, a privation of the latter.³¹ Even a due proportion can be this missing factor insofar as something is not arranged in an order,³² so that integrity and perfection receive a close connection again, in some sense an enfolding of the one by the other.

In order that the beauty of a reality can be seen or realized in some way – for the visibleness is *the* classical Platonic characteristic of it – it must be perceivable, thus having the power of expressing itself. Accordingly, clarity can be considered the quality of being to present its nature, its characteristic essence, to the external world. This quality is manifested

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.4, a.1c.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.73, a.1c.

³⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.39, a.8c.

³¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.21, n.554; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 728D.

³² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum. Opera omnia*, vol.1, dist.44, q.3, a.1, qc.1c; *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c.139.

as spiritual or as corporeal,³³ underlining the inexplicitness and relativity of the matter. Yet, since Thomas most frequently understands beauty in a concrete way as accessible to the senses, clarity is connected to color as a means of revealing the clarity of a reality or this reality itself.³⁴ In general, clarity is always a rational diagnosis indicating the capability of being to make itself knowable to reason. Thomas thereby presents evidence that clarity is closely related to truth, a hypothesis supported by himself: “But truth has a notion of splendor.”³⁵ This is, however, not enough. Clarity is also a special power of gleaming revealing the more profound aspect of being. As a consequence, Thomas closely relates clarity to Light³⁶ – the second name for God that Dionysius treats after the Good and before the Beautiful. Thomas makes this identification of God with the first invisible Light as well, but from this point onwards, the theory goes into an Aristotelian way of interpretation: the substance of the *prima lux* is said to be identical with the clarity of the divine intellect, its emanating rays with the intelligible light.³⁷ With regard to the doctrine on light in general, there is a similarly major difference between the Neoplatonic and the Thomistic approach, as Eco points out.³⁸ The former teaches that light descends from God’s creative power streaming into all realities or even consolidating itself to realities. In opposition to that, the latter concept says that clarity is a self-revelation of the form emanating from within the reality. In Thomas’ philosophy, the relationship between clarity and light is often expressed in the concept of the light of reason (*lumen rationis*). Light is clarity illuminating the world and making it, in this way, intelligible. Accordingly, all clarity and beauty of virtue

³³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.339.

³⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super I ad Corinthios. Opera omnia*, vol.5, c.11, l.2: “In corpore pulchritudo dicitur ex debita proportione membrorum in convenienti claritate vel colore.”

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum*, dist.3, q.2, a.3, expositio. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q.106, a.1c; I, q.67, a.2c.

³⁶ Perpeet even interprets all three elements from the perspective of light, calling *lux* the essence of beauty. Accordingly, the more illuminated a reality is, the more integrity it possesses in the sense of freshness and vitality. Furthermore, the more illuminated it is, the more order is in an object. Finally, the more illumination, the brighter the gleam of colors. Cf. Perpeet, 91-92.

³⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Isaiam. Opera omnia*, vol.5, c.6, lect.1.

³⁸ Cf. Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, 137.

originate in this light.³⁹ Since the intellect is the part in man responsible for the fact that man is God's image, it can be said that he partakes of the divine Light whenever there is a process of cognition in him.⁴⁰ But Thomas even demonstrates that clarity is not really an alternative characteristic to proportion. The problem appears already in Augustine's *De quantitate animae*, where it is stated that a triangle is beautiful as a result of the implicit proportion forming an evenness. On the other hand, a point is described as more beautiful owing to its oneness, despite the fact that a concept of proportion cannot be found in it.⁴¹ Thomas now solves the problem in accordance with his teacher.⁴² Both of them develop a new understanding of clarity which not only takes into account the traditional Platonic means of arriving at a solution, but also integrates an Aristotelian tool of thought. Accordingly, a form participates in divine clarity and, against this background, is said to cause being. Concrete beauty is then not a direct effect of a Dionysian hyper-substantial Beauty, but a result of one's own nature, one's form, as Thomas interprets the Areopagite by means of his Aristotelian thought pattern.⁴³ Moreover, the form is the medium of proportion as well, so that the necessary elements of the beautiful coincide at this point: the form of a beautiful object bears clarity and is thus directed at cognition because it is harmoniously constructed. This again originates in the view that the order of proportion is established

³⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.142, a.4c.

⁴⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioannem. Opera omnia*, vol.5, c.1, lect.1.

⁴¹ Cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, c.VIII-XI.

⁴² Yet, as Eugen Blessing points out, there is a difference between Albert and his pupil. The former uses the term 'splendor' quite frequently, which implies an independent aspect going beyond the concept of proportion. Thomas, on the other hand, focuses on claritas, which is closer to proportion. Cf. Eugen Blessing, "Das Wesen des Schönen nach Thomas von Aquin," *Tübinger Theologische Quartalschrift* 126 (1956): 24.

⁴³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.349; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A. The only difference from Albert is that he considers clarity an immanent principle. However, since it is for him not a criterion of beauty concerned with a viewer, the meaning is totally different. Albert's ontologically immanent resplendence changes to a necessary means to communicate beauty. The traditional, solely Platonic, explanation of the problem based on a system of emanation originates with Robert Grosseteste. For him, light generates bodies, the result of which bestows a form of proportion. Cf. Robert Grosseteste, *On Light*, transl. Clare C. Riedl (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942) 10.

by reason,⁴⁴ an assertion with which the relation of clarity to reason fits well.

In Eco's view, Thomas reduces the highly abstract and complex meaning of clarity and consonance in *The Divine Names* to concrete principles of individuation of an object judged to be beautiful.⁴⁵ This process can, of course, be traced back to Thomas' adoption of Aristotelism and the Aristotelian attention to the concrete form of things. In this context, Thomas suggests that it is the relationship between the essence of a reality and its existence that establishes concreteness, and is, therefore, the presupposition of the visibleness of reality.⁴⁶ Kovach's understanding of Thomas comes to a subtler conclusion that concentrates not exclusively on the concrete part but takes into account the skill of combining Aristotelism with Platonism. Accordingly, his summary maintains that Thomas begins his doctrine on beauty in his commentary on the *Sentences* by giving Aristotelian integrity and perfection a metaphysical connotation. He continues by unfolding the Dionysian sense of proportion in an Aristotelian direction in his commentary on *The Divine Names* without giving up the Neoplatonic character of the term. Finally, he connects the purely Aristotelian concept of form to the Neoplatonic concept of clarity to establish an organic system.⁴⁷

This does not mean that Thomas sticks to the Platonic tradition in all cases where beauty is concerned. The clearest point where he departs from it and where he distances himself from Albert – as I indicated in the previous chapter – is in respect of the question on the objectivity of beauty. For Plato, Beauty is among the highest Ideas, possessing the utmost objectivity and unchangeability. By quoting the particular passage of the *Symposium*, Dionysius adopts this doctrine. Albert, on the other hand, brings in a new aspect owing to his view of the Platonic Ideas. He transfers beauty to the concrete level, while nevertheless adhering to its objective

⁴⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.2, ad 3: "Beauty, as stated above, consists in a certain clarity and due proportion. Now each of these is found radically in reason; because both the light that makes beauty seen, and the establishing of due proportion among things belong to reason."

⁴⁵ Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 66; *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, 115. He calls this development "aesthetics of the concrete organism."

⁴⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c.53.

⁴⁷ Cf. Kovach, 145.

character. Finally, Thomas seems to base beauty on human perception. An object can be called beautiful if its perception causes pleasure. Does this mean that beauty is merely something which man ascribes to an object depending on his subjective pleasure? If this is the case, does that mean that beauty exists only in sensible things? What then with the beauty of God? Or does Thomas' definition "pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent" not apply to God, since Thomas explicitly uses the concrete form 'pulchra,' that is, beautiful things, instead of the abstract notion 'pulchritudo'? Can there be then a definition of pulchritudo? Is God pulchritudo itself? Or is he only pulcher, or does he even become pulcher no sooner than our perception of him in the beatific vision accompanied by the caused pleasure? Yet, God is unchangeable, which would suggest that beauty is an ontological characteristic independent of man's apprehension of it. These questions will be dealt with in the course of this chapter. At this point, I would just like to present several intertwined arguments, some of which are in favor of subjectivity, others of which support the objective aspect of beauty.

A major misunderstanding here is to confuse the – in the first place – subjective characterization of a beautiful object with a metaphysical definition of it. Thomas does not write "pulchra sunt,"⁴⁸ but "pulchra dicuntur" – this is why Blessing calls this the subjective element of beauty, while proportion, clarity and integrity must be seen as the objective elements.⁴⁹ The fact that we call something beautiful does not reveal anything about the truly ontological status of the object, although the statement is not entirely subjective. For a judgment concerning the existence or degree of beauty does not solely refer to one's own subjective feeling, but is correlative. This means that it is a truth judgment with reference to reality,⁵⁰ or, to put it even more clearly, reality and the degree of perfection

⁴⁸ James Joyce misquotes Thomas – "Aquinas, answered Stephen, says pulchra sunt quae visa placent." – in spite of the fact that an accurate quoting would have fitted better with his own view on beauty. Cf. Joyce, 236.

⁴⁹ Cf. Blessing, 18-19. Ernst Minjon states that Scholasticism signifies beauty as a quality of things (in prima specie qualitatis). According to this objective approach, beauty consists in a certain perfection which causes convenience and agreeableness for the senses and for reason. Cf. Ernst Minjon, "Der Schönheitsbegriff der Hochscholastik," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 25 (1912): 179-180.

⁵⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.93, a.1, ad 3: "The human intellect is measured by things, so that a human concept is not true by reason of itself, but by reason

in it are the basis for man's evaluation of the present beauty. With this opinion, Aquinas is close to Aristotelian philosophy and its view that nature is the point of reference for truth judgments.⁵¹ Accordingly, perception grasps those qualities of reality which determine its nature, so that one's delight does not depend on a subjective disposition during the subjective experience, but on certain characteristics of reality which are ontologically present in them. This is why Pöltner says that beauty occurs as "the convenientia of anima and ens."⁵² In this context, Thomas' teaching that something is not beautiful because we love it, but that it is loved by us because it is beautiful and good,⁵³ fits. His justification for this

of its being consonant with things." Cf. also *De potentia. Opera omnia*, vol.3, q.7, a.10, ad 5; *De veritate. Opera omnia*, vol.3, q.1, a.2. Pieper adds that measure is here an ontological concept referring to a certain quality belonging to the sphere of the essential form of a reality. Cf. Josef Pieper, *Die Wirklichkeit und das Gute. Werke V: Schriften zur philosophischen Anthropologie und Ethik: Grundstrukturen menschlicher Existenz*, ed. Berthold Wald (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1997) 54. With regard to the fact that reality is the basis for human judgment cf. Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest*, 23, where it is said that "whoever finds something beautiful, does not merely mean that it pleases him, such as a type of food can be to one's liking. If I find something beautiful, I am of the opinion that it *is* beautiful. To express myself with Kant: I 'intend everybody's approval.'" Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 7. According to Schiller, a judgment on beauty includes necessity demanding everybody's approval. Cf. Friedrich Schiller, "Brief vom 23. Februar 1793," *Kallias oder über die Schönheit. Briefe an Gottfried Körner*, 364. What is relevant here is Jürgen Habermas' notion of a "dogmatic constitution of the life-world" (dogmatische Verfassung der Lebenswelt). Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Richtigkeit vs. Wahrheit. Zum Sinn der Sollgeltung moralischer Urteile und Normen," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 46 (1998): 193.

⁵¹ Cf. Aristotle, *On the Cosmos*, 397a.

⁵² Pöltner, *Schönheit. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung des Denkens bei Thomas von Aquin*, 20. The good and the true are, thus, characterized as the titles for the different manner, going into different directions, of the consonance between ens and anima. Cf. Pöltner, *Schönheit. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung des Denkens bei Thomas von Aquin*, 73.

⁵³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.10, n.439. Thomas explicitly distances himself from Aristotle's subjective attitude in the *Rhetoric*, where the latter says that that which is esteemed should be classed as καλός. Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1367b11. Aquinas is more to be seen in the Platonic tradition, in that of Augustine, in particular. For according to the bishop, a beautiful object is enjoyed and loved owing to its beauty, which implies that it is not called beautiful because it is enjoyed and loved. Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione*, c.XXXII, n.59. No sooner than with Duns Scotus does this change again owing to his teaching of the primacy of the will. Accordingly, delighted appreciation can be the free act of an emotional movement towards

assertion is explained by the fact that our will is not the cause of things, but that we are moved by the causes. Assunto even suggests that man “is forced to detect them in perception.”⁵⁴ What makes the evaluation still difficult is the relativity of beauty, the problem that the value or degree of it depends on its concrete actualization, that is, either on the matter with which this accidental is joined or on the specific way – taken from an infinite number of possibilities – in which elements of this matter are composed:

“Beauty, health and the like are defined in relation to something, because a certain mixture of the humors, which produces health in a boy, does not do the same in an old man. (...) Thus, health is a proportioning of the humors in relation to some kind of nature. And similarly, beauty consists in a proportion of limbs and colors. And this is why the beauty of one is different from another’s.”⁵⁵

Yet, a certain degree of objectivity must be present in the field of beauty, since it is caused by the form of an object, which, in fact, only establishes the possibility that a reality can be perceived as beautiful. On the other hand, man has a deficient capability to apprehend anything other than the most superficial beauty owing to its attraction, which draws attention to it. Moreover, creatural imperfection – in contrast to the perfection of God, who alone has a comprehensive knowledge of the formal structure of being – has to be taken into consideration. Accordingly, owing to the influence of one’s passions, an objectively ugly reality can be experienced as beautiful and vice versa.⁵⁶ Thus, there is always a subjective influence in the judgment on the state of beauty apart from its possible ontological presence. Gerald Phelan’s assertion that one cannot discover “the slightest

the object, without the necessity that the act be determined by the object. Cf. Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, 125. It is, therefore, surprising that Thomas states in a commentary written after his on *The Divine Names* that the relativity of beauty is emphasized owing to its dependence on that with which it is compared. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Iob. Opera omnia*, vol.5, c.25: “In comparison with the most beautiful things, things that have too little of beauty appear impure.” But what is even more surprising is that Kovach asserts that there is not a trace of subjectivity in the Thomistic doctrine on beauty. Cf. Kovach, 92.

⁵⁴ Assunto, 34.

⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos* 44, n.2.

⁵⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.10, a.3c.

support for any subjectivist view on the nature of the beautiful”⁵⁷ seems, therefore, to go much too far in my opinion. Finally, Thomas deals with single questions of what exactly can be called beautiful. A very abstract kind of beauty mentioned reminds one of the intellectual beauty in Plato’s *Philebus*, for Thomas calls straight lines and geometrical figures beautiful, namely, in an ideal way.⁵⁸ In his commentary on the *Psalms*, four types of beauty are presented, which can be found simultaneously only in Christ. They are divine, corporeal, moral beauty and beauty manifesting itself in conversation.⁵⁹ These examples indicate that both an abstract and a concrete notion of beauty is taken into consideration. This is reflected in the differentiation between sensuous and spiritual beauty, a differentiation which is nothing extraordinary when one takes into account the fact that the ‘visa’ in his definition of beauty does not solely refer to the sense of sight,⁶⁰ but designates a general perception, such as of another’s intellectual beauty. Consequently, “spiritual beauty consists in a man’s behavior or his action being well proportioned according to the clarity of reason. This, however, belongs to the notion of nobleness. (...) Therefore, the noble (*honestum*) is identical with spiritual beauty.”⁶¹ Thomas is influenced by Augustine here, who says that “by honesty I mean intelligible beauty, which we properly designate as spiritual.”⁶² Apart from spiritual beauty caused by moral goodness, Thomas also mentions grace which generates the beauty of a human soul by its splendor, that is, by assimilating it to

⁵⁷ Gerald B. Phelan, “The Concept of Beauty in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Aspects of the New Scholastic Philosophy*, ed. Charles A. Hart (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1932) 127.

⁵⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Posteriorum Analyticorum. Opera omnia*, vol.4, l.1, lect.15, n.8; *Sententia libri Ethicorum. Opera omnia*, vol.4, l.1, lect.12, n.4.

⁵⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos* 44, n.2.

⁶⁰ See p.247. A similar distinction made by William of Auvergne, who claims that sensuous beauty is that which pleases him who sees it, while interior beauty is that which gives pleasure to the soul which grasps it, enticing the soul to love, shows how the general ‘videre’ can be understood in detail. Cf. William of Auvergne, *De virtutibus. Opera omnia*, vol.1 (Paris, 1674) c.XV.

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.145, a.2c. Cf. *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.339; *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum. Opera omnia*, vol.3, c.7, ad 9; *Super Psalmos* 25, n.5, where he opposes the exterior, corporeal, carnal beauty to the spiritual side of it. Alexander of Hales establishes a similar connection by identifying the beautiful with the *bonum honestum*. Cf. Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica*, p.I, inq.1, tr.3, q.3, a.2c (103).

⁶² Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus. Patrologia Latina*, vol.40, q.30.

divine Beauty.⁶³ The beauty of the body, on the other hand, consists in “a man having his bodily limbs well proportioned, together with a certain clarity of color.”⁶⁴ It seems to be a unique beauty every time, perceived individually, for there is a distinction between the beauty of one body and that of another.⁶⁵

Another type of beauty under discussion is that of useful things. Thomas does not ask himself the question, as Plato did, of whether there is an identification, nor does he claim that beauty has to be functional, as it needs to be for Aristotle. In his eyes, the beauty of utility is merely accidental – a teaching which is to be seen in opposition to other medievals’ failures to distinguish between the beautiful and the useful or fitting, as is the case for example with Suger, who saw the beauty of his church as simultaneously aesthetic and didactic.⁶⁶ Thomas’ theology is acquainted with the idea that there is a certain perfection in a reality if it serves the goal that it is to achieve⁶⁷ – a clear influence of Aristotelian teleology. However, the statement can easily be misinterpreted, as Assunto does, for he claims that, according to Thomas, beauty always has to conform to utility.⁶⁸ He wants to see this in the example that “when man makes himself a saw for the purpose of cutting, he makes it of iron, which is suitable for the object in view; and he does not prefer to make it of glass, though this be a more beautiful material, because this very beauty would be an obstacle to the end he has in view.”⁶⁹ In fact, Thomas says just the contrary here. Man does not take the more beautiful material, but the more useful one in his intention to build a saw. This in no way means that beauty has to serve utility. That the two concepts are not identical can also be found in the field of morality, where Thomas teaches that the virtue of temperance has the function of reminding man of the fact that beauty is an end in itself, that it should not merely serve human passions. Without this virtue, there is the constant danger that the ego should become decentered, that passions should try to

⁶³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum*, dist.18, q.1, a.2, qc.1c.

⁶⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.145, a.2c.

⁶⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c. IV, l.5, n.339.

⁶⁶ Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 15.

⁶⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.73, a.1c.

⁶⁸ Cf. Assunto, 27.

⁶⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.91, a.3.

rule over reason, and that, consequently, beauty should be seen under the aspect of utility.

2. Beauty as a Principle of Existing

*The beautiful is “an exemplary cause,
for all realities are distinguished according to the divine
Beautiful, and the sign of this is that no one is concerned
with fashioning or representing something
if not for the sake of the beautiful.”⁷⁰*

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Despite Aquinas' frequent use of beauty on the concrete level, he follows Dionysius from time to time in the latter's analysis of the transcendent beauty of God. It would seem an exaggeration, therefore, to argue with Heinrich Weertz that Thomas was at a loss to deal with the Areopagite's remarks.⁷¹ Aquinas states that “God is beautiful in himself”⁷² and not in respect of anything else. This represents the basis for his connection of divine Beauty with plenitude: “God is beautiful simply and in all respects.”⁷³ The term ‘simply’ emphasizes the total identity of God with his being. Thus, he can be called both most beautiful, namely, in genere, which is why the superlative is used, and hyper-beautiful, in an extra genus sense, designated by the addition ‘super.’⁷⁴ It must be added, however, that this description of God as beautiful does not touch his real nature, as both the Neoplatonists and Albert have said before Thomas. From various perfections in the

⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.353: Pulchrum “est causa exemplaris, quia omnia distinguuntur secundum pulchrum divinum et huius signum est quod nullus curat effigiare vel repraesentare, nisi ad pulchrum.”

⁷¹ Cf. Weertz, 16.

⁷² Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.346.

⁷³ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.345. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A. Although Thomas' teaching corresponds to Plotinus' and Dionysius' connection of overabundance with God, he does not use the same linguistic means, thus using the ‘super-’ as the equivalent to the Greek ‘hyper-’ only in his Dionysian quotes.

⁷⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.343.

world, man adopts names for God as the principle of these perfections.⁷⁵ Thomas finds a way according to which our names for him do nevertheless bear truth. He distinguishes between the perfections which the names signify – and which belong properly to God – and their mode of signification, that is, the way man understands them – which applies to creatures.⁷⁶

God's preeminence predestines him to be the cause of beauty. This principle is an application of the way in which he functions as the cause of being. As *esse ipsum*, God does not have being but is Being himself; thus he is able to give being to creatures, who then are not being, but who have being. Accordingly, he "gives beauty to all created things," namely, "pursuant to the properties of each: for one kind is beauty of the spirit, another kind beauty of the body."⁷⁷ In the first part he almost quotes Dionysius; the second part is added to differentiate the various types of concrete beauty on earth. Thomas also remains in the Dionysian tradition by emphasizing the freedom of the act of creation not only of being in general but also of beauty. For God's goodness is infinite; and in the case of a creation out of necessity, the infinite goodness, which he loves in himself, would have been turned into an infinite number of creatural participants. Yet, God's infinite goodness is partaken of by a finite number of creatures, so that it can be concluded that his creation is a free act of the will.⁷⁸ The question nevertheless remains why creation took place in the first place, if not out of necessity. Thomas states that "with regard to the generating of creatures nothing else moved God than his goodness, which he wants to communicate to other things according to a mode of assimilation to himself."⁷⁹ Hence, it is God's intention to aggrandize goodness by bringing it forth into his creation. The same is true for his beauty. Although man does not receive the whole of divine Beauty in this life owing to God's absolute transcendence, which has

⁷⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.I, l.2, n.54.

⁷⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.13, a.3c.

⁷⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.339. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A.

⁷⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, c.81.

⁷⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c.46. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 589B-C, where divine Goodness is also considered to be the reason for creation. Fran O'Rourke even calls this divine behavior appropriate regarding the infinity of God's goodness. Cf. Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992) 229.

to be sustained, there is as much of the perfectly whole Beauty present in creation as is possible through an assimilation of the creature to God.⁸⁰

As indicated, divine Goodness is the turning-point for creation. The only problem is that in another paragraph Thomas claims that God as the effective, moving and conserving perfect cause performs what he has through his love for himself – and not for his goodness – and for its sake he creates what is beautiful.⁸¹ This is an interpretation of the Dionysian text marking a slight difference from the original, which says that God creates out of love for everything, and not out of love for himself. Of course, Thomas contradicts neither himself nor the Areopagite, for his statement can be interpreted in a way which sees not God himself as the object of divine love, but his goodness, which he wants to pass on.⁸² This can be explained by the identity of his goodness with the divine essence,⁸³ which implies that God has to be directed to some final end and that this final end must be himself, or, in other words, his own goodness. Owing to this circle of love, God can even be called – in a completely unplatonic way – the essence of love or Love itself.

Although he obviously follows Dionysius' Neoplatonic teaching in many cases, he definitely tries to revise him – as well as implicitly the whole Platonic tradition – in his intentional substitution of participation with similarity, which is, of course, also Platonic, but leads away from the strict Platonic doctrine of participation:

“An acting cause which acts, so to speak, from a desire of an end, which belongs to imperfect acting, does not have what it desires. But it belongs to perfect acting to act through the love of that which it has, and through this it adds that the Beautiful, which is God, is the effective and

⁸⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.18, n.525; l.5, n.352; l.5, n.353.

⁸¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.352; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712A-B: “The creator of everything goes out of himself through his beautiful and good love for everything because of Eros' overabundance of goodness.”

⁸² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.9, n.409.

⁸³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.1, n.269; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 693B, where it is said that God is called Goodness, because “the Good as the substantial Good extends its goodness by means of his being in all actualized being.”

moving and conserving cause in the love of a peculiar beauty. For since he has peculiar beauty, he wants to multiply it, as far as possible, namely, through the communication of his similarity.”⁸⁴

The problematic background is already present in the prooemium of his commentary on *The Divine Names*, where he distances himself from Plato’s doctrine of Ideas, misunderstanding it as Aristotle and Albert did before him. Accordingly, he rejects the concept of ultimate Ideas of natural things separated from the sensuous world and subsisting through themselves, since this cannot be harmonized with truth. However, he tolerates the theory when referring to God, who is *ipsum esse per se subsistens*, so that Being is the only separated reality embracing all the so-called Platonic Ideas.⁸⁵ Hence, with regard to the things which are ‘maximally common,’ that is, the transcendentals good, one and actual being, he admits that there is only a difference in language. The Platonists call the first One the essence of goodness, unity and being, from which all good, one and actual things are derived. In contrast, Christians do not so much use the term ‘the One’ as ‘God’ for the same thing. Thus, when they speak about this first as the Good itself, the Good per se, the principal Good, the Hyper-Good or the Goodness of all good things, it is in harmony with the Christian faith.⁸⁶ But the

⁸⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.352. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁸⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.V, l.1, n.613; Kremer, 372-378, where he demonstrates that whenever the *esse subsistens* is called *separatum* at the same time, Thomas is influenced by Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysics. Cf. also R.J. Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956) 351-361.

⁸⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, Prooemium. The linguistic identity between the Platonic Idea of Beauty and the Christian God is supported by Thomas by means of his characterization of the latter’s perfection: Neither is there alteration nor particularity in him (cf. *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.345) – as in the Idea of Beauty. There is, however, a correspondent to what Plato calls Idea, namely, in the concept of the *species intelligibiles*. The latter is a means of apprehending an extramental thing. If one sees a hand, one does not actually realize the notion hand, but the notion hand serves as a *medium quo* to apprehend the concrete hand. Josef Santeler emphasizes that “as one can see, it is important for Thomas to show that in the case of a universal, something is extracted by means of abstraction which is connected in the object itself.” Santeler continues by conceding that “whether this connection represents a real identity with merely intellectually different aspects or a looser connection with different unintelligible parts is secondary for him. A connection with reality is

Ideas cannot exist in the form of material, general beings separated from God. Whenever Thomas now uses Platonic language in the sense of the concept of participation, it has to be understood in the sense that everything participates in God insofar as he is the creator and lets his creation partake of his being at every moment. Although the Platonic language speaks more about the good than about being, Thomas can subsume goodness under being – the central term in his theology – owing to his teaching about the interchangeability of the transcendentals.⁸⁷ What remains problematic in this context is the Neoplatonic concept of pre-existence, which can already be found in Dionysius and Albert, and which is taken up by Thomas. Accordingly, the divided and multiplied beauties of creatures pre-exist in God in a unified and simple manner.⁸⁸ Adolf Dyroff interprets this as a pre-existence of actual realities themselves in God.⁸⁹ To my mind, this idea should rather be interpreted with Pieper by simply suggesting that all actual realities are what they are as a result of divine creative knowledge functioning as their formal cause and, consequently, as their measure.⁹⁰ This formal presupposition of all realities is very similar to Augustine’s doctrine that the Platonic Ideas have to be understood as God’s thoughts.

Closely linked to the concept of participation is the differentiation between beauty and the beautiful, where Thomas again follows Dionysius: “God enfolds both in himself as one and the same”⁹¹ owing to his simplicity

sufficient in his eyes.” Josef Santeler S.J., *Der Platonismus in der Erkenntnislehre des heiligen Thomas von Aquin* (Innsbruck: Felizian Rauch, 1939) 87-88. The only problem is that, even though the sense perceives something concrete, the intellect normally thinks the general nature as a real universal. This does not mean that Thomas is in the Platonic tradition, for the method of abstraction from concreteness refers back to Aristotle, and Plato emphasized recollection as the presupposition of having insight of a concrete object.

⁸⁷ See p. 240.

⁸⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.13, a.4c; *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.V, l.2, n.662; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A, where it is said that every form of beauty has its pre-existence in the plain, hyper-natural nature of all beauty. Cf. also Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 84. Albert explicitly argues that it is God, in whom the pre-existence takes place.

⁸⁹ Cf. Adolf Dyroff, “Über die Entwicklung und den Wert der Ästhetik des Thomas von Aquin,” *Archiv für systematische Philosophie und Soziologie*, 33 (1929): 186.

⁹⁰ Cf. Pieper, *Die Wirklichkeit und das Gute*, 55.

⁹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.336. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.4, a.1c, where Thomas proves God’s perfection: “Now God is the first principle, not material, but

and perfection. This last point cannot be found in the Areopagite, but it does occur in Albert's commentary on him. However, his analysis of the reference of the two terms to God is subtler than Thomas', while, in addition to the original, both comment on the reference of the terms to creatures in about the same way. Accordingly, Thomas says that in creatures

“the beautiful and beauty are distinguished with respect to participation and participants. Thus, we call something ‘beautiful’ because it is a participant in beauty. Beauty, however, is a participation in the first cause, which makes all things beautiful, so that the beauty of creatures is simply a likeness to divine Beauty in which things participate.”⁹²

Since man is only a participant, beauty in him cannot be the same as it is in its source, for example with regard to autonomy. Furthermore, we gather knowledge about divine Beauty from the experience of our own beauty. Consequently, Thomas concludes that one has to find a mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation in this procedure. This mean exists in analogies, in which the idea is not, as it is in univocals, one and the same, yet it is not totally diverse as in equivocals. He distances himself thereby from his teacher, who claims, enigmatically, that God is a univocal cause in the sense that this univocality is one of analogy.⁹³

The concrete form in which God can be considered the cause of beauty is based on the Thomistic assertion that “God is the cause of every instance of beauty insofar as he is the cause of consonance and clarity.”⁹⁴ This again is connected to the Aristotelian concept of form as the basis for beauty.

in the order of efficient cause, which must be most perfect. For just as matter, as such, is merely potential, an agent, as such, is in the state of actuality. Hence, the first active principle needs to be most actual and, therefore, most perfect; for a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality, because we call that perfect which lacks nothing of the mode of its perfection.”

⁹² Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.336-337. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 73-74.

⁹³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.13, a.5c; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.1, 1. With regard to the analogy between God and his creation cf. Josef Habbel, *Die Analogie zwischen Gott und Welt nach Thomas von Aquin* (Berlin: Verlag Josef Habbel, 1928).

⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum*, dist.31, q.2, a.1c. When Thomas writes about the notion ‘cause,’ he uses the term ‘principium’ from the Aristotelian ἀρχή, denoting – in the Thomistic, not in the original sense – the efficient causality bringing about operation and movement. In contrast to this, Albert's choice of a term goes back to the Greek αἰτία.

Accordingly, Thomas says that “every form, through which a thing has being, is a certain participation in divine clarity.” With clarity as one of the elements of beauty, the hypothesis suggests itself that Beauty, insofar as it is divine, causes even worldly being. Thomas supports this by saying that “the being of all things is derived from divine Beauty.”⁹⁵ Since this theory is based on the notion of form, and the good refers to form in the same way, it is apparent that divine Goodness can also be considered the source of being. Nevertheless, this last conclusion does not leave the sphere of beauty behind, for Thomas proceeds by stating that something is good owing to its perfection. Moreover, a state of perfection is the result of an actualization of all possible perfections. This adherence of the object’s nature is accomplished by its form. A form, finally, is said to be determined by the three characteristics already appearing in Albert’s doctrine, namely, (1) mode, which assigns the object to its (2) species and directs it to its final goal in accordance with an (3) order:

“Now the form presupposes determination or commensuration of its principles, whether material or efficient, and this is signified by the mode. (...) But the form itself is signified by the species; for everything is placed in its species by its form. (...) Further, upon the form follows an inclination to the end, or to an action, or something of the sort; for everything, insofar as it is in act, acts and tends towards that which is in accordance with its form; and this belongs to weight and order.”⁹⁶

A reference to form as the concrete, secondary cause of beauty – apart from God as the primary cause – is made at the beginning of the analysis, for perfection is one of the necessary elements of beauty. Whenever a form causes perfection and thereby goodness, it causes beauty at the same time. What is more, Aquinas continues by equating species with beauty or, at least, by making a close link between the two notions owing to the criteria of integrity or perfection, proportion or harmony, and splendor or clarity.⁹⁷ Consequently, the fact that the species signifies the form, which

⁹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.349.

⁹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.5c. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q.73, a.1c; Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.26, c.1, a.3, III.

⁹⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Isaiam*, c.53: “For ‘species’ refers to beauty in regard to the measurement of its members.” Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.39, a.8c. The final conclusion is that “species or beauty has a likeness to the property of the Son.” The use of the singular form ‘has’ underscores the hypothesis of an identification of beauty and

causes beauty, implies that it is actually beauty which signifies the form causing concrete beauty. Thomas adds that being is also caused by a form, which makes the species – and beauty – a principle of existence. Beauty can then be found in the very essence of the respective realities, not as an accidental adjunct, but from the very reason that these realities exist.

3. Art

“Wherefore, just as science always has a relation to the good (...), so it is with art.”⁹⁸

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Thomas does not share Plato’s total rejection of art, because his main interest in this context is not to pose the truth question. The basis of the analysis is an analogy between divine and artistic creatorship, using the concept of idea as the point of interest: “All creatures are in the divine mind, just as a piece of furniture is in the mind of its maker. But a piece of furniture is in its maker’s mind because of its idea and its likeness,”⁹⁹ that is, because of its form functioning as an exemplary cause. An act of art presupposes an idea as well. While Augustine still interpreted this very platonically as an illumination of the human mind by God, Thomas establishes his theory of imagination under the strong influence of Aristotelism. Accordingly, direct experience precedes an artistic creation in the mind. As in Albert’s doctrine, the agent intellect and the possible intellect play a special role: An image, a phantasm, of a sensually experienced object is imprinted on the latter by the agent intellect, which, at the same time, generalizes it to a universal notion.¹⁰⁰ In contrast to an act of reason aiming at a judgment in accordance with the experienced reality, the process of artistically imagining is

species. By quoting St. Hilary and Augustine frequently, Thomas gives an indication of his sources.

⁹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.57, a.3, ad 1: “Unde sicut scientia se habet semper ad bonum, (...) ita et ars.”

⁹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.3, a.1, ad 5.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.84, a.6c.

concerned with a free rearrangement of the phantasms of reality analogous to it: “Art imitates nature in its manner of operation.”¹⁰¹

Apart from this rather positive evaluation of art, Thomas admits that it cannot compete with the reality of nature: “Art is deficient when compared with the operations of nature. For nature bestows a substantial form, which art cannot do. Rather, all artificial forms are accidental.”¹⁰² Here lies a danger of art: it draws attention to its products, since artificial forms are known better by us than substantial forms owing to their nearness to our senses.¹⁰³ Despite its accidental nature, there is a lasting dependence of art on nature, because the latter can operate only upon something already naturally in being.¹⁰⁴ From this perspective, art can be considered an extension of nature only insofar as man uses his reason to create an inexhaustible number of new constellations without absolute autonomy.¹⁰⁵ A kind of autonomy of a piece of art is only given in respect of its quality. Then it no longer depends on the intention of its creator:

“Art is nothing else but right reason applied to certain works to be made. And yet the good of these things depends not on man’s appetitive faculty being affected in this or that way, but on the goodness of the work done. For a craftsman, as such, is commendable, not for the will with which he does a work, but for the quality of the work.”¹⁰⁶

The quality is attained when the basic principles of beauty are actualized and when there is a correspondence between the matter to be designed and the intention of the designing.¹⁰⁷ Hence, the beauty of a piece of art has a certain ontological truth, namely, under the aspect that reality functions as its basis and that the judgment on its existence does not depend on a subjective appetite. Nonetheless, an artist cannot bestow beauty together with being, as God can. Thus, artistic beauty can never reach the same level of truth as natural beauty.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.117, a.1c. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q.84, a.6, ad 2.

¹⁰² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q.66, a.4c.

¹⁰³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri De anima*, 1.2, lect.2, n.1.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De principiis naturae. Opera omnia*, vol.3, c.3.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c.49.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.57, a.3c. With regard to the relation of art to reason cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, c.XXXIII, n.72.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Eckert, 241.

4. The Good

“The good signifies perfection which is desirable.”¹⁰⁸

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The concept of the good must, of course, be taken into account, since beauty appears almost always in its context owing to their identity in subjecto.¹⁰⁹ The starting-point for the analysis of the good is Aristotle’s remark that the good is what all things desire.¹¹⁰ Since this is not a definition of the good touching its essence, but rather serving as a subjective manifestation of the desiring subject – Fran O’Rourke calls it “the phenomenological content of goodness”¹¹¹ – Thomas proceeds by turning from the notion of the good to its nature, that is, to its ontological basis: “The good is what all desire. Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only insofar as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect insofar as it is actual (in actu). Therefore, it is clear that a thing is perfect insofar as it exists.”¹¹² Hence, it is identified with ens and not with the abstract notion esse, the actuality of ens. God alone is good essentially,¹¹³ so that he can be called the Good itself, ipsum bonum: “Everything is good insofar as it is an actual reality. It is the nature of God, however, to be his being; and so, he alone is his own goodness.”¹¹⁴ Eco describes this as a misinterpretation of the Areopagite,¹¹⁵ for whom esse is an effect of the act of creation and is not

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.1, ad 1. In respect of the Platonic and Neoplatonic influence on Thomas regarding the concept of the good cf. Pierre Faucon, *Aspects Néoplatoniciens de la Doctrine de Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Lille: Université Lille III, 1975) 20-52; 108-163.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.1, n.266: “Since the good is what all things desire, anything which has the explanation of its appetite within itself can be seen to pertain to the notion of the good. Of this sort are light and beauty.”

¹¹⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a1-2; Plotinus, V 5.12.7-8.

¹¹¹ O’Rourke, 85.

¹¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.1c.

¹¹³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.6, a.3c.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.1, n.269. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 693B.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 29; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A. Cf. also Plato, *Republic*, 509b; Plotinus, VI 7.33.20.

identified, in its fullness, with God, the Beautiful-and-Good, since he is beyond being. I would rather call it a reinterpretation. It was not Thomas' intention to interpret Dionysius as the latter had understood himself, but as close as possible to truth. Therefore, Thomas integrates his own – for him true – theology into the commentary.

Thomas is, of course, aware of his reinterpretation, so that he tries in a subtle way to determine the significance of the two notions where it is most necessary, namely, in the field of causality. In this context, it must be said that the question has actually already been answered, because the notion of cause presupposes being, so that God has to be regarded as absolute Being before he can be thought of from the perspective of causality,¹¹⁶ for it is divine Being which diffuses causality in the first place. Thomas nevertheless asks the question of whether Being as efficient cause or the Good as final cause is prior – neglecting the fact that it is inherently an artificial distinction owing to the fact that it is in both cases one and the same God. He begins by setting down that “the Good expresses the diffusion of a final and not of an efficient cause.”¹¹⁷ This includes the idea that its notion is more expressive than the mere statement of existence, because it adds the ultimate reason why to the mere fact of existence.¹¹⁸ Moreover, since finality is the first in the order of causes, the Good must be considered prior to Being from this point of view. Yet, since man strives to a final good, but in the sense of a reality, the two concepts are intertwined. As shown above, it can even be said that the Good is an effective cause, for, after all, its communication is the reason for creation in the first place. Consequently, Thomas presents a passage where he describes the Good both as efficient and final cause¹¹⁹ – a clear contradiction to what he says in *De veritate*. Even though he obviously is not totally consistent in his doctrine, he becomes more mature in his new description, since it represents a combination of the Aristotelian and the Dionysian view of the good without an adoption of their respective weaknesses. He adopts neither the Aristotelian subjectivity nor the superiority of the good over being as present in the Neoplatonic tradition.

Owing to Aristotle's immense influence on Thomas, and Augustine's reestablishment of the Greek connection between the beautiful and the

¹¹⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.13, a.11, ad 2.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.21, a.1, ad 4.

¹¹⁸ Cf. O'Rourke, 104.

moral good, this idea to some extent appears in the Thomistic theology. It is justified by a reference to the concept of proportion, of which moral beauty is a special case: “In human affairs a thing is beautiful insofar as it harmonizes with reason, wherefore Cicero says under the heading ‘Comeliness is twofold’ that ‘the beautiful is that which is in keeping with man’s excellence insofar as his nature differs from other animals.’”¹²⁰ At another point, he emphasizes that a moral act has to be ordered in accordance with human nature, so that man is the master of his actions through his reason and will.

But a morally good act is not the only case which is beautiful owing to the harmony between reason and will. Thomas applies the same characteristic to virtues as well: “Every virtue derives from its species a certain luster or adornment which is proper to each virtue.”¹²¹ The reason for the beauty of virtues can again be found in the notion of harmony, which eliminates man’s ugly disunification of himself. Accordingly, beauty is in the moral virtues by participation insofar as they participate in the order of reason. There is one virtue, in particular, with which special beauty is connected, namely, temperance, since it “restrains the concupiscences especially darkening the light of reason. Hence, it is that the virtue of chastity most of all makes man apt for contemplation, since venereal pleasures most of all weigh the mind down to sensible objects, as Augustine says.”¹²² That the excellent role of temperance consists in a certain moderate and fitting proportion – the basis for beauty – shines through in a second justification by Thomas, although this becomes obvious only at a second glance. For he says that

“the things from which temperance withholds us, hold the lowest place in man, and are becoming to him by reason of his animal nature, (...) wherefore it is natural that such things should defile him. In consequence, beauty is a foremost attribute of temperance which above all hinders man from being defiled.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.142, a.2c. Cf. Cicero, *De officiis*, I, 27, 96.

¹²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.129, a.4, ad 3. Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1366a33-35.

¹²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.2, ad 3. Cf. Augustine, *Soliloquia. Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, I.I, c.10, n.17.

¹²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.141, a.2, ad 3. This does not mean that temperance is the highest virtue. It is just the most beautiful one. “Honor and beauty are especially ascribed to temperance, not on account of the excellence of the good proper to

Here, temperance does not create a harmony between the will and reason directly, but between the will and human nature as a whole, the distinctive characteristic of which is, of course, reason.

Moral ugliness, on the other hand, is called ‘deformity’ by Thomas, pointing to a distortion of the form, which is normally the cause of beauty.¹²⁴ Apart from a deformation, a destruction of the order in human life takes place whenever man does not choose the moral good: “The proper and direct cause of sin is to be considered on the part of the adherence to a mutable good, in which respect every sinful act proceeds from inordinate desire for some temporal good.”¹²⁵ ‘Inordinate’ means lacking order, thus lacking the beauty of a morally good act.

In a life orientated towards God, however, the beauty of an appropriate order must not be missing, for the movement of faith and love presupposes the exercise of virtues, since passions are likely to draw the spirit to the sensuous sphere causing turbulence and restlessness in man instead of a pointed concentration. Hence, Thomas concludes that virtues belong to a contemplative life, the prime example of a life orientated towards God – although, as Thomas explains, not essentially but dispositively,¹²⁶ that is, as a preparation. The virtuous life is neither ultimate happiness nor the essence of religion. Thomas’ interpretation of Aristotle’s ethics can be understood in the tradition of the Neoplatonic concept of purification.¹²⁷ Accordingly, human goodness opens man to divine Goodness, thus preparing him for the elevation which is necessary for the beatific vision. There, man attains perfect happiness (*beatitudo perfecta*) – while in this life happiness can only be imperfect (*beatitudo imperfecta*), being able nevertheless to serve as a way to perfect happiness. This shows that a morally good life is the presupposition of true happiness. Thomas, therefore,

temperance, but on account of the disgrace of the contrary evil from which it withdraws us, by moderating the pleasures common to us and the lower animals.” *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.141, a.8, ad 1.

¹²⁴ Cf. Eckert, 239. Evil is, thus, not of itself ordered to the good, but only in an accidental way. Consequently, it does not operate towards the perfection and beauty of the universe, except accidentally. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.19, a.9, ad 1 and 2.

¹²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.77, a.4c. Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 517b-c, where the reason for the danger is referred to sensuousness.

¹²⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.2c.

¹²⁷ Cf. for example Plotinus, I 6.6.1-2.

quotes Aristotle in this context: “Happiness is the reward of virtuous behavior.”¹²⁸

5. The Transcendentals

“The expressed mode is a general mode in respect of every actual being.”¹²⁹

≈

The doctrine of the transcendentals seems to be almost the only or, at least, the major case where the Platonic idea of participation is valid – at any rate, Thomas calls it “Platonicorum ratio.”¹³⁰ Just how far his view of the transcendentals is in accordance with the Platonic teaching of participation is another question. In his eyes, goodness, oneness and actual being are “maxime communia,” which means that they are things which can be found in every reality. Hence, every reality in a way partakes of them. In detail, it can be said that a transcendental is “a mode which generally accompanies every actual being.”¹³¹ It fits well into the Thomistic system that *ens* is the first of the transcendentals without being a transcendental next to other transcendentals. All transcendentals in some way or other refer to being, revealing a particular characteristic or aspect of it and are to be seen, in this sense, as additions. This does not mean that something is added which is not being, but something is expressed which is not explicitly – but only implicitly – expressed by *ens*. This addition is the quiddity of *ens*, so that Thomas, first of all, mentions that every *ens* is a *res*. Moreover, *ens* has the quality of not being many, but of being characterized as one, thus setting the third transcendental ‘*unum*.’ Insofar as one *ens* is distinguished from another *ens*, it receives the name ‘*aliquid*.’ Whenever the soul tries to relate

¹²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.5, a.7c. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b17; Plato, *Gorgias*, 470e; Winfried Lange, *Glückssehnsucht und uneigennütziges Lebensgestaltung bei Thomas von Aquin. Untersuchung zum Problem der inneren Einheit seines ethischen Systems* (Freiburg: Dissertationsdruck, 1969).

¹²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.1, a.1c: “Alio modo ita quod modus expressus sit modus generalis consequens omne ens.”

¹³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, Prooemium.

¹³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.1, a.1c: “modus generaliter consequens omne ens.”

to an ens, it happens in two ways according to the two basic faculties in the soul: The first way is concerned with the relation to the intellect, and the ens is then called verum. The second way refers to the relation to the will, and the ens is then called bonum.¹³² Eco summarizes this system in the following way: “They are a bit like differing visual angles from which being can be looked at. (...) But each transcendental is nonetheless the whole of being and is found in everything that exists. This is why they are convertible into one another.”¹³³

Some scholars, such as Eco, ascribe a text by an anonymous author, in which beauty is considered to be a transcendental, to Thomas’ contemporary Bonaventure. This text represents the only case in the whole Middle Ages, where it is said that there are “generally four conditions of a being, namely, that it be one, true, good and beautiful.”¹³⁴ Aertsen doubts Bonaventure’s authorship, since he normally confines himself to including oneness, truth and goodness to the group of transcendentals.¹³⁵ However, this doctrine did not directly influence Thomas, for, like Albert, he does not include beauty in the list of transcendentals. However, his description of the relationship between it and the good, namely, that they are the same in the subject but different in notion, again reminds one of how transcendentals are related to one another: “Although the true and the good are convertible with being in the underlying reality, they nevertheless differ in the notion.”¹³⁶

Ever since Étienne Gilson’s claim that beauty is a “forgotten transcendental”¹³⁷ in Thomas’ teaching, almost every scholar concerned with the topic of beauty tries, nonetheless, to find a way of integrating it into the system.

¹³² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.1, a.1c.

¹³³ Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 21.

¹³⁴ “Tractatus de transcendentalibus entis conditionibus,” ed. Dorothee Halcour, *Franziskanische Studien* 41 (1959): 65. Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 45. See p. 245, note 156.

¹³⁵ Cf. Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals. The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996) 350; Aertsen, “Das Schöne. Mittelalter,” 1353; Bonaventure, *Breviloquium. Opera omnia*, vol.5 (Clarac Aquas: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1891) vol.5, I, c.6: “conditiones entis nobilissimae et generalissimae (...) hae autem sunt unum, verum, bonum.”

¹³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.16, a.4. Despite the fact that Thomas adds two transcendentals, his doctrine more or less corresponds to his teacher’s. Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.28.

¹³⁷ Étienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York, Doubleday: 1960) 159.

Even before Gilson, Jacques Maritain interpreted Thomas' commentary on *The Divine Names* in such a way that he comes to the conclusion that beauty "is in fact the splendor of all the transcendentals together."¹³⁸ Without taking account of Thomas' neglect, Eco suggests an implicit theory of beauty as a transcendental in Aquinas' writings. On the other hand, he has to admit that the phrase 'visa placent' introduces a subjective condition for beauty pointing to a denial of its transcendental status.¹³⁹ He bases this view on Marc de Munnynck's indication that 'placent' as an effect of an encounter with beauty undermines the latter's universality, being present for example in the true and the good.¹⁴⁰ Of course, neither Eco nor de Munnynck take into consideration the fact that 'placent' refers to our description of the beautiful and not to its ontological status. Kovach claims to find not only an implicit mentioning of the transcendental state of beauty, but even an explicit one. He defines a transcendental in accordance with Thomas as a notion expressing a general mode of being (*generalis modus essendi*), that is, a notion expressing *ens* or a *generaliter consequens omne ens* necessarily inhering in it.¹⁴¹ Kovach considers his hypothesis to be proven by the convertibility of the beautiful with the good, that is, with an explicit transcendental¹⁴² – though he admits that there is no passage where Thomas *literally* says that the good is also convertible with the beautiful – and by the fact that every creature partakes of divine Beauty.¹⁴³ At the end of his analysis he even concludes that beauty is "the richest, noblest and most comprehensive of all transcendentals."¹⁴⁴

Czapiewski is more critical, namely by asking himself whether every being, insofar as it is true, can be good at the same time, so that every being

¹³⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930) 132.

¹³⁹ Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 37.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Marc de Munnynck, "L'esthétique de St. Thomas d'Aquin," *San Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan: Società Editrice 'Vita e Pensiero,' 1923) 232. De Munnynck concludes that all things are beautiful in the eyes of God, but not for us. Cf. also Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 38.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Kovach, 185; Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.1, a.1c; *Summa theologiae*, I, q.47, a.2, ad 2.

¹⁴² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.4, 1.22, n.590.

¹⁴³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.4, 1.5, n.345-346.

¹⁴⁴ Kovach, 214.

would be a *bonum intellectus*, and, thus, something beautiful,¹⁴⁵ for it is obvious that the three concepts are very similar. All of them have the same subject and revolve around a similar notion. Truth is the goal of the intellect, but, what is more, it functions as an object of the appetite as well under the condition that it is seen as good. The notion of the good is thereby, on the one hand, already described. On the other hand, an indication of love is given with the reference to the appetite, namely, as soon as the appetite is satisfied. Now again all aspects of the definition of something beautiful are given. Yet, Thomas does not include it in the group of transcendentals, so that it does not seem to be a concept which can be derived from being directly. Beauty can only be found in the interplay of the true and the good. Hence, Aertsen rightly states that Thomas' evaluation of the beautiful as a possible transcendental does not depend upon its universal extension, which the theologian supports in his commentary on *The Divine Names*.¹⁴⁶ The decisive point is that there is no indication in either Dionysius' or Thomas' teaching that the beautiful is a quality of every being, distinct from the other two. The beautiful adds to the good a reference to cognition, which does not mean that it adds this to being. This impossibility is further intensified by the identity of it with the good regarding the subject¹⁴⁷ – a fact which, consequently, does not support calling beauty a transcendental, as Kovach wants to interpret it. With all this in mind, it is hardly understandable how far Pöltner goes in his interpretation: When, according to him, the *anima* is not split up into the difference of the good and the true, but can be found in peaceful consonance with itself, the state must be considered to be in consonance with beauty. There, actual being is completely itself, since *anima* and *ens* come together in beauty, so that, as a result, beauty originally opens up

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Czapiewski, 23.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.4, l.5, n.355. Here, Thomas also comments on Dionysius' non-existing things, which are nevertheless said to participate in beauty. Aquinas interprets them differently from Albert, who identifies these non-existing things with not perfectly existing things. In contrast, his pupil interprets them as *materia prima* having a similarity with the divine Beautiful-and-Good. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.5, 2.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals. The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, 343.

the sense of being.¹⁴⁸ Pöltner concludes that the nature of beauty signifies the transcendental relation, emanating from ens, qua transcendental, owing to the capability of beauty to reach the original sense of being.¹⁴⁹ Hence, the meaning of transcendentality is realized in beauty in its purest form. To my mind, the beautiful is given such a high value with regard to the transcendentals by this claim that the only way to top it would have been to call it, instead of ens, the prime one.

6. Beauty as the Goal of the Intellect and the Will

*“For whenever the goodness, beauty and
suavity of creatures draws the human minds in such a
way, God’s fontal goodness itself draws the wholly
inflamed souls to it.”¹⁵⁰*

≈

The Neoplatonic scheme of a circular movement of all creatures is used by Thomas even to the extent that he composed his *Summa theologiae* in accordance with it. God creates being as an effect of his love for himself, at the same time orientating his creation back into his direction by means of a natural loving impulse present in every being. O’Rourke points out that Thomas thereby accepts the Neoplatonic principle that every effect is converted to its cause as a result of its desire for its own good. Furthermore, the good of an effect is considered to be derived from its cause, so that the effect seeks its cause as its own good.¹⁵¹

a) Willful Cognition

Thomas agrees with Plato that the number of people who try to learn to know true Beauty is small: “Those who wish to undergo such a labor for

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Pöltner, *Schönheit. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung des Denkens bei Thomas von Aquin*, 75.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Pöltner, *Schönheit. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung des Denkens bei Thomas von Aquin*, 85.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c.1.

¹⁵¹ Cf. O’Rourke, 235.

the mere love of knowledge are few, even though God has inserted into the minds of men a natural appetite for knowledge.”¹⁵² The striving for this goal is characterized by the elements of human nature. God is the *actus purus*, not composed out of form and matter. In him, there is no distinction between a reality and its nature, nor between essence and existence.¹⁵³ Finite being – in contrast to God – is characterized by a weakness, which manifests itself in the splitting up of this being. Accordingly, it exists in actuality through the substantial form,¹⁵⁴ a phenomenon which Thomas calls *actus primus*. At the same time, every reality is itself the cause of a self-actualization, called *actus secundus*, as soon as it is actualized. Beforehand, every *actus secundus* exists in potentiality. In man, there are two basic potentialities of the same status, mutually including one another in their acts, namely, the will and the intellect. This is because “the intellect understands that the will wills, and the will wills the intellect to understand.”¹⁵⁵ The will is directed to a *bonum*, the intellect is directed to a *verum*. Hence, the beautiful must be regarded as a relation of being to the coincidence of the two basic faculties.¹⁵⁶ This means that by the sensuous encounter with and

¹⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, c.4. Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 476b; Plotinus, I 3.1-3.

¹⁵³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.3, a.7c. He derives this from Aristotle’s idea that the nature of a perfect being is actuality without potentiality. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1071b18-22.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.48, a.1, ad 4.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.82, a.4, ad 1. Czapiewski points out that every statement that one-sidedly asserts the superiority of the intellect in Thomas’ writings is not an adequate account of genuine Thomism, for the two faculties are interdependent: The intellect cannot result from the finite spirit but through the intermediation of the will. The will needs the intermediation of the intellect to result from the finite spirit. Both are faculties mediated with the substantial basis of the spirit. Cf. Czapiewski, 106; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.82, a.4, ad 3; *De veritate*, q.22, a.12, ad 2.

¹⁵⁶ Scholars dispute about the exact interpretation of the coincidence. Kovach is of the opinion that an addition to the *bonum* and *verum* takes place, which makes him put the beautiful at the end of the list of transcendentals as a synthesizer of them (cf. Kovach, 143; 212), while Czapiewski considers the *pulchrum* to be the original center of the unity of the good and the true, so that the position of the beautiful in the list of transcendentals would precede those of the last two transcendentals – were there a free position. Cf. Czapiewski, 143. Aersten calls this a “synthetic function” of the beautiful and rejects both theories. Kovach does not pay attention to the cumulative structure of the Thomistic list of transcendentals, where the later includes the earlier element conceptually, which does not leave room or reason for a unique transcendental in the form of a synthesizer. With regard to Czapiewski,

the intellectual cognition of the beautiful, a bonum is possessed as a verum. Thomas thereby unifies the Platonic distinction between intellectual and romantic beauty in such a way that meets Plato's own attempt in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. The importance of the unification is supported by Thomas' emphasis that the beautiful and the good are not identical.

Owing to Augustine's assertion that one desires rest and Dionysius' diverging claim that the appetite strives for beauty, Thomas tries to subsume both goals under the general goal of the good, for the good is what all things desire. Beauty, then, is not a special case of the good, but identical with it when seen under the aspect of a goal, since whoever strives for the good strives therefore for the beautiful. The reason offered by Aquinas can be found in the fact that the elements of commensurability and specification (in the sense of a perfection of the form) pertain to the beautiful and are included in the notion of the good – while the latter just adds an order of perfection to other things:

“If the appetite terminates in the good and in peace and the beautiful, it does not mean that it terminates in different goals. By the very fact of tending to the good, a thing at the same time tends to the beautiful and to peace. It tends to the beautiful as it is proportioned and specified in itself. These notes are included in the essential character of the good, but the latter adds a relationship of what is perfective in regard to other things. So anyone desiring the good by that very fact desires the beautiful.”¹⁵⁷

he points out that the order of inclusion is twisted, since in the list the posterior includes the prior conceptually, and not the prior the posterior. Cf. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals. The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, 352. This synthetic function can be found as early as in the Middle Ages in the writing by an unknown student of Alexander of Hales', explicitly including the beautiful into the list, namely, as the last transcendental embracing the others and being common to them. There, oneness refers to the efficient cause, the aspect of truth to the formal cause, and goodness to the final cause. Beauty, finally, is said to have a synthesizing function: It embraces all three causes and is shared by all. Cf. “Tractatus de transcendentalibus entis conditionibus,” 65: “Dicendum, quod istae conditiones fundantur supra ens addunt enim aliquam rationem (...). Sed pulchrum circuit omnem causam et est commune ad ista.” Aertsen criticizes the editor of the text for having chosen this specific title, since “the term transcendentalis is unknown in the thirteenth century.” Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals. The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, 350, note 52.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.22, a.1, ad 12.

The amendment that the good has a perfective function towards other things represents the actual reason for its connection with the appetitive faculty, “for all desire their own perfection.”¹⁵⁸ Since the beautiful does not possess this ability, but is merely intrinsically perfect owing to its proportion, it cannot be a goal per se. As shown above, this quality of being proportioned applies to it as a result of its relatedness to cognition, in other words, to clarity. For according to Thomas, this concept is closely connected with beatifying and, therefore, perfective contemplation: an object is perfected if its truth is apprehended, and the apprehension of truth again effects perfection. It therefore follows that we should call not only the beautiful desirable, but also the true, which is indicated by the symbol of light in the following quote – though it must be emphasized again that the true is also not desirable in itself: “Beauty is not an object of desire except insofar as it assumes the nature of the good. With truth the case is the same. But in its own nature, beauty does possess clarity.”¹⁵⁹ Consequently, Eco argues that “in his commentary upon chapter four [of Dionysius’ *The Divine Names*] Aquinas thinks of the beautiful as a way in which the good makes itself manifest.”¹⁶⁰ That would coincide with Plato’s doctrine of Beauty as the only high Idea to which sensuousness has access, and of it as the goal of the human ascent instead of the Good, or as a perspective of the latter. Thomas does not mention the good explicitly in this context but refers to the noble, which implies both a good and a beautiful aspect: “The noble, inasmuch as it implies spiritual beauty, is an object of desire, and for this reason Cicero says: ‘Thou perceivest the form and the features, so to speak, of nobleness; and were it to be seen with the eye, it would, as Plato declares, arouse a wondrous love of wisdom.’”¹⁶¹ Since the first quote explicitly refers to truth and this last quote at least mentions the concept in the form of perception, Eco’s argument that beauty manifests the good, to my mind, neglects the necessary aspect of truth, which is only indicated in the word ‘manifest.’ Czapiewski, on the other hand, interprets Thomas’ definition with a special emphasis on both elements: “Being beautiful is the being good of

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.1c.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum*, dist.31, q.2, a.1, ad 4. With regard to the teaching that beauty is not the explicit goal of human aspiration cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71; 77.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 32; Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24.

¹⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.142, a.2c. Cf. Cicero, *De officiis*, I, 5, 15.

being true.”¹⁶² Or: “The pulchrum is identical with the bonum insofar as the latter includes the verum.”¹⁶³ Although Czapiewski does not explicitly mention it, he uses a third element in the definition, namely, ‘being.’ The coincidence of the good and the true has to be a real one, or otherwise it could not be a relationship in which man can rejoice.¹⁶⁴

Natural desire leads to an encounter with beauty, the latter of which is only given if pleasure arises out of the apprehension of a reality. Man’s senses are indispensable in this sphere, because “our mind receives knowledge from the senses.”¹⁶⁵ Thomas follows his teacher in establishing a hierarchy of the senses. The initiator of this theory is Plato, who combined the visual sense with the perception of beauty, succeeded by Augustine, who contrasted sight with the other senses, through which the experience is not one of beauty but of pleasantness (*suavitas*).¹⁶⁶ Thomas expands the first sphere by integrating the sense of hearing:

“It belongs to the notion of the beautiful that the appetite comes to rest in its view (*aspectu*) or cognition. Those senses are, therefore, chiefly associated with the beautiful which are most closely related to cognition (*maxime cognoscitivi*), namely, sight and hearing when ministering to reason. Thus, we speak of beautiful visible things and beautiful sounds. However, in the sensible phenomena of the other senses we do not use the name ‘beauty’: we do not speak of beautiful tastes and smells.”¹⁶⁷

In general, that is, when not directly referring to beauty, Thomas depicts the situation even more universally:

“Any term may be employed in two senses: one in keeping with its original imposition, the other complying with common usage. This is apparent in the word ‘visio,’ the initial reference of which was to the act of the sense of sight. In view of the special dignity and certitude of the sense

¹⁶² Czapiewski, 22: “Schönsein ist das Gutsein des Wahrseins.”

¹⁶³ Czapiewski, 122.

¹⁶⁴ Phelan even tries to assign the three necessary elements of beauty, that is, integrity, proportion and clarity, to the good, the true and being. In his eyes, integrity refers to being, since to be perfect means, first and foremost, to be. Proportion is connected with the good owing to its attempt to attain an end. Clarity, finally, is related to truth, because it serves as a presupposition of knowledge. Cf. Phelan, 142-143.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.10, a.6.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d; Augustine, *De ordine*, I,II, c.11, n.33.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.27, a.1, ad 3.

of sight, this term is extended in common usage to the cognition of other senses (...), and it is even made to include intellectual cognition.”¹⁶⁸

Consequently, the term ‘visio’ denotes a real apprehension of a reality resulting in knowledge, because it refers to the formal cause of the reality. Eco calls this “a grasping of several aspects organized in accordance with the immanent concept of a substantial form.”¹⁶⁹

Plato’s theory signifies that man is able to ascend to the Idea of Beauty as a result of a recollection of an encounter with this Idea instigated by an encounter with concrete beauty. Thomas teaches something apparently similar and yet, in fact, completely different. In his eyes, a glimpse of true Beauty is present in man, namely, in the form, serving as a mirror of divine Beauty with its faculty for assimilating man to God and to support a cognition of God: “But the creature is especially led to the knowledge of God by its species and its graceful beauty (decor), which manifest the wisdom of the one who is generating and governing.”¹⁷⁰ Thomas is again on a purely Platonic path by suggesting that the experience of every beauty on earth can lead man to God: “They said that among those bodies those are preeminent and dispose the world which seemed to be more beautiful and worthy. And to these they attributed and threatened the divine cult. (...) Therefore, whatever you have, whether knowledge or beauty, you should refer all of it and use it to the glory of God.”¹⁷¹

Man cannot know what God is in himself. He is, however, accessible in respect of his creatorship. From the latter fact, two conclusions can be drawn: firstly, we know him to be the cause of all being through his goodness; secondly, we can be sure of his being the first principle of all perfection, hence, of every kind of beauty. The reason for the restriction is the intellect’s bondage to finite knowledge – while God is infinitely knowable.¹⁷² Moreover, our finite knowledge is only capable of realizing things the quiddity of which partakes of being – whereas God does not have being but is Being itself (ipse esse subsistens).¹⁷³ Since God is, consequently,

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.67, a.1c.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, 124.

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum*, dist.48, q.2, a.3c.

¹⁷¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In Symbolum Apostolorum. Opera omnia*, vol.5, a.1.

¹⁷² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.II, l.4, n.180; Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.3, q.17.

¹⁷³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super librum De causis. Opera omnia*, vol.4, lect.6. This idea is

so immeasurably more than that which our intellect can know, we attain the most profound knowledge about him by a removal of all our so-called knowledge. At the same time, it becomes clear that this is not enough. Thomas agrees with the Neoplatonic tradition that all this knowledge is actually not removed owing to a deficiency, but because God exceeds every attribute.¹⁷⁴ He is not obscure but too clear for us.¹⁷⁵ In this life, man, therefore, achieves the highest knowledge possible when admitting his inability in a Socratic way: “At the end of our knowledge we know God as unknown.”¹⁷⁶ This is how Thomas interprets the statement of the Areopagite that we are united with God as the wholly unknown.¹⁷⁷ In the former’s eyes, and in contrast to Dionysius, the assertion is not about mystical theology at all. And yet, one guarantee remains: We can be sure of his existence, for we are confronted with his act of creation, which is constantly bestowing being.

actually not as originally Thomistic as one would think, but presents a Platonic influence on the very basis of Thomas’ theology. For in Plotinus’ philosophy something similar can be found, although not with regard to being, but in respect of beauty. Accordingly, the spirit is called beauty itself, because it is beauty per se – though not a se owing to the spirit’s emanation from the One. The reason for its being beauty through itself is that it is subsisting beauty, in which the difference between beauty and the partaker of beauty does not exist. Cf. Plotinus, V 9.2.12; Kremer, 131.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.I, l.1, n.29; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 869A.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.I, l.3, n.82; Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 998A-B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Super De Trinitate. Opera omnia*, vol.4, pars 1, q.1, a.2, ad 1. For this reason, Thomas agrees with Dionysius and Albert that silence is the best means to honor the divine secrets. Cf. *Super De Trinitate*, pars 1, q.2, a.1, ad 6. Cf. also Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, VII 40; 46; 48; 60; 68; 70. According to Thomas, revelation does not change the situation, but it even intensifies the divine unknowability. Cf. William J. Hoye, “Die Vereinigung mit dem gänzlich Uerkannten nach Bonaventura, Nikolaus von Kues und Thomas von Aquin,” *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, 500. Unknowability does not merely mean incomprehensibility, as Hoye emphasizes, but no knowledge at all. Cf. William J. Hoye, “Zur Problematik des Begriffs ‘Gotteserfahrung’ bei Thomas von Aquin,” *Theologie und Glaube* 77 (1987): 421.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1001A.

b) Love

According to the Christian Thomas, who adopted the assertion from the, in this case, unplatonic Dionysius, “love is divine.”¹⁷⁸ In contrast to Plato, for whom love is imperfect and an example of unfulfillment, so that Eros strives for beauty rather than being beautiful, Thomas develops the unplatonic concept of divine love in such a way that he can call love itself at one point beautiful. For God’s love is beautiful and good, and through it he loves all things due to the over-abundance of his goodness.¹⁷⁹ The concept of over-abundance represents the key point. Only because God is fulfillment in himself can his love be described as beautiful. However, there is a major difference between God’s love and the corresponding human form. While divine love is the cause of every beauty and goodness, of concrete being in general, the love of the latter is a reaction to an encounter with something beautiful or good. The reaction is a necessary one, which man cannot avoid: “Every man loves the beautiful.”¹⁸⁰ The fact that the beautiful is loved by all human beings is an effect of divine love, for as there is a circle of divine love, earthly love is structured in the same pattern. Accordingly, love is the cause for the enjoyment of beauty as it is the effect of the encounter with a beautiful object.¹⁸¹ Although Thomas more often refers love to the good, he includes the beautiful implicitly by saying that whoever strives for his good, has it in a certain sense present to himself and united to him in the sense of similarity, or at least of a similarity of proportion,¹⁸² thus implying the notion of beauty. Thomas explains this in the following way: Longing for that which is adapted to the goal is caused by the love and desire for the goal, that is, the divine Good.¹⁸³ This means, on the one hand, that both the

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.X, 1.5, n.858. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708B.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, 1.10, n.437; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712B.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos* 25, n.5.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, 1.9, n.400-401. At this point, Thomas again agrees with Plato, without, of course, taking over the Greek’s doctrine that love is due to memory.

¹⁸² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, 1.9, n.401.

¹⁸³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, 1.9, n.402.

appetite and love are directed to a final good – depending on the respective level of being – and, secondly, that there is only one ultimate goal in relation to which all others are nothing more than sub-ordinated goals. The good is, consequently, the common object of all striving. With regard to love, the striving of the lover is directed to the beloved as to his good. The fact of being directed is alone enough to possess the good as praesens and as unified with it analogically to a certain similarity in the form of proportion.¹⁸⁴

In correspondence to the different types of beauty – “physical people love carnal beauty, spiritual ones love spiritual beauty”¹⁸⁵ – there are different types of love, which can be deduced from the different kinds of striving. The natural appetite is the lowest form of all aspiration, barring all cognition. Sensuous striving is higher in the hierarchy, since it is accompanied by cognition. Here, beauty is perceived: “The passion of love starts to become in a maximal way by means of the vision, and accordingly the sense is conserved. For love of this kind is especially aroused out of the beauty which sight perceives.”¹⁸⁶ But only the highest form, that is, willful striving, is connected both with cognition and the freedom of choice. The form of love of dilectio corresponds to willful striving. This does not mean that the highest form is fitting with the love for God. According to man’s nature and divine love, amor is more suitable, since it does not so much emphasize the element of choice as the fact that man is not completely independent as a creature. Therefore, man strives towards God primarily in a passive way in the sense that he is drawn to him.¹⁸⁷

Inspired by Aristotle’s remark that to love is to wish someone good,¹⁸⁸ Thomas mentions a twofold tendency with regard to love, namely, towards the good which a man wishes for someone and towards the one for whom he wishes some good. These two possible sub-categories of love are called amor amicitiae, where a good is loved for itself, and amor concupiscentiae, where a good is loved not simply and for itself, but for the sake of something else.¹⁸⁹ The latter is closely linked to ecstasy, in which one does not remain

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Dyroff, 180-181.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos* 25, n.5.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, I.9, lect.14, n.1.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.26, a.3c and ad 4.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1380b36.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.26, a.4c; *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.10, n.428. The form of love of amicitia is derived from

in oneself hoping for one's own good. It is, however, a misinterpretation by Dyroff to suggest that a love directed to God, which must always be ecstatic love, does not leave any self-love, but is concentrated exclusively on the divine objects.¹⁹⁰ Love of God causes man's happiness, and Thomas explicitly says that one cannot love one's own happiness unselfishly.¹⁹¹ It is, of course, right to point out that God, when perceived as beautiful, is not loved egoistically, for love of beauty is not egoistic but an appreciative admiration. This does not exclude self-love. An encounter with beauty impels one to move on: "Love and similarly zeal is caused in us out of beauty and goodness."¹⁹² One does not stop striving for the final vision of the highest Beauty bringing with it the most perfect form of happiness.

7. The Apprehension of God's Beautiful Essence

*"It is, however, due to the Good
and the Beautiful that [things]
may be made known."*¹⁹³

≈

As the definition of what is called beautiful shows, there are two elements involved in beauty. One is the element of truth appearing in the human perception of a reality, the other the element of the good, which results from perception in the form of pleasure. In detail, this means that beauty under the perspective of the good is related to the appetite, to a certain striving. Thomas simply subsumes this Dionysian principle, as can be seen in the following quote, which unites the beautiful and the good: "The Beautiful-and-Good is an object of desire and love."¹⁹⁴ At this point, the second

the Aristotelian concept of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which does not appear in Dionysius' writings.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Dyroff, 184.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, c.92; Pieper, *Über die Liebe*, 365.

¹⁹² Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.10, n.439. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712B.

¹⁹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.103, a.1, ad 2.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.9, n.400. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A.

element, that is, love as a force of the will, is of special interest. Thus, Aquinas agrees with Plato that desire and love are incentives for the apprehension of beauty. Moreover, love is also the result of the apprehension, as Thomas emphasizes in his presentation of the rational aspect of beauty:

“Beauty, as stated above, consists in a certain clarity and due proportion. Now each of these is found radically in reason, because both the light that makes beauty seen, and the establishing of due proportion among things belong to reason. Since contemplative life consists in an act of reason, there is beauty in it by its very nature and essence; wherefore it is written of the contemplation of wisdom: ‘I became a lover of her beauty.’”¹⁹⁵

Desire, however, ceases to exist: “It belongs to the notion of the beautiful that the appetite comes to rest in its view (aspectu) or cognition,”¹⁹⁶ precisely because the object of desire is then present in the mind. This indicates that a beautiful object is loved during its apprehension owing to a feeling of fulfillment, or else the striving force in man would not rest. Pöltner calls this “fulfilled presence,”¹⁹⁷ thereby emphasizing how Platonic Thomas basically is. Yet, he deviates from Plato in his view that there is a sudden coincidence of the two faculties in man, the cognitive and the appetitive faculty during the contemplation, so that it cannot be seen as a successive approaching to true Beauty, as in the Greek philosopher.

This is also the point where the decisive difference between the good and the beautiful becomes clear again. The former as a beloved object is aspired with the intention of taking it into possession so that the appetite comes to

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.2, ad 3. Thomas' quote is from *The Book of Wisdom*, 8:2. Cf. *De veritate*, q.11, a.22, ad 11, where Thomas quotes Gregory's definition of contemplation as loving God and one's neighbor. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.7, ad 1: “Although the contemplative life consists chiefly in an act of the intellect, it has its beginning in the appetite, since it is through charity that one is urged to the contemplation of God. And since the end corresponds to the beginning, it follows that both the target and the end of contemplative life have its being in the appetite, since one delights in seeing the object loved, and the very delight in the object seen arouses a yet greater love. Wherefore Gregory says that ‘when we see one whom we love, we are so aflame as to love him more.’ And this is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life, namely, that divine Truth be not only seen but also loved.”

¹⁹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.27, a.1, ad 3.

¹⁹⁷ Pöltner, *Schönheit. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung des Denkens bei Thomas von Aquin*, 187. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.3, ad 1, where Thomas states that “contemplation regards the simple act of gazing on truth.”

rest in it, whereas the latter keeps its autonomy in contemplation in order to conserve its integrity.¹⁹⁸ This does not mean that all cognition is excluded from the good, because the latter is not the object of the appetite, except as apprehended. The good can be loved only if it is known.¹⁹⁹ Yet, the apprehension of the good is not the goal, but the presupposition, while it is the goal in the case of the beautiful, since contemplation is essentially related to beauty because of its perfection.²⁰⁰ However, a contemplative state, free from the desire of possessing – Kovach points to the etymology of *ad-spectus* expressing a glance from a distance²⁰¹ – is only possible if the second element of Thomas’ definition of what is called beautiful is added. Love during contemplation is accompanied by a form of pleasure in earthly life – or leads to fulfilled happiness in the *visio beatifica* – or else striving could not be replaced with rest. Thomas defines the difference between the two kinds of happiness by referring to Saint Paul: “Now the contemplation of divine Truth is possible for us imperfectly, namely, ‘through a glass’ and ‘in a dark manner.’ Hence, it bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which begins now and will be continued in the life to come.”²⁰² Contemplation in this life is not senseless but serves, as everything else does, as a preparation. In this sense, the pleasure felt in the encounter with a concrete beauty should be accidental instead of intentional, as is the case with the vision of divine Beauty. Man alone has the capacity for it: In contrast to a lion, “man enjoys these sensations [experiences of pleasure in the encounter

¹⁹⁸ As mentioned above, the appetite comes to rest in both concepts. In the case of the good, this happens as a result of the possession of the good; in the case of the beautiful, desire ceases owing to the possession of the cognitive image. Dyroff, therefore, calls beauty “the good in the form of an image” or, in Kant’s words, “symbol of the good.” Cf. Dyroff, 199.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.27, a.2c.

²⁰⁰ The aspect of perfection indicates that contemplation is no longer concerned with discursive thinking, which is just the lower form of the intellectual faculties, as Czapiewski states. Cf. Czapiewski, 64; Josef Pieper, *Glück und Kontemplation. Werke VI: Kulturphilosophische Schriften*, ed. Berthold Wald (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998) 195: “Contemplation is the perfect form of cognition par excellence. For contemplation is the knowledge of that which is present (...). Thinking, on the other hand, is the lower, impure form, so to speak, of knowledge. Thinking is knowledge of the absent or even merely the endeavor of such knowledge.”

²⁰¹ Cf. Kovach, 255.

²⁰² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.4c. Cf. *Super I ad Corinthios* c.13, l.12.

with a stag] not just because they promise prey, but also because they are pleasing to the senses.”²⁰³ He alone takes delight in the beauty of sense objects for their own sake.²⁰⁴ This status of sensuousness can be explained by its connection with the intellect, for the senses are for the sake of intelligence and represent a certain imperfect participation in it.²⁰⁵ Animals, in contrast, lack this connection. In them, sensuousness is solely directed to the world's aspect of usefulness, which in the case of man can even rob him of a certain amount of beauty.

With regard to earthly contemplation, the will brings it about that distanced cognition turns into appreciative apprehension of beauty paving the way for a new circle of loving striving: “The contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the beginning of spiritual love.”²⁰⁶ This is so since there is a natural yearning in man for complete happiness, which is unattainable in this life – although it is common that man appreciates that there is some kind of happiness to be had in this life on account of a certain likeness to true happiness,²⁰⁷ the specific notion of which is, however, frequently unknown.²⁰⁸ In order to specify it, Thomas shows that happiness is not generated by external goods, nor by the goods of the body, since external goods are ordained to the body itself, while the good of the soul is preferred to all bodily goods.²⁰⁹ This leaves the good of the soul as the source of definitive happiness. At a closer look, it becomes obvious that this source cannot be the soul itself or something belonging to the soul, but must be something outside of it.²¹⁰ Furthermore, it is impossible for any created good to constitute man's happiness, because it could never completely fulfill his appetite. This can only be attained by the universal Good, the natural object of the

²⁰³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.141, a.4, ad 3.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.91, a.3, ad 3.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.77, a.7c.

²⁰⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.27, a.2c.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.5, a.3, ad 3; Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, I.X, lect.12.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.5, a.8c.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.2, a.5, ad 1.

²¹⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.2, a.7c. Hermann Kleber calls this a triviality, since it is self-evident that “the human striving for happiness is not after anything that man already possesses anyway in the form of a constitutive part of his existence.” Cf. Hermann Kleber, *Glück als Lebensziel. Untersuchungen zur Philosophie des Glücks bei Thomas von Aquin* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1988) 194.

human will. Thomas concludes that it has to be God alone who can constitute human happiness as the universal Good, since every creature possesses goodness only by participation.²¹¹

In consequence of the conclusion that God is in some way the goal of man's natural striving, which yet cannot be attained in this life, it is obvious that Thomas repudiates a mystical vision of God in the sense of a direct contact of the human mind with him and his beauty. This might also be the reason for his not having written a commentary on the Dionysian *The Mystical Theology*. The question is, therefore, how he deals with the passage in *The Divine Names* where the Areopagite cites Plato's enthusiastic description of the encounter with Beauty itself after the ascent in order to illustrate the vision of the beauty of the infinite God. Thomas' treatment tries to establish a contrastive mood by drawing back to the defective world with its defective beauty: "In creatures there is a twofold defect of beauty. One is that there are some who have variable beauty, as it appears from corruptible things. (...) But the second defect of beauty is that all creatures have in some way a particular beauty as well as a particular nature." Variability expresses an unescapable bondage to time: Man and his beauty are exposed to change and decay. Particularity has a similar connotation. A general infinite form is connected to matter, so that a concrete

²¹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.2, a.8c. Kleber criticizes here that both happiness (*bonum perfectum*) and God (*bonum universale*) are identified with the goal of the natural striving of the human will, so that happiness is equated with God. In his eyes, the problem arises with this last identification, because traditionally the natural striving of the human will can indeed have the *bonum universale* as its goal, but is not directed to God himself. In Thomas, there is, thus, an identification of an intentional object with a non-intentional one, which is not possible, for *natural* knowledge cannot know anything about the reference of the goal of the *natural* striving of the human will ("Das natürliche Wissen ist nämlich im Hinblick auf das materiale Apriori menschlichen Handelns mit referentieller Blindheit geschlagen."). According to Kleber, Thomas does not seem to take this into consideration. Cf. Kleber, 195-196. What Kleber himself, however, fails to consider is that Thomas makes an explicit differentiation in his commentary on the *Sentences*. There, he distinguishes between *beatitudo increata*, which is God himself, and *beatitudo creata*, which is man's happiness through union with God. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum*, dist.49, q.1, a.2, sol.1. Cf. also *Summa theologiae*, III, q.9, a.2, ad 2, where the two kinds of happiness are referred to Christ: As God, he has *beatitudo increata*, as man *beatitudo creata*. Moreover, this theory is supported by the very passage criticized by Kleber, for Thomas does not say that God *is* human happiness, but that it *consists* in him: "in solo igitur Deo beatitudo hominis consistit."

and finite reality is generated, which, at some time, will cease to exist. He now contrasts these defects with God's perfection. The first defect is excluded from him because he is always beautiful insofar as he remains the same in the same way, so that any alteration is excluded: "In him there is neither a generation nor a corruption of beauty, nor a growth or diminishing of himself." The second defect is excluded from God insofar as he is neither beautiful in one part and ugly in another, nor generally taking part in the beauty appearing in time.²¹² These examples show that, although Aquinas takes over Dionysius' description of God, he does not include it in his depiction of a mystical vision. The reason for this ellipsis lies in the fundamental inability of man to attain knowledge of God, a teaching shared by Dionysius:

"The mode of knowledge follows the mode of the nature of the knower. But our soul, as long as we live in this life, has its being in corporeal matter; hence, it naturally knows only what has a form in matter, or what can be known by such a form. Now it is evident that the divine essence cannot be known through the nature of material things. For it was shown above that the knowledge of God by means of any created similitude is not the vision of his essence. Hence it is impossible for the soul of man in this life to see the essence of God."²¹³

God cannot be experienced. In general, an experience presupposes a reality having a quiddity that can be apprehended apart from its actualization. God, however, has neither a nature nor existence. He is his being.²¹⁴ Consequently, he alone is not a reality that can be perceived but the actuality of

²¹² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.5, n.345. With regard to God's immutability cf. Michael J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love. A Study of the Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on Divine Immutability in View of Certain Contemporary Criticism of this Doctrine* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1986). Dodds shows here that Thomas takes over the teaching from the Areopagite that immutability does not mean that God is static, since the motion of love flows out of him, but that he transcends motion and rest. Cf. Dodds 168-170.

²¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12, a.11c. Cf. *De veritate*, q.10, a.11c; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 588A. Whenever his position opposes Scripture, as in *Genesis* 32:31, Thomas suggests that those who claim to have seen God had an imaginary vision (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c.47) or merely perceived theophanies. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum*, dist.49, q.2, a.7, ad 1.

²¹⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.21, a.4, ad 7.

all realities.²¹⁵ With regard to beauty, Thomas can, therefore, say that God both has all beauty and is without beauty.²¹⁶

Another example in Dionysius' texts that is interpreted as a mystical experience can be found in his doctrine on the three motions of the soul.²¹⁷ Thomas does not offer anything original in his commentary on the Dionysian threefold motion of the angels. Insofar as the three motions of the soul are concerned, he keeps close to the original, but emphasizes more strongly the relationship between a beautiful motion, order and regularity. Moreover, he considers uniformity important, attaching it to the circular motion. In contrast, the notion of straight motion is characterized by deformity. The spiral motion, as composited out of straight and circular motion, as his teacher indicated before him, somehow unites both qualities.²¹⁸ Accordingly, the soul has the natural capacity to move in a straight way when the intellect starts in the sphere of diversity, abstracting to a more perfect state of simplicity and unity. This motion, usually, does not end with a vision of God, so that it is puzzling that Ferdinand Joret claims exactly this.²¹⁹ Thomas, however, clearly denies that abstraction can reach God. The only thing that is reachable by means of abstraction is a *res*, not even an *ens*²²⁰ – how should God, who is neither the one nor the other but who is *esse ipsum*, be reached in this way? Thomas, therefore, merely admits that straight motion can pertain to circular motion.²²¹ With regard to spiral motion, he states that the natural cognition of the soul is signified by deformity insofar as it is born to perceive exclusively by way of diversity. Uniformity can be found in this motion when divine illumination is taken into account. For this works uniformly, although the soul – uniform in itself – does not

²¹⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q.7, a.2, ad 9.

²¹⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.V, l.2, n.661; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 824B.

²¹⁷ Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705A-B.

²¹⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.7, n.375-378; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 105.

²¹⁹ Cf. Ferdinand D. Joret, *Die mystische Beschauung nach dem heiligen Thomas von Aquin* (Dülmen: Verlag Laumann, 1931) 112. The way Joret tries to prove the existence of a Thomistic mystical theology is in all other cases very misleading, since he uses quotes on the mystical theology of other classical theologians as if Thomas himself wrote them.

²²⁰ Cf. Hoye, "Zur Problematik des Begriffs 'Gotteserfahrung' bei Thomas von Aquin," 409.

²²¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.7, n.378.

receive it uniformly, but differently according to its distinctive mode.²²² After having left all earthly things and symbols behind, the soul is purified from diversity and prepared for the circular motion. There, the intellect can direct its whole attention to God. The circling is in accordance with the distinctive intellectual powers. The first principles are perceived by the simple intellect without discourse. The soul has that which it perceives in its nature, so that it is made uniform through the convolution. Finally, as Thomas states in accordance with the original, it is led to the Beautiful-and-Good, that is, God²²³ – an assertion of Thomas' with no indication of a meaning referring to a mystical union. He simply quotes the Areopagite in the sense of mentioning what the original says but not in the sense of interpreting or supporting it in any way.

Yet, Thomas adds that divine revelations are perceived the more clearly in dreams and alienations of the bodily senses, such as in prophecy, which does transcend natural reason, thus requiring supernatural illumination, but which, nonetheless, does not grasp the divine essence.²²⁴ The only delicate point is the case of rapture, where Thomas is confronted with the authority of Augustine, who concedes a vision of the divine essence by Moses and Paul.²²⁵ Accordingly, Aquinas has to say that when no use either of the bodily senses or even of the imagination is made, as happens in rapture, contemplation in the present life can attain to (pertingere) the vision of the divine essence.²²⁶ The difference between this vision, which solely concerns

²²² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, 1.7, n.377.

²²³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, 1.7, n.375-376.

²²⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.171, a.2c. Thomas is very close to Plato's counting of prophecy among the four types of divine madness and his description of it as an enthusiastic ecstasy sent by God. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a-d.

²²⁵ At this point it becomes clear what 'authority' meant in the Middle Ages. It was out of the question to be one as a living person. Only the works of dead authors were considered to have such a status. Therefore, it was not decisive that Albert, the living contemporary of Thomas, denied a vision of the divine essence by Moses, instead referring to the concept of theophanies. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1.

²²⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.5c. How this is to be understood is not always explained in the same way by Thomas, as Hoye emphasizes. Cf. Hoye, "Zur Problematik des Begriffs 'Gotteserfahrung' bei Thomas von Aquin," 434-436. Joseph Maréchal, for example, suggests a development in the Thomistic thinking rather than a

Moses and Paul, is that the experienced happiness is not the same as in the beatific vision. Paul is interpreted simply as a witness of happiness,²²⁷ implying that there is no habit involved (as in the beatific vision).²²⁸ Moreover, there is still a distance between the one who experiences rapture – already indicated by the word itself: a violent tearing, so that man is outside of himself – and God, and, hence, there is no complete unity.²²⁹ In order to avoid a contradiction to the usual Thomistic theology on this topic, namely, that a vision of the divine essence is only possible after death, Aquinas concludes that Moses and Paul were actually dead. Death, however, does not mean a ceasing of bodily existence, but a reception of the light of glory.²³⁰ In general, a mystical vision leads, according to him, solely to a contemplation of theophanies, to a divine apprehension through the mirror of creatures. Balthasar says in this context: “The kingdom of beauty (the Thomistic non-subsisting being) is as a whole, as being, translucent towards a divine subsisting Being, which is graspable solely as a mystery and which is, as the hidden origin, gleaming glory.”²³¹ This hardly leaves any possibility of being misunderstood, and, yet, one has to ask what Magnus Beck means by persisting in calling it an experience of God.²³²

When Czapiewski indicates in the context of the coincidence of *verum* and *bonum* in the encounter with beauty that this theory is about a rise in the perfection of being,²³³ it becomes obvious how close the genuinely Thomistic theory on beauty is to Platonism. Being becomes more and more

self-contradiction. Cf. Joseph Maréchal, *Études sur la psychologie des mystiques*, vol.2 (Bruges: Beyaert, 1924) 213.

²²⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.13, a.5, ad 6.

²²⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.174, a.5, ad 1.

²²⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.2, ad 3.

²³⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.10, a.11c. Hoyer, “Zur Problematik des Begriffs ‘Gotteserfahrung’ bei Thomas von Aquin,” 437-441, where this is described in detail: Thomas sees rapture as an evisceration of man, since it is a spiritualization of him in the sense of a divine vision without a bodily resurrection.

²³¹ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 337.

²³² Cf. Magnus Beck, *Wege der Mystik bei Thomas von Aquin* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1990) 156; David Berger, *Thomismus. Große Leitmotive der Thomistischen Synthese und ihre Aktualität für die Gegenwart* (Köln: Editiones Thomisticae, 2001) 361, where Berger claims that “the beatifying contemplation of heavenly glory is still loseable, dark and germinal, but in its essence fully disposed in the supernatural life of a Christian.”

²³³ Cf. Czapiewski, 122.

perfect as the intellect and the will draw nearer to one another. At the same time, there is an approach of the bonum to the verum until, at the final point, that is, at the coincidence of the greatest bonum with the greatest verum, there is the highest perfection possible in being. This highest perfection of beautiful being cannot be attained on earth, but takes place in the beatific vision, the prime example of an encounter with beauty, for the very name already expresses that a vision, that is, an experience of truth, coincides with the goal of the will. As for Plato, truth is for Thomas ideal beauty,²³⁴ so that the highest contemplation refers to precisely this beauty.²³⁵ There, Truth itself, in the form of God, is apprehended and, at the same time, the Good itself is seen in this very manifestation: “The speculative intellect has good within it, namely, the contemplation of truth.”²³⁶ Since the true and the good refer to the two basic actus secundi in man, the beatific vision represents his highest self-actualization,²³⁷ mirroring back the divine perfection of being, for “in the contemplative life man has something in common with things above him.”²³⁸

This vision causes not only a form of pleasure, as in the experience of concrete beauty, but happiness. To Thomas' mind, happiness can only be attained in the following way:

²³⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Psalmos* 44, n.2; *Catena aurea in Mattheum. Opera omnia*, vol.5, c.13, lect.10; Plato, *Symposium*, 212a.

²³⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.180, a.2, ad 3.

²³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.3, a.5, ad 2. Aertsen calls the process not a coincidence but considers the beautiful an extension of the true to the good influenced by the following Thomistic quote: “We see two grades in cognition: firstly, insofar as intellectual cognition is directed to a verum; secondly, insofar as it judges the verum to be fitting and good.” Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum*, dist.15, q.4, a.1, ad 3. According to Aertsen, the theoretical intellect, which is directed to truth, becomes practical by this extension. Cf. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals. The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, 358-359. This would correspond to Albert's assertion that the estimation of a true thing as good is formed by the divine procession of the beautiful. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71. Although Thomas' commentary on the *Sentences* is still very much influenced by Albert, Aertsen goes too far in my opinion. It appears that he is well acquainted with Albert's text and tries to interpret the latter's pupil in his light. Yet, Thomas himself does not connect the two grades in cognition to the beautiful, so that one should not allege that he does it.

²³⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.3, a.2c.

²³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.3, a.5c.

“Happiness consists in an operation of the speculative rather than of the practical intellect (...), because if man’s happiness is an operation, it needs to be man’s highest operation. Now man’s highest operation is that of his highest power in respect of its highest object: and his highest power is the intellect, whose highest object is the divine Good, which is the object not of the practical but of the speculative intellect. Consequently, happiness consists principally in such an operation, namely, in the contemplation of divine things.”²³⁹

This quote shows that only the intellect has the adequate capacity to bring about the highest form of happiness depending on an experience of reality. The intellect alone is open to Being itself as being. Furthermore, happiness is only possible under the condition that the state through which it should be attained is a created operation corresponding to human nature.²⁴⁰ It cannot be the happiness of an angel attained by means of the capabilities of an angel, but it does have to be an intellectual contemplation. This is supported by Thomas’ claim that there has to be an assimilation between the one perceiving and the perceived object, in this case God.²⁴¹ Assimilation is a process in which man does not attempt to feel himself into the perception of the object, but tries to feel the perceived object into himself,²⁴² as Dyroff argues. Since God is a spiritual being, the apprehension of him has to take place in a spiritual way. This indicates – in contrast to early Neoplatonic tradition – that in the process of assimilation, the intellect in some way or other becomes God without abandoning its own nature. Consequently, the beatific vision is the richest experience possible, fulfilling all desires that have ever been awakened, owing to the fact that God includes all reality.²⁴³

²³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.3, a.5c. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Ethica*, 1.I, lect.10. Albert Ilien points out that this operation cannot be one of the will, because in the beatific vision the aspect of desire ceases, so that the only remaining element is delectation. I would add that love remains as well, but Ilien considers love to be part of an expanded intellect in the beatific vision. In his eyes, love is a dimension of the will exclusively in earthly life. Cf. Albert Ilien, *Wesen und Funktion der Liebe im Denken des Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 192-193. There is, however, no indication for the latter assumption in Thomas’ teaching.

²⁴⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.3, a.2c and a.7c.

²⁴¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1; Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165C-D; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De caelestis hierarchia*, c.4.

²⁴² Cf. Dyroff, 195.

²⁴³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.26, a.2c; I-II, q.2, a.8c. Hoye points out

Even though it is nothing other than God's essence that is apprehended, every creature sees something different, depending on its respective desires and its individual experience in life. The possibility of such a seemingly impossible state is due to the concept of participation, according to which concrete reality exists both in the transcendental God and in itself.²⁴⁴ This teaching does, of course, exclude a Plotinic disdain of the worldly beauty as soon as true Beauty is experienced.

The question is now what exactly is seen during the beatific vision, for in agreement with Dionysius, Thomas says that man is incapable of comprehending God owing to the former's created intellect. A created intellect is restricted to finite knowledge, but God, whose being is infinite, is only infinitely knowable.²⁴⁵ To change a human intellect in such a way that would make it able to know infinitely would destroy man's nature, which is, however, to be perfected by glory.²⁴⁶ Yet, Aquinas goes so far as to claim that God's essence is seen, and nothing else but his essence.²⁴⁷ His name for this vision refers to this apprehension of the divine essence (*visio divinae essentiae*), which is to be considered a contemplation bringing ultimate and perfect beatitude:

“Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing other than the vision of the divine essence. (...) Man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek. (...) The perfection of any

that the known object, that is, God, does not lose anything of its being when it is known, because knowledge is a one-way relationship, in which the knower is dependent on its object by assimilating its form to his intellect. The object itself remains independent of and unaffected by the act of knowledge. Hence, God does not change in the process of our apprehension of him. Cf. William J. Hoye, *Actualitas Omnium Actuum. Man's Beatific Vision of God as Apprehended by Thomas Aquinas* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1975) 258.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Joseph de Finance, *Etre et agir dans la philosophie de Saint Thomas* (Paris: Univ. Pontificale Grégorienne, 1956) 172-173.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12, a.7c.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum*, dist.49, q.2, a.3, ad 8.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum*, dist.1, q.1, a.1c; Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.3, q.13, c.4. Hoye shows in a very detailed way that it was a revolutionary thought in theology that not theophanies but the divine essence is seen. Cf. Hoye, *Actualitas Omnium Actuum*, 146-147. Dionysius, for example, does not suggest it: He maintains the concept of the vision of theophanies. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 592B-C.

power is determined by the nature of its object. Now the object of the intellect is ‘what a thing is,’ that is, the essence of a thing.”²⁴⁸

This vision of the essence is described as immediate and simultaneous. This means that there is neither a mediation by theophanies presupposing “the light of glory strengthening the intellect to see God,”²⁴⁹ nor is there a succession in the contemplation. Everything concretely seen in God’s essence is viewed in one eternal moment.²⁵⁰ On the one hand, this corresponds to the way in which concrete beauty is perceived as the sudden coincidence of a bonum with a verum; on the other hand, it signifies a difference in comparison with the contemplation of beauty in man’s earthly life, which brings pleasure, but not fulfillment as a result of its fragmentary character and its transience.

Even though this type of divine experience is suitable to man, he needs God’s support to view the divine essence: “But when any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence, it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height.”²⁵¹ Not that God has to be made intelligible – he already is perfectly knowable – but the human intellect must be elevated to a state of consciousness without the restriction to abstraction so that God can become present in it, effecting a pure unification which no longer regards him in terms of an object of perception. The lack of abstraction on the way to Beauty itself is exactly what Plato wanted to express regarding the same topic. There is a need for a change of the mode in which man perceives, if mere sensuous reality is not to become an element in which it is easy to become entrenched. In order to be able to grasp reality itself, man must be made capable of experiencing unity embracing all diversity. The basis for the experience is naturally given to man in his longing for happiness,

²⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.3, a.8c. Cf. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 430b26-30.

²⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12, a.2c.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12, a.10c; *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c.60. It is nevertheless possible to describe the experience in temporal terms, as Rahner does it: “Evidently, the eternal life of the glorified spirit in the immediate companionship with the eternal God cannot be thought – even after the total fulfillment – in other terms than as an eternal movement of the finite spirit into the life of this God.” Karl Rahner, *Zur Theologie des Todes* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958) 27-28.

²⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12, a.5c. Cf. *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c.53.

but he is the one who has to develop it. The degree of perfection of the contemplation depends on the individual, with the consequence that one person sees God's essence more perfectly than another. The reason for this is not that one has a more perfect similitude to God than another, but that one has a greater power or faculty for seeing God than another. The faculty, again, does not belong to the created intellect naturally, but is freely given to it by the light of glory provided that one be apt and prepared, so that, all in all, the fullness of the participation of the light of glory is dependent on the amount of love one has, since love determines the degree of longing which can be satisfied by the light of glory.²⁵² As a result of this and in contrast to Albert – but in accordance with Dionysius – not cognition but love represents the connection between earthly life and life after death for Thomas.²⁵³ Implied in this assertion is that love is actually the medium of immortality, which is not too far away from Plato's doctrine that love strives for it and brings it about. Yet, this does not mean that man can gain a right for glory by means of his love. The basic capability is already given with man's nature owing to the fact that he is an image of God. Nature is then brought to maturity by love and fulfilled by glory.²⁵⁴ The love of eternal life, that is, charity, is according to Aquinas a friendship of man with God which is founded upon the fellowship of everlasting happiness.²⁵⁵ Here, the

²⁵² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12, a.6c.

²⁵³ "Love is the term of cognition. And, thus, where cognition ceases, namely, in the thing itself which is perceived through some other thing, love can begin at once." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.27, a.4, ad 1. Hoye stresses that this means that "thinking ceases to be in the arrival at absolute unity." (cf. Hoye, "Zur Problematik des Begriffs 'Gotteserfahrung' bei Thomas von Aquin," 417) If Hoye means discursive thinking with his general expression 'thinking,' the Christian doctrine can be seen to be in accordance with Plato, for whom the Idea of Beauty is apprehended by the νοῦς. The vision of absolute Beauty is then still an operation of the intellect – in contrast to the Neoplatonic doctrine of Dionysius – but no longer of human reason.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.2, a.2, ad 1: "Grace presupposes nature." Cf. also *Summa theologiae*, I, q.1, a.8, ad 2: "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it." This is, of course a specifically Christian thought, which sets itself apart from a Neoplatonic doctrine of self-dissolution, as it is present in Plotinus.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.24, a.2c. Interestingly, charity is here not a direct translation of the Greek ἀγάπη, which is translated in the Latin translation of *The Divine Names* as 'dilectio.' For Thomas, in contrast to Augustine, dilectio and caritas are not synonyms, since the former expresses an indication of choice in love, while the latter is love directed to God. The tension between the two terms 'ἔρωσ' and 'ἀγάπη'

phenomenon of amor amicitiae appears again, where a good, in this case God, is loved for itself, as is possible in the case of beauty. This fellowship is again not a matter of natural, but of gratuitous gifts. In the conferring of grace and glory, free choice is implied.²⁵⁶ Hence, he who has more of the light of glory in himself will see and love God the more perfectly. Furthermore, this amor amicitiae in charity does not exclude self-love.²⁵⁷ Although Thomas states that “God will be to each one the entire reason of his love, for God is man’s entire good,” man should love himself more than all else after God in the order of love.²⁵⁸ This is because “the love with which a man loves himself is the form and root of friendship.”²⁵⁹

In this experience of Beauty itself, the resurrection of the body is included – although it refers to a body that is no longer exposed to alteration, which explains why morality, for example, no longer exists.²⁶⁰ This is necessary owing to the teaching that happiness in the afterlife is orientated in accordance with life on earth. Since the body is an indispensable condition for earthly happiness, it must, consequently, take part in eternity, although the intellect does not depend on it as on earth. Therefore, Thomas emphasizes that the body is not a presupposition of happiness in the beatific vision

which Dionysius tried to solve thereby no longer exists in the Thomistic theology. Cf. Jan A. Aertsen, “‘Eros’ und ‘Agape.’ Dionysius Areopagita und Thomas von Aquin über die Doppelgestalt der Liebe,” *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, 382-383.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.23, a.4, ad 1. This is a clear distancing from Dionysius’ analogy of the seal, where God gives every creature the same amount of goodness. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 644B. Thomas takes this over only insofar as the communication of divine Goodness in general is considered. There, God communicates his goodness without election. But with regard to the communication of a particular good, such as grace or glory, free choice takes place.

²⁵⁷ At this point, Anders Nygren’s accusation that Thomas’ understanding of love is always in terms of selfish desire is again relevant. As a defense, it can be said that amor is understood by Thomas as a passive passio drawing man towards the beloved, in this case God. Dilectio, on the other hand, as a love of choice, can contain a greater element of selfishness. Amicitia, however, bears its sense in itself. This form of love, in particular, is regarded as the truest one. Cf. Aertsen, “‘Eros’ und ‘Agape.’ Dionysius Areopagita und Thomas von Aquin über die Doppelgestalt der Liebe,” 388-389.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.26, a.13, ad 3.

²⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.25, a.4c.

²⁶⁰ As a result, man is indeed perfected in the beatific vision, but not in the sense that he establishes more virtues – in contrast to Plato’s doctrine that the apprehension of the Idea of Beauty achieves exactly this. Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 212a.

in the sense of not being the essence of it, but contributes to the perfection²⁶¹ and is, at the same time, perfected. Accordingly, it can be said that the supernatural beauty of the state of glory, which brings about an assimilation of man with divine Beauty, causes the beauty of the glorified body²⁶² and makes it not less entire, but more perfected,²⁶³ so that, consequently, there is a fulfilled state of beauty in the beatific vision without any defect.

8. Summary

For Thomas Aquinas, God is not so much beautiful as Beauty itself, since his being is identical with his quiddity. He created the world and all beauty out of his free will owing to his infinite goodness, which he wanted to communicate. Earthly beauty can, therefore, be seen as analogous to original and absolute Beauty. Being grounded in every created form, it is a principle of existence including three elements: All beautiful things are characterized by integrity or perfection, bear a certain adequateness in respect of reality, thus being duly proportioned, and must be perceivable by the senses or the intellect as a result of their inborn clarity. The latter factor already points to the relationship between the beautiful and the good. They are said to be the same in their subject, but different in their notion. While desire comes to rest in the good, in the case of the beautiful it comes to rest *in its cognition*. In accordance with this, Thomas calls those things beautiful which please when they are seen. In this description, the two basic faculties in man are addressed, namely, the will directed to a bonum and the intellect directed to a verum. The two faculties coincide in the beautiful, the sensuous encounter with or the intellectual cognition of which marks the possession of a bonum as a verum. During one's earthly life, it is only possible to gain knowledge of beautiful realities, that is, of realities which have a quiddity. God, on the other hand, is solely infinitely knowable. Hence, Aquinas is hesitant in respect of the existence of mystical visions. All contemplation of created

²⁶² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum*, dist.49, q.5, a.4, qc.3c: "Sed sicut ex gaudio essentialis praemii, quod est aurea, redundat quidam decor in corpore, qui est gloria corporis; ita ex gaudio aureolae resultat aliquis decor in corpore."

²⁶³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q.54, a.4, ad 2; I, q.57, a.4, ad 1, where it is said that "the clarity of the risen body corresponds to the quality of the mind with regard to its degree of grace and glory." Again, Thomas emphasizes that the state of perfection in eternal life depends on God's grace and is not anything to which one has a right.

beauty and of other divine revelations serves as a preparation for the life to come. Then, in the beatific vision, the prime example of an encounter with beauty takes place. Truth itself is apprehended and loved in the vision of God's essence. This means that not only does desire come to rest because the ultimate Good is attained, but it comes to rest because the truth of the ultimate Good is perceived in the form of Beauty itself. Consequently, human nature is fulfilled and every creature receives individual happiness in accordance with the desire and love realized during its earthly life.

Chapter VII

The Doctrine on Beauty According to Nicholas of Cusa – The Iudex Pulchritudinis

1. The Notion of Beauty

“For the beautiful is called ‘finely formed’ from ‘form’ and ‘specious’ from ‘species’ and ‘decorous’ from (...) ‘it is well-formed.’ For that which is well formed is comely and beautiful.”¹

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In the sermon devoted to the topic of beauty, *Tota pulchra es, amica mea*, Cusanus orientates himself by the four distinctive characteristics of the nature of the beautiful established by Dionysius. However, he does not quote the Neoplatonist directly but sees him through Albert’s glasses. Thus, his statement that, first of all, a beautiful thing excels in the splendor of its form is followed by Albert’s definition of beauty, namely, that the splendor is concerned with this form – be it either substantial or accidental – in such a way that it is disseminated over the proportional or limited parts of matter.² By doing so, he integrates the factor of harmony neglected by Dionysius in this enumeration and combines it with splendor, as Albert and the tradition have done before him. In *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, he even identifies the two elements – provided that the concept of order is regarded as a subcategory of harmony: “Order is wisdom’s resplendence. Without it wisdom would be neither beautiful nor clear.”³ Apart from this mentioning

¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII. Opera omnia*, vol.19,3, ed. Walter Andreas Euler and Harald Schwaetzer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002) nr.2.

² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.6; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXXI, nr.94.

of splendor in its identification with harmony, the concept occurs only once more in the context of beauty. For Nicholas says that the soul has its natural beauty, because it is nothing other than the splendor of the divine Light.⁴ In another case, he uses the term ‘clarity,’ which Albert also distinguishes from splendor.⁵ Accordingly, there is clarity in all beautiful realities insofar as beauty accompanies the essence of the reality.

Something similar is true for proportion or consonance, which can also be found in every beautiful object. But in contrast to clarity, this is true for consonance only insofar as the subject of beauty is taken into account.⁶ This means that Cusanus considers consonance an inner characteristic of a beautiful reality in contrast to the outer relationships of objects to one another. He owes the possibility of a reinterpretation of the traditional sense of the notion of harmony to Aristotle’s metaphysical concept of form.⁷ At another point he distinguishes between the material and the formal aspects of beauty, the former of which is expressed by proportion, the latter by resplendence.⁸ In his analysis of the material aspect of beauty, Cusanus goes beyond just splendor and clarity; though he does not necessarily consider order and proportion to be elements of beauty, he sometimes lists them next to one another.⁹ When he does define harmony, he usually emphasizes, like Boethius, the coincidence of unity and diversity, so that whenever beauty is characterized by a harmonious nature, its “oneness of being consists of plurality.”¹⁰ More precisely, the unity must be mirrored in plurality in the form of proportion or harmony.¹¹ In this context, Nicholas refers to Dionysius, for whom the nature of beauty consists in the consonance of diverse

⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CXLVIII. Opera omnia*, vol.18,2, ed. Heinrich Pauli (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001) nr.8.

⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72 and 76.

⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.8.

⁷ Cf. Santinello, “Mittelalterliche Quellen der ästhetischen Weltanschauung des Nikolaus von Kues,” 681.

⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.24.

⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLXIII. Opera omnia*, vol.18,3, ed. Silvia Donati, Isabelle Mandrella and Harald Schwaetzer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2003) nr.4.

¹⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990) I, c.20, nr.62. Cf. *On Surmises*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000) II, c.2, nr.83: “unitas et alteritas constrictio”; Boethius, *De Trinitate. Patrologia Latina*, vol.64, c.VI.

¹¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.3.

things, which implies both the notion of harmony and unity in diversity.¹² This presupposes a certain perspective which the viewer of beauty has to adopt if it is not to remain invisible:

“When a poisonous animal is viewed not as a whole but in terms of its separate parts, it seems to possess no beauty or goodness. But when the parts are related to the whole of which they are members, they are found to have their beauty and their goodness. For the whole, which is wholly beautiful, is composed of a beautiful harmony of the parts.”¹³

Yet, the task of accounting for beauty does not inhere in the viewer alone. He is supported by the immense power in the nature of unity, enabling it to stand out. Accordingly, Nicholas calls beautiful an object’s partaking of oneness in which the “power of the oneness shines forth more unitedly and more concordantly in the otherness.”¹⁴

At this point, the importance of the concept of oneness for the Neoplatonists becomes clear. Cusanus is likewise of the opinion that “the beauty which depends on one forming principle only is a more perfect beauty than that which is brought about by a plurality of forming principles.”¹⁵ The reason for this can be found in the nobleness of the respective beauty, which seems to be the decisive factor: The fewer the principles of perfection, the nobler a reality, and, thus, the more beautiful it is. Oneness is distinguished by its perfection, which Cusanus displays by means of the example of a circle, the most perfect form for Plato. Circular forms receive their beauty from their uniformity, equality and simplicity, pointing at God as the form of forms, which shines forth more clearly in them than in any other figure. Viewing them, the mind is favorably disposed towards the exemplar of a circular form, that is, towards its infinite form and beauty.¹⁶ For creation, on the other hand, pure unity is not appropriate. In order to bring it about that the one form of forms, in which all diversity is identity – a point that shows the close relationship with harmonious beauty – is visible in creation

¹² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.4; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C.

¹³ Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988) nr.17.

¹⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Surmises*, II, c.6, nr.105.

¹⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.9.

¹⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Complementary Theological Considerations*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998) nr.7; Plato, *Philebus*, 51c.

to the highest extent possible, diversity is added, paradoxically, in the concretization of this form of forms:

“The parts of creation could not be exactly alike but [had to be] different so that an immense beauty would shine forth more perfectly in the variety of parts because no parts, however different, would be devoid of beauty. The creator was pleased to create together with the variety such an orderliness that the ordering which is absolute Beauty itself would shine forth in all things together. Through this ordering the highest-things-from-among-the-lowest-things, harmoniously united to the lowest-things-from-among-the-highest-things, would come together into a single beautiful universe. And through this ordering all things, being content with their own gradation in relation to the goal of the universe, would enjoy peace and rest, than which nothing is more beautiful.”¹⁷

This implies that despite the diversity in the world, a unity is formed by the different parts, so that no part is dispensable, if the beauty of the whole is to be maintained. Therefore, Cusanus says that “the foot and the eye recognize that, as regards man’s perfection and his beauty, they are necessary members if they are as they are and if they are located in their prescribed place. (...) Insofar as they are aberrant, they render the entire body deformed.”¹⁸

The second element taken over from Dionysius and Albert leaves behind Plato’s so-called intellectual side of beauty and puts emphasis on its sublime or romantic aspect. This factor is inspired by Cicero’s assertion that the beautiful and the noble draw man by means of their inner power and allure him with their dignity.¹⁹ Therefore, the beautiful is characterized by an arousal of desire, but only insofar as it is seen as something good and, hence, as a goal.²⁰ Cusanus even specifies this goal by calling it a final one. Under this aspect, beauty has the power to call the viewer to itself (*ad se vocare*).²¹ When considered under the aspect of form, that is, to be a

¹⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXIX, nr.90. Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I.XI, n.18; *Enchiridion*, c.X. With regard to beauty’s immense power to stand out cf. Plotinus, I 6.3.13.

¹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXIX, nr.91.

¹⁹ Cf. Cicero, *De officiis*, I, 6, 18.

²⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CXLVIII*, nr.6; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

²¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.9.

forming principle, the beautiful has the ability to congregate everything into a unity by unifying the multiple potencies of matter and joining them into one.²² This third element shows that beauty is not only characterized by a harmonious form, but also creates it. The fourth element of beauty diverges slightly from both Albert and Dionysius, but in different ways. First of all, like Albert, Nicholas does not even count it among those elements distinctive of the nature of beauty, as does Dionysius, but simply adds it after the third one – while it is the first element in the Areopagite’s text. For the latter, the hyper-substantial Beautiful can be called Beauty, since it gives beauty to every being. Albert is of the opinion that the first Beauty, a phrase which he explicitly refers to God alone, is the cause of every beauty through its essence. Cusanus, in turn, does not make any reference here restricting the first Beauty to God, and, thus, is closer to Dionysius. Moreover, he discards Albert’s term of ‘first Beauty’ in favor of ‘Beauty per se.’²³

Although Cusanus once mentions Aristotle’s idea that one of the qualities of beauty consists in a certain magnitude, namely, by saying that “corporeal beauty consists in three factors: in an appropriate quantity of the body, in an elegant disposition of the members and in the beauty of color,”²⁴ he is generally of the opinion that beauty is not a quantitative concept. This indicates that there are no degrees of beauty, such as are necessary for Plato’s doctrine on the ascent from corporeal beauty through the different stages up to Beauty itself. With regard to the kingdom of beauty, the Renaissance philosopher says that “the beauty of one thing does not impair the beauty of another thing,” because beauty in general is neither small nor big. It is just the opposite: Smallness and bigness are beautiful through beauty.²⁵ Even though he does not explicitly say so, it is possible that he refers the suggestion that beauty is not a quantitative concept to the kingdom of beauty exclusively – being close to divine oneness – since he does not and cannot support his own position in the face of the obvious existence of qualitative and quantitative differences between concrete forms of beauty. He

²² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.9; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

²³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.6; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72; 74.

²⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo IX. Opera omnia*, vol.16, ed. Rudolf Haubst (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1991) nr.13.

²⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.26.

distinguishes, for example, between sensual and intelligible beauty, assigning more value to the latter: “Whatever things are precise and permanent are more beautiful than things that are imperfect and changing. Thus, intelligible things are more beautiful than are perceptible things, which are beautiful to the extent that intelligible forms, or intelligible beauties, shine forth in them.”²⁶ Norbert Herold concludes that Nicholas “considers beauty to be something spiritual that is expressed in the sensual world.”²⁷ Furthermore, the philosopher states that different degrees of beauty are important with respect to the richness and plentitude of creation:

“The world’s beauty required not only things that would exist but also things that, in addition, would be alive and things that, over and above, would be intelligent; and it required that there be various kinds-of-beauty, or modes-of-beauty, of these three required things. These modes-of-beauty are the divine mind’s practical predeterminate forms and are useful beautiful-combinations that are suitable for the world’s structure.”²⁸

This even indicates that the degree of beauty in a reality does not necessarily depend on the respective reality, as the tradition of the allegory of the seal argues.²⁹ In other writings, Nicholas’ standpoint is less clear. In the sermon on beauty, he emphasizes that the different degrees of concrete beauty directly effect the general difference between realities – the grades of being (entium) – which depends on their assimilation to beauty.³⁰ Here, he does not specify whether the reason for the grades lies in the creator or in creation. So it is in *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, where the degrees of beauty are due to a clearer representation of light by the visible thing.³¹ My assumption that the teaching that beauty is not a quantitative concept refers solely to the kingdom of beauty becomes even

²⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.V, nr.13.

²⁷ Norbert Herold, “Nikolaus von Kues,” *Ästhetik und Kunstphilosophie von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Arthur Nida-Rümelin (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1998) 587.

²⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.IV, nr.10.

²⁹ In contrast to this cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.25, where it is clearly said that the fault is with the creature that receives beauty. Cf. also Plato, *Theaetetus*, 194c-195a; Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, V 71-73; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 644B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 75.

³⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.22.

³¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998) nr.8.

more likely when Cusanus' comparison of divine and creatural beauty is taken into account. The former is true and ineffable Beauty itself and has nothing of impure or imperfect mixture, but is characterized by eternal and infinite perfection; in contrast, the ornate cosmos or a sensuously beautiful thing has many mixtures of impurity and imperfection, because "no beautiful thing in this world has every possible beauty."³²

2. Beauty as the Explication of the Inexplicable

*"Eternal wisdom (...) is the
Beauty in everything beautiful."*³³

≈

As indicated above, Cusanus analyzes the Platonic concept of oneness in his theology in such a way that recalls the inner structure of beauty. Accordingly, the principle of oneness is present in the multiplicity of creation, namely, in its beauty, which "is the whole being of all that exists, that lives and is rational." The reason for this implication of unity in diversity, as is typical in the case of beauty, is that unity folds together all number, while number includes all proportion and meditation, whereas all harmony, order and concordance can, finally, be found in proportion. At this point, that level of beauty is reached which shines back in order, proportion and concordance.³⁴ In his attempt to find the most appropriate name for God, that is, a form in which God is present to the intellectual creature in his earthly life and the life to come,³⁵ Nicholas tries to orientate himself by the

³² Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXXV. Opera omnia*, vol.19,5, ed. Heide Dorothea Riemann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2005) nr.19. Cf. Albert the Great, *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, l.II, tr.4, c.3; Plotinus, V 5.13.35-38.

³³ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on Wisdom*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996) I, nr.14.

³⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.23.

³⁵ In respect of the name 'Truth itself' for God, Cusanus writes that "truth is not God as he triumphs in himself but is a mode of God by which God is impartible to the intellect in terms of eternal life." Nicholas of Cusa, *On Being a Son of God*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994) c.III, nr.63. This is transferable to all other names given to him by man, thus, also to beauty.

same concept of oneness to which the name has to correspond – his reliance thereupon a result of his high evaluation of Platonic philosophy: “The divine Plato, in the *Parmenides*, more keenly made such an attempt to open a way to God. The divine Dionysius imitated Plato to such an extent that he is quite frequently found to have cited Plato’s words in series.”³⁶ This is the first reason for Cusanus to adopt the Platonic doctrine of the One with regard to God: An authority as high as Dionysius cited it. The second reason lies in the assertion that Plato is near to Christianity owing to an apparent personal experience of revelation: “I think that Plato mentally viewed the substance, or the beginning, of things by way of revelation – in the manner in which the Apostle tells the Romans that God has revealed himself to them.”³⁷ Cusanus is of the opinion that Plato was familiar with the divine sphere and the appropriate ways to express it. Thus, he allows himself to be influenced by the annotations to Proclus’ commentary on the Platonic *Parmenides* and interprets the One as the embodiment of the True and Absolute.³⁸ The proof of its existence is already found in empirical diversity, for “there is not a plurality of beings that exist utterly apart from the One.”³⁹

As a name for God, the One is of singular significance for the Neoplatonists. Cusanus, however, also makes a direct reference to Beauty as a name for God, which implies a coequal identity between it and the One: “If we call God the One, this One is the hyper-substantial unity, which is Beauty including all beautiful realities in itself.”⁴⁰ In God, there is no multiplicity of qualities, but a single unity of them: “Eternal Goodness, eternal Greatness, eternal Beauty, eternal Truth (...) are not more than one eternal thing. Similarly, they are not a plurality of equal things, because they are so equal that they are most simple equality itself, which precedes all plurality.”⁴¹ Cusanus concludes that God as the One is the complicatio of

³⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.10. Balthasar rightly states that the Platonic were “baptized” to pre-Christians more than ever in Nicholas’ time. Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 554.

³⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On God as Not-Other*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1999) c.XX, nr.92.

³⁸ With regard to this influence cf. also Hans Werner Hoffmann, 20.

³⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Beginning*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998) nr.7.

⁴⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.24.

⁴¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXIII, nr.68.

all things.⁴² By bringing together unity and variety in the One, he now presents the major difference between it and beauty, for the latter expresses unity in variety, while the concept of the One must be seen in connection with the doctrine on the coincidence of opposites, through which Nicholas tries to “correct the natural tendency of thinking, which opposes the One to the many, thus missing the oppositionless One, which is everything,”⁴³ as Flasch formulates it. As a consequence, the One transcends the contrast of unity and variety and can be called “the unity of unity and variety.”⁴⁴ The One under the aspect of infinity itself even demands attributes, or else this coming together of unity and variety would be ignored.⁴⁵ Flasch points out that this view is in accordance with Plato’s overcoming of the pre-Socratic opposition of the One and the many in his *Sophist*, an advancement with which the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato was not able to comply.

In contrast to Thomas, for whom ‘Being’ is the most proper name for God, Cusanus shows his Neoplatonic background by pointing out not a quasi equality, as seems apparent between the One and Beauty, but a superiority of the One over being: “The One encompasses both those things which actually exist and those which may possibly come into existence. Therefore, the One is more comprehensive than is being, which exists only if it exists actually.”⁴⁶ With this latter condition that being always has to be actualized it becomes clear, however, that his terminology is far from contradicting

⁴² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, II, c.3, nr.105. The Renaissance philosopher originates this complicatio-explicatio-theory, which is nevertheless influenced by his studies of Thierry of Chartres, in particular, of the latter’s commentary on Boethius. Cf. Hans Werner Hoffmann, 54.

⁴³ Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues*, 252.

⁴⁴ Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues*, 255.

⁴⁵ Cf. Kurt Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1998) 408. Flasch adds that the Neoplatonic “prohibition of *additio* misunderstands the nature of our speaking about the One; it presupposes the rational opposition of determined and undetermined, which exists in the case of a usual use of language, but which has to be overcome in our speaking about the eternal.” He justifies this by stating that “if we say ‘the eternal is knowledge,’ we transform the concept of knowledge by withdrawing distinction from it and by repealing its opposition to non-knowledge.” *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung*, 407-408.

⁴⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXI, nr.60. Cf. *On the Beginning*, nr.39: “From the One, being has whatever it is; for if the One is removed, nothing at all remains.” Nevertheless, Nicholas suggests a close relationship insofar as he derives the Greek ‘being’ (ὄν) from ‘one’ (ἓν).

Thomas' name for God, the actuality of all acts.⁴⁷ Nicholas continues to analyze a further name for God suggested by Dionysius, namely, *posse ipsum*, as the quiddity and basis of all things, also called Light: "Possibility itself (*posse ipsum*) is called Light by some saints – not perceptible light or rational light or intelligible light but the light of all things that can give light – since nothing can possibly be brighter or clearer or more beautiful than *posse ipsum*."⁴⁸ The Light in which there is no darkness is also identical with the One. This is, finally, the simplest name thinkable, for Cusanus proposes that if there were a simpler one indicating at the same time that light as the signifier of unity is a divine attribute, every kind of beauty would be included in this name. He distinguishes here between the material aspect of beauty, namely, proportion representing unity, and the formal one, that is, resplendence as the representative of the name 'Light.'⁴⁹

Furthermore, Beauty taken by itself is also a name for God according to Cusanus. He calls him absolute Beauty and (wrongly) refers to Dionysius as the origin of the teaching that the absolute Beautiful is that which is identical with Beauty.⁵⁰ The Renaissance philosopher himself seems to have invented the phrase to express the absolute transcendence of God. Even though certain Platonic and Plotinic expressions, such as 'ἀπόλυτον,' are either translated or presented in this way, it must always be seen as an interpretation of the philosophers. Moreover, such expressions refer not to God, but to the Idea of Beauty. In how far this then means something divine is nevertheless not important at this point.

Nicholas shows in several ways what he means by transcendence as implied in the phrase 'absolute Beauty.' On the one hand, it should set God apart from his creation: "Suppose that on the basis of the beauty of created

⁴⁷ Apart from the terminology and Cusanus' explicit reference to Thomas (cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.17), the two philosophies of being do not agree with one another, since Cusanus is too radically influenced by Neoplatonism. Even though Nicholas can say that God is the "actuality of all things" (*On Learned Ignorance*, II, c.5, nr.118), 'actuality' is a mere abstraction, such as the *forma formarum*. Hence, it does not leave the Platonic pyramid embracing all realities, but can be found somewhere at the top. In contrast, Thomas demands that 'Being' (*esse*) be of a totally different structure which is not part of the pyramid but which encompasses the pyramid itself. See p. 283, note 71.

⁴⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, nr.8.

⁴⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.24.

⁵⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.15.

things I say that God is beautiful; and suppose I know that God is so beautiful that he is a beauty which is everything it is able to be. Then, I know that God lacks nothing of the beauty of the whole world.” He is “that beauty which is actually the possibility of the existence of all beauty and which is not able to exist otherwise than it does, since it is what it is able to be.”⁵¹ Hence, the Absolute – and the Absolute alone – is positive fulfillment itself. Its freedom from any restriction sets it apart from all concrete realities, which are characterized by a coincidence of potentiality and reality. On the other hand, Nicholas agrees with Dionysius by stating that God is beyond even absoluteness, in order to avoid this contrasting comparison of absolute Beauty and concrete realities, since the perspective of this comparison is earthly.⁵² Moreover, a comparison between creation and its creator borders on the impossible here, because God does not exist on the concrete level of his creation, where different kinds and degrees of beautiful things exist, but he himself is Beauty itself: “All beauty that can be conceived is less than the beauty of your face. All faces have beauty; but they are not Beauty itself. But your face, O Lord, has beauty, and this having is being.”⁵³ Cusanus takes over Thomas’ axiom that God’s being is identical with his quiddity. This identity, and the co-extensiveness of being and beauty, makes Cusanus accept

⁵¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Actualized-Possibility*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986) nr.10.

⁵² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Being a Son of God*, c.V, nr.80; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 649C. Mariano Alvarez-Gómez points out that the Neoplatonic ‘supra’ is, therefore, not adequate, because it is considered an opposition to ‘intra’ or ‘infra.’ In his eyes, the best name for God is ‘non-aliud,’ since it precedes all possible relations. This does not mean that God as the one beyond the absolute is separated from concrete creation. He is “the complication of the being” of creation and is, as a consequence, totally immanent in it. Cf. Mariano Alvarez-Gómez, *Die verborgene Gegenwart des Unendlichen bei Nikolaus von Kues* (München: Pustet, 1968) 196-198. Nicholas himself asserts that names like Spirit, Insight, Reason, Justice and Truth are more appropriate for God than fire, water, air and earth, for, owing to their simplicity, the former names are not graspable by the senses. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XXII. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.12. On the other hand, he adds that every name expresses knowledge, which is problematic in the case of God. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XXIV. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.11.

⁵³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988) nr.21. This corresponds to the Thomistic concept of God, indicating that he is not only his essence, but also his being. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.3, a.3c.

Dionysius' and Albert's theory that in God *pulchritudo* and *pulchrum* are identical.⁵⁴

Despite God's absoluteness and difference, the German cardinal makes an attempt to get at the heart of divine Beauty. By doing so, he cannot avoid attributing beauty to Beauty itself: "Absolute Beauty, which is God, inflames itself through the vision of itself to the love of itself."⁵⁵ The self-knowledge of its own beauty is a necessary presupposition of the absolute character of the source of all beauty; otherwise, a possible faculty would be missing, with the consequence that this beauty could not be perfect. Cusanus implies this by saying that intelligence is more beautiful than sensuousness, thus underscoring the importance of self-knowledge. Although the comparative used at this point indicates that intelligence is also not the highest quality, Nicholas does not develop the idea further and refrains from specifying the most beautiful faculty. This is not necessary for him, since all he needs to do is to justify the importance of the faculty of knowing oneself, which serves as the starting-point for a theology of the Trinity. Accordingly, Nicholas begins by stating that this highest Beauty is called 'Father' by all beautiful realities. From this basis he proceeds to explain the divine Trinity, which has already been adumbrated in the quote at the beginning of this paragraph. God's self-knowledge represents an insight into his own beauty, resulting in love for himself. This love is eternal owing to the infiniteness of the beauty through which it is caused.⁵⁶ Therefore, it does not seem to be the force of creation of finite being, but remains in the infinity of the divine Trinity. The teaching of the Trinitarian One marks the difference from Proclus' concept of an impersonal and distant One, although Cusanus admits that the names and the persons "are bestowed on God in relation to created things."⁵⁷ The peculiarity of the Trinity, namely, that it is three and one at the same, time nevertheless finds again an analogy in the nature of beauty. As there is a trinity in the unity of the essence of eternal divine Beauty,

⁵⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCXLIII, nr.17.

⁵⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCXLIII, nr.19. Cusanus claims that the foundation of what later became the Christian doctrine on the Trinity had been laid by Plotinus. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Eusebii De evangelica praeparatione interprete Georgio Trapezuntino* (Codex Vaticanus latinus 1245) fol. 155v.

⁵⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, c.24, nr.80: "For because God is oneness, he is begetter and Father; because he is equality of oneness, he is begotten, or Son; because he is union of both [oneness and equality-of-oneness], he is Holy Spirit."

there is unity in diversity in every beauty in general. Yet, this analogy is not totally coherent but suffers from a peculiar flaw. The unity in diversity of both concrete and abstract beauty always bears the mark of not being divine. Additionally, the Trinity is unique in the sense that in this case the three does not really mean diversity. Hence, the similarity of our beauty to the composition of the Trinity is marginal – as is the case with every similarity between the divine world and creation.

Beauty is not only the reason for the “genesis” of the Trinity, but also the motivation for creation. Nicholas’ doctrine on creation is a combination of the Neoplatonic philosophy of the One and Aristotle’s teaching on causality. These two aspects can be found in the complicatio-explicatio-theory. Accordingly, the love existing in the Trinity, that is, in the Trinitarian One, does not seem to be sufficient in spite of its infinite fullness. God goes beyond it by letting his love flow out of his eternal being into an explication of himself, thus creating the world out of his free will⁵⁸ and not out of necessity, to which the Platonic and Aristotelian highest principle is bound. The Cusan world thereby becomes the “explication of the inexplicable,”⁵⁹ as Balthasar puts it. Yet, the world is not made to be anything else. By means of participation, there is “a multiplication of oneness without there being a multiplication.”⁶⁰ God, the “living Beauty,” the permanent complicatio of all beauty, “wanted to reveal its glory, which is the form of all beauty.” At this point, beauty is connected to goodness, since the reason for the revelation can be found in the identity of the two concepts. Beauty is goodness, and goodness intends to communicate itself. Cusanus concludes that Beauty, therefore, created the world “in order to reveal its glory and to have goodness and beauty be partaken of.”⁶¹ What is more, God gives

⁵⁸ Cusanus criticizes Plato’s neglect of this aspect of the freedom of creation as a basic misapprehension. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.21. Cf. also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, c.81.

⁵⁹ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 556. He continues by criticizing the view of the Antique philosophers that the highest principle succumbs to necessity in order to try to bestow necessity to the sensuous world as well. For Balthasar this attempt must fail owing to the impossibility of justifying the contingency by means of the absolute. Cf. *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 562.

⁶⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, II, c.3, nr.109.

⁶¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo LXXI. Opera omnia*, vol. 17,5 (not yet published) nr.108. Cf. *Sermo CCIV. Opera omnia*, vol.19,1, ed. Klaus Reinhard and Walter Andreas Euler

his full goodness and beauty into his creation as a result of his simplicity, which precludes his giving only part of himself.⁶² This concept of the self-knowing and, consequently, creating One does not totally correspond to the Neoplatonic foundation of the doctrine, as Beierwaltes shows. In Plotinus' eyes, the One is without difference, so that every attempt to make a statement about it would imply diversity and, thus, difference. Nicholas cannot maintain this purity of unity, for his God embraces himself and his emanation through self-reflection. This can imply difference because it does not exclude relationality, as is the case in the influential philosophy of Proclus.⁶³ But, as I have shown earlier, this impurity is no problem for Cusanus, since his intention is to transcend the opposition of the One and the many.

Cusanus explicitly supports the Christian doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo* and links it to Dionysius' view that creation is due to beauty. However, he does not simply adopt the other's teaching, but formulates an original theology of creation. The starting-point is even taken from Aristotle, who says that the causality of the first mover is final, since beings are drawn to him.⁶⁴ Accordingly, Nicholas argues in agreement with the Neoplatonic tradition that beauty also has this attracting quality, but leaves this tradition by omitting the condition that beauty then be considered under the aspect of its goodness – at all events insofar as creation is concerned: “As every creature attracted by beauty out of nothing approaches beauty from nothingness, it comes out of nothingness into being.”⁶⁵ Consequently, no creature is without beauty nor without goodness – as the philosopher now adds according to the style of Dionysius, though he previously omitted it.

Creation must, furthermore, be understood here as a process of formal causality, since the forming principle which gives being is nothing other than the participation in Beauty itself: God's beauty, or, more specifically, his essence, is the first and highest Beauty, the forming principle of all

(Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1996) nr.6; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c.46, where it is goodness instead of glory which is to be communicated.

⁶² Cf. Martin Thurner, *Gott als das offenbare Geheimnis nach Nikolaus von Kues* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001) 111.

⁶³ Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Visio absoluta. Reflexion als Grundzug des göttlichen Prinzips bei Nikolaus Cusanus* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1978) 12-14.

⁶⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b4: “It causes motion as being an object of love, whereas all other things cause motion because they are themselves moved.”

⁶⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.21.

beauty⁶⁶: “Your face is absolute Beauty, which is the form that gives being to every beautiful form.”⁶⁷ Nicholas’ use of the notion of form is a conjunction of Aristotelism and Platonism. In accordance with the former, the beauty of a reality is said to be created through the form’s inner operation, through its provision of information, while the latter’s influence becomes apparent in the statement taken from Albert that beauty is the splendor of form, “the success of which can be found in its forming effect insofar as the form can reveal itself in harmonized matter,”⁶⁸ as Santinello interprets the context. At this point, a distinction between the form and the form of forms (*forma formarum*) – an expression taken from Proclus⁶⁹ – is necessary. As already mentioned above, the form of forms is identical with God, through whom all created forms are revealed in their splendor, while the shining beauty of these forms reveals, at the same time, the transcendent form of forms. It – and he – is the essential form of all realities, without being these realities, for they receive being from God, whereas he includes (complicat) all being in himself: “Beauty (...) is the actuality of the possibility of any beautiful thing’s being made.”⁷⁰ This implies, on the other hand, that a specific form is actualized by the form of forms, the absolute form or universal form of being. Accordingly, God gives being to all being, whereas a specific form gives being to one particular reality.⁷¹ As a consequence,

⁶⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.7; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72-74. Participation in the case of Cusanus is not to be understood in the sense that the copy is a reflection from the original as in a mirror, since then the copy would not be in the possession of autonomous being. It is, therefore, important that the original bestows being. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, II, c.2, nr.103; Karl-Heinz Volkman-Schluck, *Nicolaus Cusanus. Die Philosophie im Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1957) 44-46; Josef Koch, “Nikolaus von Kues und Meister Eckhart. Randbemerkungen zu zwei in der Schrift *De coniecturis* gegebenen Problemen,” *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 4 (1964): 164-173.

⁶⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, nr.21.

⁶⁸ Santinello, “Mittelalterliche Quellen der ästhetischen Weltanschauung des Nikolaus von Kues,” 682. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

⁶⁹ Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, III 13.

⁷⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.VII, nr.18.

⁷¹ Cf. Alvarez-Gómez, 200-234, where the Cusan theology of being is presented in detail. For example, he points to the difference between Cusanus and Thomas in this context. The latter considers it pantheistic to call God Being in the sense of a forming principle implying that he would then be present in these created realities and, consequently, identical with

every actualized reality needs a particular form in order to exist: “In every existing thing the form *is* the being, so that the very form which gives being *is* the being which is given to the thing. Now, God is the absolute form of being,”⁷² that is, its formal cause.

On the other hand, the concept of form is later said to be of a final kind: “All existing things are the work of absolute Beauty, that is, formed in accordance with its likeness. And this forming is attraction.”⁷³ Although Cusanus forbears from explaining what he means by his attempt to connect formal and final causality, it likely has to do with divine love. As indicated above, Aristotle seems to shine through here. He, too, considers love the driving force which draws man to the first mover, but it is not the latter’s love that draws, but human love. For Cusanus, God created the world out of love and thus gave it a certain form. What becomes a reality through this forming principle is realized, is active, so that final causality is part of what it means to be a creature. Hence, every creature has a loving force in its nature by its very nature, which makes it strive back to the origin. At the same time, this is linked to the concept of beauty, the etymology of which Nicholas analyzes. Taking up Albert, he says that the Greek words for good and beautiful are etymologically related to the Greek verb ‘καλέω’

them. Cusanus tries to circumvent the accusation of pantheism by suggesting that God is a forming principle in such a way that his transcendence is also the immanent form of being of the realities. Cornelio Fabro supports this interpretation of the philosopher by denying that he neglects the transcendent function of being as the actuality of all acts. Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et causalité selon S. Thomas d’Aquin* (Louvain: Publ. Univ., 1961) 562-570. To my mind, the asserted transcendence is not given, and this becomes especially clear by taking my analysis of the Thomistic and Cusan understanding of ‘Being’ as a name for God into account. This unmistakably implies that the divine transcendence, and, thus, the confutation of pantheism, in the case of Cusanus originates in the Neoplatonic concept of the One, which is no longer part of the pyramid to which being still belongs. It is, therefore, unfounded that Hans Werner Hoffmann nevertheless considers it appropriate to speak of pantheism in the Cusan theology. See p. 278, note 47. Cf. Hans Werner Hoffmann, 55. The cardinal leaves pantheism behind as if it were a “vulgar form of philosophy not worth discussing.” Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 575. With regard to the problem of pantheism cf. also Karl Meurer, *Die Gotteslehre des Nikolaus von Kues in ihren philosophischen Konsequenzen* (Bonn, 1971) 23-32.

⁷² Nicholas of Cusa, *The Gift of the Father of Lights*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1983) c.II, nr.98.

⁷³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.22.

meaning ‘voco’ in Latin. Like the good, the beautiful calls and draws to itself.⁷⁴

Cusanus expresses the same idea in a less complicated way by quoting Dionysius’ teaching on the Neoplatonic circle, according to which every movement and everything else concerning sensuous things emanates from God as the Beautiful and goes back to him, since every reality has its origin in the Beautiful, exists for its sake, is preserved by it and transformed into it.⁷⁵ In *On the Vision of God*, the middle element of the Neoplatonic circle, namely, that God conserves his creatures, is specified: He does it by means of his mercy so long as one lives.⁷⁶ The loving, doing, holding together and perfecting of creation is due to the magnitude of divine Goodness. Consequently, God, apart from being the formal and final cause of everything, is also the efficient cause,⁷⁷ in particular of beauty:

“That which is so beautiful that it cannot be more beautiful is the cause of greatness. (...) And Beauty which is so good that it cannot be better is the cause of goodness – and so on. Therefore, I see that Actualized-Possibility is the cause of goodness, of greatness, of beauty, truth, wisdom, delight, perfection, clarity, equality, and sufficiency.”⁷⁸

On a more abstract level, it can even be said that creation is not a matter at all related to causality, since God belongs to the infinite region, where there is simply oneness and no dualism of cause and effect. Creation is

⁷⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.2; Plato, *Cratylus*, 416c; *Ephesians* 4:1; *1 Thesalonians* 2:12; *1 Peter* 2:9; 5:10; Plotinus I 6; V 8; Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 24; *Alcibiades I*, 328; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 701C; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 77.

⁷⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.13; *On Seeking God*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994) nr.31: God “is the beginning from which things flow forth, the middle in which we are moved, and the end unto which things flow back.” Cf. also Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A.

⁷⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.V, nr.16-18.

⁷⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.15; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A-B. In *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.VII, nr.19, Nicholas attributes all causes except the material one to God: “Yet, [the first beginning] is not merely the formal cause; rather, it is also the efficient and the final cause.” Cf. also *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.VIII, nr.22: “Since the first cause is an efficient cause, it is called oneness, according to Plato; and since it is a formal cause, it is called being, according to Aristotle; and since it is a final cause, it is called goodness, according to both Plato and Aristotle.”

⁷⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXXV, nr.104.

rather something that takes place and remains in God himself.⁷⁹ Cusanus' understanding of the Ideas corresponds to this.

Cusanus asks himself what the Platonic Idea means, thus presenting the philosopher's doctrine as well as the way in which it was developed by Neoplatonists such as Proclus, who, according to Cusanus, is of the opinion that "through the contact whereby the individual is united to its Idea, it is in contact with the divinity by way of that intelligible Idea."⁸⁰ Having considered the different positions, the Renaissance philosopher concludes that "if these [Platonic teachings] are properly understood, then perhaps they are not as much opposed to truth as inept interpreters of Plato have suggested."⁸¹ He himself begins his more detailed analysis with Augustine's understanding of the Ideas as God's thoughts. Accordingly, these forms pre-exist in God's mind, so that divine wisdom predetermined and produced everything in accordance with them. Cusanus describes these Ideas as "delimitations that determine all things." Consequently, the divine mind is the delimitation of all those forms.⁸² With this concept, the complicatio-explicatio-theory can easily be connected. Nicholas illustrates this connection by showing the meaning of the Idea of Beauty in the intellect: "The intellectual nature, which is the first irradiation of the Beautiful insofar as it is the image of God, who is exemplary Beauty itself, complicates all natural beauties, which are explicated through their natures in the universe, in itself."⁸³ In detail, "divine wisdom has determined for every creature its measure, its weight, and its number." Nicholas thereby integrates these three aspects taken from *The Book of Wisdom*, but without referring to Augustine's interpretation, as Albert and Thomas did earlier.⁸⁴ This gives the impression that there exists a variety of Ideas in the divine mind as exemplars of the

⁷⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XII, nr.50.

⁸⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.I, nr.3.

⁸¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.I, nr.3.

⁸² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXVII, nr.81. In respect of the notion of pre-existence cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704A; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 84; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.13, a.4c; *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.V, l.2, n.662.

⁸³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.18.

⁸⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXVII, nr.81; Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.6, q.26, c.1, a.3, III; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.5c; q.73, a.1c.

created forms, but Nicholas understands the situation differently, so that he revises both Augustine and Plato. For despite his acceptance of the concept of the Idea itself, he insists on a singular Idea, namely, the One, as another name for God: “The divine Plato (...) stated in the *Phaedo* that, as it exists in itself, there is one form or Idea of all things but [that] with respect to things, which are plural, there seems to be a plurality of forms.”⁸⁵ Hence, it is possible to speak of a variety, but these elements are actually and merely mental notions included in the One: “I speak of a plurality of exemplars since we are referring to the various [respective] rational grounds of various things. Yet, [these exemplars] are one exemplar, because they coincide in the Absolute.”⁸⁶ It is likely that the study of Albert’s commentary on the Dionysian *The Divine Names* influenced this insight, for in the margin of his copy of this commentary Cusanus added the note “Idea divina una – ideata plura.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, he cites Albert’s suggestion that one form, the overall form of creation, flows from God into all things. This form is the likeness of the essence of God, so that all things partake of being that is derived from God.⁸⁸ With this understanding of the Ideas it becomes clear that they are not to be interpreted as mediators in the act of creation, in the sense that God created them as models for the rest of creation. Eriugena must be seen in this branch of Neoplatonism, according to which the uncreated God creates Ideas that again create.⁸⁹

By agreeing with Albert,⁹⁰ thus suggesting this doctrine of the Ideas as notions of the mind with no reality outside of it, Cusanus rejects both Aristotle’s and Albert’s misinterpretation of Ideas as realities separated from the world⁹¹ – as well as the Platonic theory that the knowledge of them is a natural configuration of the soul: “Aristotle seems rightly to have thought

⁸⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, c.17, nr.48.

⁸⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on Wisdom*, c.II, nr.38.

⁸⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, “Marginal 7,” *Nicolaus Cusanus und Ps.-Dionysius im Lichte der Zitate und Randbemerkungen des Cusanus*, ed. Ludwig Baur (Heidelberg: Winter, 1941) 94.

⁸⁸ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.5, 32.

⁸⁹ Cf. Eriugena, *De divisione naturae*, I.II, c.15. With regard to the One as the Ideas of Ideas cf. also Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues*, 269-273.

⁹⁰ Cf. Albert the Great, *Metaphysica*, I.I, tr.1, c.1.

⁹¹ “Herefrom you may infer that Ideas are not separated from individuals in such a way as to be extrinsic exemplars.” Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.I, nr.3. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096b33; Albert the Great, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, I.I, tr.1, c.5.

that there are no concepts concreated with the soul at its beginning – concepts that the soul forgot upon becoming embodied.” The reason for this is that the intellect judges that something is beautiful and something else good, but that it does not know what *the Beautiful* and *the Good* is.⁹² However, Plato could be interpreted to allow that a power of judgment is, by nature, concreated with the mind,⁹³ the actualization of which is again dependent on a sensual intermediation, as Aristotle emphasizes. Josef Stallmach concludes that “sensual experience is actually not the source of truth, but a mere instigation to start a search for beauty which proceeds into one’s own inner sphere.”⁹⁴ By means of this return, man might be able to transcend himself, thus advancing to the source of truth as the *sine qua non* of the knowledge of truth: “If [the creature] understands itself as the living image of the creator, it perceives its creator by looking at itself, since it is torn out of the state of imageness into a full attention to the exemplar.”⁹⁵

Apart from his understanding of the Ideas as notions instead of mediators, Cusanus describes a phenomenon that does suggest a mediatory function, namely, the possibility-of-being-made. This function must be interpreted as a presupposition of the world’s existence and possession of attributes: “In willing to make a beautiful world, he created the world’s possibility-of-being-made.”⁹⁶ Nicholas’ definition of the possibility-of-being-made is that creation has a participatable likeness to God.⁹⁷ Since creation is composed of potentiality and reality, God does not solely give reality. The potentiality to exist at all and in a special way must be actualized at the same time. This special way of existence should correspond to God’s beauty, thus demanding order: “Unless the possibility-of-being-made were restricted with respect to its disorderly fluidity – restricted by a uniting power – it would

⁹² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CXXX. Opera omnia*, vol.18,1, ed. Rudolf Haubst and Heinrich Pauli (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1995) nr.5.

⁹³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996) c.IV, nr.77.

⁹⁴ Josef Stallmach, *Ineinsfall der Gegensätze und Weisheit des Nichtwissens. Grundzüge der Philosophie des Nikolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1989) 41.

⁹⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief an Nikolaus Albergati,” *Cusanus-Texte IV, 3: Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Gerda von Bredow (Heidelberg: Winter, 1955) 28, nr.5.

⁹⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.IV, nr.10.

⁹⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.VI, nr.15.

not admit of beauty or form.”⁹⁸ Otherwise divine absolute Beauty would not shine forth in all things.⁹⁹ With its order, creation mirrors divine reason. Cusanus explicitly refers to Plato as the origin of this teaching on the so-called “creator-intellect,”¹⁰⁰ for the antique philosopher declares that the cosmos was “constructed after the pattern of that which is apprehensible by reason and thought.”¹⁰¹

Divine reason becomes apparent in the form and beauty of realities. Cusanus defines form as an incorruptible harmonic relation communicable to objects, precisely because a likeness to the divine creator-intellect shines forth in harmonic proportion. Man has the ability to experience this fact, since proportion is delightful and pleasing to each of the senses whenever it is perceived.¹⁰² Yet, no created thing possesses a beauty through which the creator can really be attained, since there is no comparative relation of the creature to the creator¹⁰³:

“There is found nothing to which the King himself is similar. Nor within the entire intellectual realm is there a concept of his likeness. (...) For everything possessing an intellectual nature is, in comparison with him, a shadow, a lack of power, a density, a smallness of wisdom, and so on regarding an infinite number of similar modes. (...) His nature infinitely precedes – in height, simplicity, power, might, beauty, and goodness – all intellectual wisdom.”¹⁰⁴

The reason for this can be found in the fact that everything that is created is not the same as the original, but similar to it: Nicholas considers creation to be the same in the other, for “all creatable beauty is only a certain disproportionate likeness to that [absolute] Beauty.”¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, there is a likeness owing to divine processions flowing into the world in

⁹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXIV, nr.72.

⁹⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXIX, nr.90.

¹⁰⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Eyeglasses*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998) nr.35.

¹⁰¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 29a.

¹⁰² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Eyeglasses*, nr.62.

¹⁰³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.18.

¹⁰⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.26. Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.3, q.17; Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.II, l.4, n.180.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Actualized-Possibility*, nr.10.

order to form it in a beautiful way, thus assimilating creatures to God's beauty.¹⁰⁶

Man finds himself in a tension of unattainability and assimilation. This tension has its origin in the tension of the paradox that God is hidden and nevertheless revealed. As Walter Köhler points out,¹⁰⁷ this concept of God forms a major difference from that of the antique Greeks. The latter found themselves confronted with a senselessly *hiding* divinity, while the Cusan – and generally Christian – God is a *hidden* one, whose concealed state is the presupposition of man's desire for him. In *On the Hidden God*, the Christian clearly answers the Pagan's question of why he worships that of which he does not have any knowledge with the surprising statement that his non-knowledge is the very reason for his worship.¹⁰⁸ Still, Nicholas persists in maintaining the Greek doctrine that the world reveals some of the beauty of the hidden divinity, since "everything invisible is hidden in what is visible"¹⁰⁹:

"The world (...) is said in Greek to be a beautiful cosmos: it is [derived] from the ineffable, eternal Beauty, which is prior to non-being. Now, the name ['cosmos'] denies that the world is ineffable Beauty itself. But it affirms that [the world] is the image of that [Beauty] the truth of which is ineffable. What, then, is the world except the manifestation of the invisible God? What is God except the invisibility of visible things? (...) Hence, the world reveals its creator, so that he is known. Or better: the unknowable God reveals himself knowably to the world in imagery and symbolism."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.4; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Walther Köhler, *Der verborgene Gott* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1946) 4-6.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Hidden God*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994) nr.1.

¹⁰⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Bowling-Game*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000) II, nr.104. There, Nicholas constructs a hierarchy of inclusion: The elemental is hidden in chaos, the sensible in the elemental, the vegetative in the sensible, the imaginative in the sensible, the logical or rational in the imaginative, the intelligential in the rational, the intellectible in the intelligential, and the intellectible is hidden in the power of powers.

¹¹⁰ By symbolism, Nicholas means above all the symbols of mathematics. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Actualized-Possibility*, nr.72. Cusanus' understanding of 'non-being,' of 'nothingness,' out of which being is traditionally said to have emerged, is not the antithesis of

Nicholas refers to Dionysius with regard to the necessity of this sensual mediation: “Dionysius, the greatest of the theologians, assumes the following: that it is impossible for a human being to ascend unto an understanding of spiritual matters except by the guidance of perceptible forms, so that, for example, he regards visible beauty as an image of invisible Beauty.”¹¹¹ In order to illustrate this principle of the invisibleness in visibleness, the metaphor of light is applied:

“Light is not seen as it is, but, rather, it is manifested in things visible (...). However, light enfolds and transcends the clearness and beauty of all visible things. Light manifests itself in visible things not in order to show itself as visible but, rather, in order to manifest itself as invisible, since its clarity cannot be grasped in visible things.”¹¹²

The Platonic sun allegory appears here. Light makes things visible and seeing possible. But while Plato claims the unrecognizability of the source of visibleness, Nicholas goes further by integrating the allegory into his doctrine of revelation: That which transcends the human capability of cognition and results in an unattainability of God is unfolded in and through a variety of things.¹¹³ This variety of things is a necessary precondition for a successful manifestation.

With his doctrine of divine manifestation in creation, Nicholas is in danger of being accused of holding a pantheistic view. A statement such as “God lacks nothing of the beauty of the whole world”¹¹⁴ magnifies this danger. But it does not make him a pantheist, for he speaks

being. It is transcendently preceded by absolute Being and followed by created being. Cf. *On Actualized-Possibility*, nr.25. This theology is very similar to what Dionysius says about the coincidence of non-being and being in Hyper-Beauty. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704B.

¹¹¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On God as Not-Other*, c.XIV, nr.54. Cf. Dionysius, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 373A.

¹¹² Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, nr.8.

¹¹³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Genesis of all Things*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994) c.I, nr.151; Gerhard Schneider, *Gott – das Nichtandere. Untersuchungen zum metaphysischen Grunde bei Nikolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970) 129: “As light is not seen in its pure quiddity as the cause of seeing, but only assimilatively on the visible object, so can the absolute divine essence only be described by the help of object being.”

¹¹⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Actualized-Possibility*, nr.10.

radically against this accusation by explaining what is really meant by ‘manifestation’:

“In like manner, St. Thomas, in the *Contra gentiles*, says that certain men – on the basis of the words of the great Dionysius – were led to say that God is all things. [They were led to say this] because in *De coelesti hierarchia* Dionysius maintains that God is the being of all things. But if they had read all the works of the Areopagite, then they would surely have discovered in *De divinis nominibus* that God is the being of all things in such a way that he is not any of these things, since what is caused can never be raised unto equality with its cause.”¹¹⁵

The best way of expressing this phenomenon is by means of the name ‘non aliud.’ God is the non aliud, the Not-Other, which is an understanding of God that Cusanus sees in its beginnings in the Dionysian *The Mystical Theology*, which expresses “the secret of not-other.”¹¹⁶ This God is neither the antithesis of his creation nor identical with it. If he were identical with the world, we would be confronted ultimately with a kind of pantheism. If, on the other hand, he were not merely distinguished but quite separate from the world, completely other, then he would be ultimately irrelevant and unreal. Thus, God is neither absolutely other nor simply immanent in the world. At least for us, his being is approachable only in an ontological relationship to the world, in which we have our reality. As the Not-Other, God is the immanent presupposition of all other, bestowing stability, and its “final *raison d’être* possible,”¹¹⁷ as Gerhard Schneider describes it. Thus, the names given to God do not distinguish him from the world, but define what the world actually is in its deepest nature without determining the divine nature. The name ‘the Not-Other’ fulfills this condition in the best way,

¹¹⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.17. See p. 278, note 47; p. 284, note 71. Cf. Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 177C; *The Divine Names*, 593C.

¹¹⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On God as Not-Other*, c.I, nr.5. Gerda von Bredow adds that God is the other from the creature’s point of view only, and, thus, not the other way around. Cf. Bredow, 56. Adorno holds a similar view in his concept of the non-identical: “Natural beauty is the vestige of the non-identical on the things” under the influence (im Bann) of universal identity. “As long as it presides, no non-identical thing exists positively.” Adorno, 114.

¹¹⁷ Gerhard Schneider, 141. In respect of the importance of this name cf. also Johann Uebinger, *Die Gotteslehre des Nikolaus Cusanus* (Münster: Schöningh, 1888) 84-92.

although Nicholas still does not believe it to be the absolutely best name for God.

3. The Good and the Beautiful

“In this beautiful world (...), the intellectual spirit strives for the beauty of virtues, with which it adorns its natural beauty.”¹¹⁸

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As Beauty per se is identified with God, so also is the Good: “Since God is the origin of every good and all perfection, virtue and truth, who does not depend on anyone and from whom is everything, he is necessarily the highest Good as well.”¹¹⁹ Although the identification itself is Platonic, the way in which it is justified is Aristotelian, because the starting-point is the existence of concrete goods, from which Cusanus concludes that God is the highest Good. On the other hand, the implication that God is the “fount of good, from whom flows forth unto you all that you have”¹²⁰ is in accordance with Platonism. In the next step, this basic pattern is carried out in a Christian way influenced by Dionysius. Accordingly, the emanation of all goods, which makes all beauty good as well, is not due to a necessity in God but is a free act of creation which is accompanied by a free giving of the good by the Good itself. Thus, man has to accept that both God and his creation are good, so that the origin of all goodness is to be praised: “Each work of God rightly praises God because he is good. For each work acknowledges that it itself is good and praiseworthy by virtue of his gift.”¹²¹

Assuming the Platonic circle, Nicholas emphasizes that the Good plays the foundational role in human life. Since God is Goodness itself, “the spirit will live in the goodness of Beauty, which unites itself with the spirit.”¹²²

¹¹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.28.

¹¹⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo I. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.2.

¹²⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.50.

¹²¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XVIII, nr.52.

¹²² Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXXV*, nr.21.

Furthermore, he also refers the Good to the goal and cites the Neoplatonic idea that “the one per se Good is desired by all. For everything choosable is choosable under the aspect of the good. Therefore, since the choosable and desirable end is the Good, [this] per se Good will be the cause of all things, since all things are turned toward their own cause and seek it.”¹²³ The reason for this search is that man wishes to know the cause of his deep desire. This Neoplatonic tradition is taken over from Albert.

Like the latter, Nicholas grounds the relationship between the good and the beautiful on this aspect of desire. For neither of them consistently accepts Dionysius’ teaching on the identity between the good and the beautiful, but rather mentions their notional difference. The good’s distinctiveness is precisely that it draws desire to itself.¹²⁴ My assertion that the teaching is not consistently accepted already foreshadows the fact that the German cardinal unrestrictedly concedes this quality to the beautiful as well, namely, whenever he analyzes the matter himself without simply quoting Albert.

Apart from the term ‘bonum,’ Nicholas sometimes uses ‘honestum,’ the noble, that is, Albert’s spiritual good per se that adds a certain inner power and worthiness to the good.¹²⁵ The term should nevertheless not be translated merely as the moral good,¹²⁶ for this restriction does not justify the definition, namely, that it attracts. This does not mean that the good, as well as the beautiful, do not bear a moral character. That both concepts can be seen in reference to external qualities, ontology and morality becomes obvious when Cusanus mentions two natural goods, namely, the goods of the body and those of the soul. Among the first group he counts beauty, nobility, liberty, sanity, fortitude and agility. The latter field includes the rightness and swiftness of character, the goodness of memory, the strength to bear exercise, and a natural disposition for virtues.¹²⁷ Despite the classification of beauty as a good of the body, the cardinal knows of an inner beauty as well. For example, he mentions deformities of the soul that distort

¹²³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.VIII, nr.20. Cf. *On the Vision of God*, c.V, nr.16: “For everyone who seeks seeks only the good.” Cf. also Plotinus, V 5.12.7-8; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A; Albert the Great, *De XV problematibus*, q.5.

¹²⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.7; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

¹²⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.9.

¹²⁶ Cf. Scharpff, 540.

¹²⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo VI. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.22.

its beauty.¹²⁸ This means that the soul can lose its beauty, which is partly defined through form, by being deformed itself, thus losing its ontological nature.

Where morality is concerned, the beautiful even seems to be a moral standard comparable to the good. Accordingly, man has the innate intellectual forms of the imperceptible virtues of justice and equality in order that he may know “what is beautiful, what is delightful and good (and may know the opposites of these), and may choose good things and become good.”¹²⁹ Cusanus cites Albert again by calling virtue beautiful, for virtue has a certain clarity in itself which accounts for the beauty and which serves as the presupposition of the recognizability of beauty.¹³⁰ He goes even further by stating that the value of a virtue depends on its beauty: “A virtue is great insofar as it is beautiful.”¹³¹ Yet, not only virtue, but also its actualization in a moral act is connected with beauty. This is because that good is more beautiful which does not come about out of necessity, but of one’s own free will.¹³² Unfortunately, Cusanus is not at all precise in his description of the influences on the free will. In *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, he claims that sensuousness has no influence on it: “The power of free will does not at all depend on the body, as does the sensual power of our animal nature’s desire. Hence, the power of free will is not affected by the weakness of the body.”¹³³ A sermon, however, contradicts this position by postulating the negative effect of man’s sensuous nature on the will: “Being tends towards eternity and immortality, insight towards truth, the will towards the good. (...) The will desires exclusively the good. Yet, [human nature]

¹²⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.25. This inner beauty is important for Cusanus, be it virtuous, pacific, honest or prudent. Cf. *Sermo XLI. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.27. The value of inner beauty is already mentioned in Plotinus’ philosophy, where it is considered to be more beautiful than outer beauty. Cf. Plotinus, V 8.2.33-42.

¹²⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Compendium*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996) c.VI, nr.17.

¹³⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.8; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 76; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.129, a.4, ad 3.

¹³¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.25. The same is true for love: “Love is the measure for the value of all virtues.” *Sermo CCXLI. Opera omnia*, vol.19,3, nr.10.

¹³² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLVI. Opera omnia*, vol.19,4, ed. Isabelle Mandrella and Heide Dorothea Riemann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2004) nr.17.

¹³³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, nr.23.

finds a tendency downwards as well in its earthly and sensuous nature, towards some transient, untrue, merely seeming good.”¹³⁴ In another sermon, the tendency of human nature is held to be even worse, namely, to be a constant endangerment of turning to the ugliness of the creature, even though man should turn himself to the source of beauty in beautiful objects.¹³⁵ The reason for this lies, evidently, in the attractive and attracting character of beauty, to which Plato already assigned the seductive power to become immoral.¹³⁶ As an example, Nicholas comments on the first sin, considering the beauty of the fruit of the tree of knowledge to be a factor adding to its seductiveness.¹³⁷ Accordingly, Eve noticed the beauty of the apple owing to its sensuous beauty and, as a result, ignored the divine law.¹³⁸

The latter evaluation of sensuousness corresponds to the Cusan view on evil, which is comparable to Dionysius’ allegory of the seal. In correspondence with him, the cardinal argues that “deformity originates in the receiving creature, beauty comes from the forming creator.”¹³⁹ Such a statement as, ‘beauty is a kind of grace which is wasted by man through luxury,’¹⁴⁰ fits well into this dualism. Though the approach is treated in more detail, it does not reach any real depth. The explanation remains on the level of this superficial Platonic dualism in which all good things are divine and all bad things human. This structure begins as soon as the topic of evil is treated. Cusanus considers virtues to be heavenly and identifies them with the beauties of the divine kingdom. In contrast, ugly things (foeda) are not part of the kingdom of beauty: “Deformities of the soul (...) do not come from Beauty, since only beautiful and good things can

¹³⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XXIV*, nr.21.

¹³⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXI*. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,1, nr.24.

¹³⁶ Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 53c; *Phaedrus*, 250e; 251a.

¹³⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXXVII*. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,5, nr.19.

¹³⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCVIII*. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,1, nr.9.

¹³⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.25. In spite of this position, Cusanus not only claims what is generally agreed upon, namely, that God knows the good because he is Goodness itself, but he is also of the opinion that God knows evil or else he would not know perfectly. This is true, although evil is actually nothing with respect of its notion. Cf. *Sermo CCLXX*. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,6, ed. Heide Dorothea Riemann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2005) nr.6.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLVIII*. *Opera omnia*, vol.18,2, nr.4.

emanate from this first Beauty.”¹⁴¹ Emanation is, therefore, not a gradual or hierarchical out-pouring. This must be seen in contrast to what is said about the different degrees of beauty in the world in *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, where the useful beautiful combinations are said to be for the world’s structure.¹⁴²

4. The Transcendentals

“No reality is without beauty and goodness.”¹⁴³

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Statements that suggest a philosophy of the transcendentals exist throughout the Cusan writings. Nicholas expounds on the ubiquitous extension of oneness, of truth, goodness and beauty. According to him, “oneness is the one thing that unites all things, so that each thing exists insofar as it is one.”¹⁴⁴ As in classic teaching on the transcendentals, this concept is said to be more comprehensive than being, which exists only if it exists actually.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, all being is ontologically true already as actual being.¹⁴⁶ Thus, “none of all existing things can be altogether devoid of the good, the great, the true, the beautiful.”¹⁴⁷ With regard to beauty, he adds that God generously grants it to all things,¹⁴⁸ because “what is deprived of order and beauty cannot exist. For how could being that lacks order and beauty have passed from potentiality to actuality?”¹⁴⁹ Yet, all of these independent indications are not composed into a coherent whole. What is more, the fact that all being is one, true, good and beautiful does not self-evidently imply that

¹⁴¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.25. The dualism is mirrored in a sermon, where Cusanus uses the Platonic image of the body as the prison of the soul. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLIII. Opera omnia*, vol.18,6, nr.4.

¹⁴³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.21.

¹⁴⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXI, nr.61.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXI, nr.60.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief an Nikolaus Albergati,” 34, nr.21. He adds that truth is present vitally only in the intellectual nature, which is capable of an explicit actualization of truth.

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XV, nr.44.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXXV, nr.105.

¹⁴⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXXI, nr.92.

the concepts are actually synonymous and that each of the attributes simply highlights a distinctive aspect of being.

Alvarez-Gómez claims that Nicholas' notes to Albert's commentaries on the Dionysian writings show that he was acquainted with the doctrine on the transcendentals, without adopting it or working out a concept himself. Thus, there is, for example, no identification of God with the transcendentals.¹⁵⁰ The cardinal thereby avoids the danger of forgetting the absolute divine transcendence as a result of a concentration on positive instead of negative theology. He admits that being, the true and the good are taken as obvious names of God, but without attaining precision.¹⁵¹ Gerhard Schneider interprets this assertion by emphasizing the relativization with which the transcendental elements meet. In his eyes, "all of them are directed to another quid as notions; with regard to their meaning, they are limited and they remain opposites for thinking in spite of their convertibility."¹⁵² Yet, their non-identity with God does not mean that they exist subsequently to him, but rather through him, as is the case with all creation in relation to the Not-Other.¹⁵³ Hence, Nicholas is in search rather of a "hyper-transcendental concept, a designation which – without being one of the transcendentals – is still the precondition of all of them,"¹⁵⁴ to put it in Stallmach's words.

In contrast to Alvarez-Gómez and Stallmach, Santinello supports the existence of a doctrine on the transcendentals in the Cusan philosophy. In his eyes, the Dionysian divine processions in the world as creation of being signify a creation of value ("Wertschöpfung") in the form of the true, the good and the beautiful. In this context, he presents Nicholas' repetition of Albert's assertion that the beautiful is a good which is related to the true insofar as the latter is considered under the aspect of its goodness. Santinello concludes that all three concepts can be understood entirely as ens, if one notes that Cusanus himself says that the form which

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Alvarez-Gómez, 225.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On God as Not-Other*, c.IV, nr.14.

¹⁵² Gerhard Schneider, 140.

¹⁵³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On God as Not-Other*, c.IV, nr.13-14.

¹⁵⁴ Josef Stallmach, "Das 'Nichtandere' als Begriff des Absoluten. Zur Auswertung der mystischen Theologie des Pseudo-Dionysius durch Cusanus," *Universitas. Dienst an Wahrheit und Leben; Festschrift für Bischof Dr. Albert Stohr*, vol.1, ed. Ludwig Lenhart (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1960) 330.

gives being is identical with the form which imparts beauty.¹⁵⁵ Consequently, Santinello makes the same mistake as many have done before him by stating that “although it is not without doubt that the beautiful is a transcendental for Thomas Aquinas, there is no doubt about it in the case of Nicholas.”¹⁵⁶ For he, too, ignores the necessary condition of a transcendental that it has to add an aspect to being which no other transcendental adds. In *Il pensiero di Nicolò Cusano nella sua prospettiva estetica*, Santinello justifies the transcendentality of beauty in a different and more interesting way. He claims that beauty “gives manifestation to the creative act from which it emanates.” Consequently, it can be said that its peculiarity is “the presence in the being of that act which constitutes it in being and transcends it. To know how to grasp beauty means knowing how to see and to comprehend things as affiliations of the creator-spirit, his expressions, his words and meanings.” Santinello adds that Cusanus thereby gives an explanation for the “relative autonomy of the beautiful in the bosom of being, as its transcendental note, next to the other values of the true and the good.”¹⁵⁷ With this hypothesis he now completes what he began in his article “Mittelalterliche Quellen der ästhetischen Weltanschauung des Nikolaus von Kues.” Beauty receives a distinctive aspect with which it highlights being. That would legitimately include beauty for the first time in the group of the traditional transcendentals. The only remaining problem is that this group of transcendentals is missing in the case of Cusanus.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.7.

¹⁵⁶ Santinello, “Mittelalterliche Quellen der ästhetischen Weltanschauung des Nikolaus von Kues,” 684.

¹⁵⁷ Santinello, *Il pensiero di Nicolò Cusano nella sua prospettiva estetica*, 236. He continues by expressing the superiority of this solution over the one in the sermon: “And it seems that this solution would be a more felicitous one than the other, slightly different, appearing in the sermon *Tota pulchra*. There it was said, repeating Albert textually and deriving his inspiration from Dionysius together with Albert, that beauty is given from the apprehension of the true ‘in ratione boni,’ through which the beautiful and the good arise as identical in the subject, although then distinct in the notion. The formula can give occasion to an interminable discussion on the transcendental character.”

5. Art

“There is a simple beginning, which is the art of arts; [therein] is enfolded the eternal art of the philosophers.”¹⁵⁸

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Beauty is not only an ontological component for Cusanus, which would restrict the aspect to the substantial form of being, but can also be present in the accidental form of a reality, that is, in the form which man establishes in art. Art is defined as “man’s capability to interfere in the world, regulating and forming it, thus acknowledging its natural beauty through cognition and action.”¹⁵⁹ Yet, Cusanus uses art in respect of God’s creation, the divine art, as well. In the tradition of Augustine, he identifies this art with the divine Word: “Wherefore, Augustine maintains that the Word is both the art and the Idea in relation to created things.”¹⁶⁰

With regard to the field of human art, man is a creator, but not in the sense that he causes being as God does without any presupposition. Being a creature himself, man has to presuppose divine creation, so that the artistic act of his intellect is an imitation of God’s primordial act.¹⁶¹ The latter nevertheless legitimates the existence of human creativity. The reason for this is God’s goodness. Something good is diffusive, and God created a nature which partakes of his goodness in the utmost way. Thus, he gave it a creative and free will, which gives Cusanus reason to regard man as a human God,¹⁶² since “for just as God is the creator of real beings and of natural forms, so man is the creator of conceptual beings and of artificial forms that

¹⁵⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.II, nr.58.

¹⁵⁹ Herold, 589.

¹⁶⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, c.24, nr.80. Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, I.VI, c.10, n.11.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief an Nikolaus Albergati,” 34, nr.19-20.

¹⁶² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Surmises*, II, c.14, nr.143-144, where man is also called a microcosm. Cf. Albert the Great, *De intellectu et intelligibile*, I.I, tr.1, c.6. The idea of man as a human God recalls Plato’s assertion that the world is a perceptible God. Nicholas knew this description and quoted it in *The Gifts of the Father of Light*, c.II, nr.102 in the context of his human God. Cf. also Plato, *Timaeus*, 92c. Martin Thurner concludes that “God and the

are only likenesses of his intellect, even as God's creatures are likenesses of the divine intellect."¹⁶³ At this point, Nicholas distances himself from Platonism, for which there is a hierarchy with the Idea of the Good at the top, the human spirit somewhere below, while the sensuous world is to be found on an even lower level – not to mention the extremely low position of art. Nicholas thinks rather according to the pattern of proportion: God is related to the creation of the world as man is to his own imaginary creation.

“If the divine mind is absolute Being itself, then its conceiving is the creating of beings; and our mind's conceiving is an assimilating of beings. (...) If all things are present in the divine mind as in their precise and proper truth, then all things are present in our mind as in an image, or a likeness, of their proper truth. That is, they are present conceptually.”¹⁶⁴

This doctrine on man's assimilative intellect originates in Albert.¹⁶⁵ Führer suggests that they both can be interpreted in an Eckhartian sense, namely, that the human mind is a spark of divinity in man. Cusanus supports this interpretation by calling the assimilative intellect a “living divine number,”¹⁶⁶ by means of which man receives an aptitude for reflecting divine harmony, enfolding all sensible, rational, and intellectual harmony. The reflection, of course, enables him to form harmonious beauty in his mind and in art.

world are the same; however, God is it in an eternal way, the world in a perceptible way.” Thurner, 63. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Actualized-Possibility*, nr.72: “What, then, is the world except the manifestation of the invisible God? What is God except the invisibility of visible things?”

¹⁶³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Eyeglasses*, nr.6. Santinello even suggests that “the spirit of man makes itself the image of God” by its creative activity. Cf. Santinello, *Il pensiero di Nicolò Cusano nella sua prospettiva estetica*, 270. In respect of the doctrine that man is an active designer of creation cf. Wilhelm Dupré, “Der Mensch als Mikrokosmos im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues,” *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 13 (1978): 68-87.

¹⁶⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.III, nr.72. Cf. *The Layman on the Mind*, c.IV, nr.74; nr.75; c.VII, nr.99.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Albert the Great, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, I.II, c.12.

¹⁶⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.VII, nr.98. Cf. Führer, “The Theory of Intellect in Albert the Great and its Influence on Nicholas of Cusa,” 49.

Nicholas speaks of a “mundus similitudinarius”¹⁶⁷ in this context. Man is the creator of an imaginary world.

This already indicates that art is not solely an imitation. In agreement with Aristotle and Plotinus, the cardinal argues that man can both ennoble the given beauties of nature as well as correct its faults through a creative act.¹⁶⁸ What is more, “by not only imitating, but by creating originally, man directly imitates the absolute origin itself of all imitable things.”¹⁶⁹ Through creating, one reaches a closer resemblance to and thus a better imitation of divine creation than by merely imitating it. Cusanus thereby sets himself apart from Plato, as he also does by saying that art produces originals, since the human intellect creates things which have no counterpart in nature:

“A spoon has no other exemplar except our mind’s idea [of the spoon]. For although a sculptor or a painter borrows exemplars from the things that he is attempting to depict, nevertheless, I who bring forth spoons from wood and bring forth dishes and jars from clay do not [do so]. For in my [work] I do not imitate the visible form of any natural object, for such forms of spoons, dishes, and jars are perfected by human artistry alone. So my artistry involves the perfecting, rather than the imitating, of created visible forms, and in this respect it is more similar to the infinite art.”¹⁷⁰

This does not mean that sensuousness, which perceives the state of nature, is superfluous. Quite to the contrary, it plays an important part in the gaining of general knowledge, which is the basis for the creation of beautiful art:

“We who have taken up this profession of philosophy love the foretasted sweetness of Wisdom through no other means than through an appreciative desiring of the things that are subject to the senses. For who would not die in order to obtain such wisdom, from which emanates all beauty, all sweetness of life, and everything desirable? How great is the power

¹⁶⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, II, c.VI, nr.126: “In understanding, it [the intellect] unfolds, by resembling signs and characters, a certain resembling world, which is contracted in it.”

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b4-7; Plotinus, V 8.32-37.

¹⁶⁹ Blumenberg, 623.

¹⁷⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.II, nr.62.

of Wisdom that shines forth in the creation of man! – in his members, in the ordering of the members, in the infused life, the harmony of the organs, the movement, and, finally, in the rational spirit. This spirit is capable of marvelous arts and is, as it were, Wisdom’s imprint; in this spirit, more than in anything else, eternal Wisdom shines forth as in a close image [of itself] – just as an original [shines forth] in its close likeness.”¹⁷¹

Beautiful art is, consequently, a visible sign of eternal Wisdom, which shines through the artist’s creative ability.

6. Surpassing Earthly Beauty

*“One does not find life in descriptions of or in travels through the world, but while the soul sallies forth with its powers to the beautiful form, that is, to abstract beauty, so that one arrives in the house of the bread of life; then pregnant love bursts forth and bears its son, who is life for it.”*¹⁷²

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a) Desire

God as posse ipsum is alone “the beginning of the mind’s desire”¹⁷³ for Nicholas, because “the thinking spirit is not set in motion, if it is not attracted by the spirit who is not from the sensual world, but from the spiritual world, that is, the heavenly or divine one.”¹⁷⁴ That does not mean that desirous motion is something alien to human nature. Quite to the contrary, desire is a natural characteristic of man imprinted in him with creation. Its ultimate goal should be God. Human appetite is part of the human affective nature, which represents the shortest way to the divine goal. But

¹⁷¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Peaceful Unity of Faith*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994) IV, nr.12.

¹⁷² Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XLII. Opera omnia*, vol.17,2, ed. Rudolf Haubst and Hermann Schnarr (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1991) nr.41.

¹⁷³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, nr.12.

¹⁷⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLVIII*, nr.12.

Cusanus explicitly argues that a teaching that would consider the affect the only ruling power in the soul must be seen in opposition to both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.¹⁷⁵ Since it is, moreover, obvious that nothing can be loved that has not been perceived,¹⁷⁶ he emphasizes a necessary connection between the affect and the other part of the human soul, man's intellect. Therefore, the longing for one's fulfilling goal is not a matter of the affect alone, but bears in itself a moral inkling aroused by an intellectual consideration. As a consequence, Nicholas can say that "we do not at all walk rightly unless we seek [God] by means of maximum desire,"¹⁷⁷ including the necessary intellectual consideration. This is, however, only possible if natural desire is perfected by divine grace, namely, in the way that the human form of love, that is, amor, is perfected by the divine love of caritas, which God bestows upon man as a gracious gift without adding anything alien. The essence of human nature remains intact and attains its ultimate value.

Cusanus develops this principle in the traditional way. Fulfillment, and, as a result, the desire leading to the fulfillment, is individual: "Since all things seek to exist, then in all things there is desire from the fount-of-desire, wherein being and desire coincide in the same. Therefore, everything's desire is in accordance with its being, so that rational things desire to exist rationally."¹⁷⁸ Now beauty is something the perception of which corresponds to human nature. God is intellectually regarded under the aspect of his beauty, so that the longing for him, which is demanded by morality, can turn into a longing for absolute Beauty. The Renaissance philosopher refers to Albert at this point, taking up the identity of the beautiful and the good insofar as the subject is concerned. As a result, he can claim

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, "Brief vom 28.Juli 1455 an Bernard de Waging," *Autour de la Docte ignorance. Une Controverse sur la Théologie Mystique au XV^e Siècle*, ed. Edmond Vansteenbergh (Münster: Aschendorff, 1912) 160.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, "Brief vom 12.Februar 1454 an Kaspar Aindorffer," *Autour de la Docte ignorance. Une Controverse sur la Théologie Mystique au XV^e Siècle*, 122.

¹⁷⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.39.

¹⁷⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Genesis of all Things*, c.IV, nr.170. It is not totally consistent with the text – although it is with Christian theology – when Balthasar concludes that the fact that a creature is created coincides with the desire in the creature (Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 570), for Cusanus explicitly stipulates this coincidence for the source of desire, that is, God.

without restriction that “all realities long for beauty earnestly,”¹⁷⁹ for, traditionally, this is the inherent quality of the good. By taking up again the necessity that the longing has to correspond to the specific reality, he concludes that “living intellectual beauty is drawn to absolute Beauty in undescribable desire by apprehending it intellectually.”¹⁸⁰ In accordance with his Neoplatonic predecessors, Cusanus continues by arguing that the deeper one’s desire, the closer the living intellectual beauty comes and the more it is assimilated to the exemplar. The reason for this is that desire, apart from love, incessantly transforms the lover to be in conformity with the beloved object.¹⁸¹ Owing to the fact that there is an infinite gap between every living intellectual beauty and absolute Beauty, the assimilation can only take place in an infinite process, in which God supports the natural and desirous disposition by means of his grace:

“Through a foretaste of the sweetness of a glorious life you draw [me unto yourself] so that I may love you, who are infinite good. You enrapture me, in order that I may transcend myself and foresee the glorious place to which you invite me. You show me many exceedingly appetizing repasts that attract me by their most appealing aroma. You permit [me] to see the treasure of riches, of life, of joy, and of beauty. You disclose, in nature as well as by art, the fount from which flows everything desirable. You keep nothing secret. You do not hide the source of love, of peace, and of rest.”¹⁸²

Cusanus agrees with Plato that this foretaste of true Beauty, which turns into an eternal tasting in the life to come, is so appealing that the appetite does not cease, but is attracted and stimulated even more. He concludes that the intellectual spirit is “always moved by most joyous desire, so that it will attain unto never becoming satiated with the delightfulness of its contact”¹⁸³ with the divine revelations.

¹⁷⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.9. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

¹⁸⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.29.

¹⁸² Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XXV, nr.113. Völker considers the statements on the power of desire in *On the Vision of God* an answer to the attraction of divine Beauty quite undionysian and concludes that they are influenced by Augustine. Cf. Völker, 252.

¹⁸³ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, nr.18.

b) *Cognition*

In a sermon, Cusanus quotes Augustine's presentation of the ascent of the seven steps of contemplation to the contemplation of God. Moreover, he deals with the respective beauty of each state of the ascending soul, which is – as he expresses it – “beautiful from the other, beautiful through the other, beautiful in opposition to the other, beautiful towards the Beautiful, beautiful in the Beautiful, beautiful towards Beauty, beautiful in Beauty.”¹⁸⁴ It is, however, not entirely clear whether the Platonic image of an ascent does justice to what Cusanus really means when he describes cognitive processes. For, based on statements such as “the intellect contemplates within itself the modes of being” and “insofar as they are intelligible the intellect finds, when it seeks, all things to be present within itself in an intellectual way,”¹⁸⁵ H. Lawrence Bond concludes that the ascent to God is an ascent within. According to this interpretation, Cusanus would be more influenced by Plotinus' and Augustine's return inwards to the beauty within oneself than by Plato's ascent upwards to the Idea of Beauty, the existence of which cannot be reduced to anything merely mental. Bond's justification for this hypothesis can be found in Christ: “When the soul seeks its center, it is seeking Christ, for the center of life is Christ.”¹⁸⁶ Since these are two quite different approaches to beauty, the following paragraphs will try to ascertain which image corresponds best to the Cusan philosophy.

Beginning from his doctrine on the Trinity, which holds that within it the source of beauty causes the self-contemplation of beauty, Nicholas analyzes in what respect this is also true for the world outside of God. In the case of man, this comparison is possible because he is the image of God, a teaching that can be interpreted in a Platonic way by means of the archetype-copy-theory.¹⁸⁷ This means that the divine image shines through man: “Since the exemplar-of-all-things shines forth in the mind as a true object shines forth in its image, the mind has within itself that unto which it looks,” so that the “mind is a living description of eternal,

¹⁸⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo IX. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.33. Cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, c.XXXV, n.79.

¹⁸⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Bowling-Game*, II, nr.119.

¹⁸⁶ H. Lawrence Bond, “The Journey of the Soul to God in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Ludo Globi*,” *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, 81-82.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Stallmach, *Ineinsfall der Gegensätze und Weisheit des Nichtwissens*, 37.

infinite wisdom.”¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, man is the only creature to possess this natural quality, so that he, therefore, is not only an image, but a representative of the exemplar, thus rendering him the “exemplar for all of God’s images after him.”¹⁸⁹ Apart from creativity and free will, the intellectual faculty manifests the fact that man is an image of God.¹⁹⁰ There are two possible ways in which the vision of the human self takes place: it can either be understood as a sensual or as an intellectual vision. The former possibility is rejected, since the eye can see itself solely in a mirror. Thus, Cusanus concentrates on the possibility of an intellectual vision:

“[Man] finds in himself the first and nearest sign of the creator. In this sign the creative power shines forth more than in any other known animal. For an intellectual sign is the first and most perfect sign for [signifying] the creator of all things, whereas a perceptible sign is the last [and farthest-removed sign for signifying the creator of all things].”¹⁹¹

This doctrine that the intellect finds God and all other realities in itself is taken over from Proclus’ interpretation of Plato in *The Theology of Plato*.¹⁹² Owing to his rational nature, man has a privileged role in the perception of the cosmos and can “withdraw himself, as best as he can, from all perceptual signs [and turn] toward intellectual and simple and formal signs.”¹⁹³ Sensuous beauty is surpassed in favor of spiritual beauty with the help of desire and love. The manner in which this vision takes place is adopted from Plato’s *Alcibiades I*. “Then how shall we obtain the most certain knowledge of it?” Socrates asks Alcibiades, and continues by establishing a condition for gaining knowledge: “For if we know that, it seems we shall know ourselves also.”¹⁹⁴ Nicholas takes this over, but revises it by saying that

¹⁸⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.V, nr.85. The intellect’s cognition of truth is thereby assured.

¹⁸⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.V, nr.85. Stallmach concludes that man alone is the connection between temporality and eternity owing to his sensual nature’s unity with spirituality. Cf. Stallmach, *Ineinsfall der Gegensätze und Weisheit des Nichtwissens*, 38.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Stallmach, *Ineinsfall der Gegensätze und Weisheit des Nichtwissens*, 39.

¹⁹¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Compendium*, c.VIII, nr.23.

¹⁹² Cf. Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, I 3.

¹⁹³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Compendium*, c.VIII, nr.23.

¹⁹⁴ Plato, *Alcibiades I. Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol.8, transl. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955) 132c. Augustine proceeds in a similar way: “For the mind

the spirit cannot see anything else until it has seen itself. What he means by this self-vision of the spirit is its knowledge that it is intellectual. Only with this knowledge is the spirit able to see other things in itself intellectually, as, for example, beautiful objects as well as the source of itself and all beauty.¹⁹⁵

Nicholas' view of a close relationship between beauty and truth is apparent in his treatment of the apprehension of sensual beauty. For in the tradition of Plato and in agreement with Thomas, he points out that only the more intellectual senses are concerned with the matter of beauty.¹⁹⁶ The general function of these senses is gaining knowledge, for which, above all, the senses of seeing and hearing are qualified. The reason for this connection can be found in exactly this primary ability. They serve the rational spirit; they are even united with it, as Cusanus says, and become nobler through the unification, for reason, which is already considered noble, bestows nobility to everything with which it is united. The senses of seeing and hearing are in a closer unification with the intellect, because they are less animalistic than the other senses. Consequently, the senses of , tasting and touching are neither able to apprehend beauty nor beautiful themselves. They are not intellectual in the sense that they are purely animalistic. This, of course, implies that it is an exclusively human faculty to have an idea of beauty at all.¹⁹⁷ The reason of the senses advances as far as the sensual sphere, thus connecting the intellectual and animalistic areas in man in the case of the senses of hearing and seeing. They are, then, beautiful through their nearness to reason and alone possess the ability to experience beauty. Accordingly, a specific color or form, perceived with the eyes, is called beautiful, as is a certain voice, which the sense of hearing perceives. At this point, the traditional elements of beauty are indicated. A beautiful color expresses the splendor of beauty, while a beautiful form refers to a harmonious construction. A beautiful sound is integrated into the second class, since "the ear is enthralled by a beautiful harmony."¹⁹⁸ In order to

changes nothing so much as that it is present to itself, and nothing is more present to the mind than itself." Augustine, *De Trinitate*, I.XIV, c.4, n.7.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.20; *Sermo CXXX*, nr.6.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d; Augustine, *De ordine*, I.II, c.11, n.33; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.27, a.1, ad 3.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.141, a.4, ad 3.

¹⁹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.3. Cf. *Sermo CCXXXI. Opera omnia*, vol.19,2,

perceive beauty, man needs the ability to register either the innate order or the splendor of the object, with the result that he has an experience of truth. For Cusanus connects these two elements with truth, or to be more exact, with truth in man – for the quiddity of truth itself remains invisible¹⁹⁹ –: His intellectual part, which takes pleasure in a proportional and, therefore, beautiful concept, shines back more clearly in the two intellectual senses, making them beautiful by means of this splendor.²⁰⁰

However, this does not imply that man should be satisfied with the truth that he apprehends through the senses. As Plato did before him, Cusanus differentiates between different types of beauty. At one time, the differentiation concerns accidental and substantial beauty, the former of which is to be seen as the means to approach the latter: “By means of accidental beauty, which we apprehend with the senses and which can be found as in a covering or in the exterior frame of figures, we come to the beauty of the substantial form.”²⁰¹ On the one hand, this is reminiscent of Albert’s definition of beauty, the basis of which is the substantial or accidental form;²⁰² on the other hand, Cusanus indicates the difference between sensuous, and spiritual or intelligible beauty. They are hierarchically structured, with sensuous beauty on the lowest (ultimum) level. In the tradition of Dionysius, he applies the metaphor of light to visualize the Platonic philosophy. Accordingly, he speaks of a “relucentia” of the beautiful on the lowest level. This means that the light of divine Beauty streams into realities, makes them beautiful and shines, so that our more spiritual senses can incorporate it to find the abstract notion of beauty in it. This must be seen in contrast to Albert’s philosophy, according to which there is a direct illumination of the intellect by God. In Cusanus’ eyes, this divine Light illuminates the human intellect through beautiful realities²⁰³ – a crucial difference. This

ed. Marc-Aeilko Aris (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001) nr.2: “The ear feeds on the sweetness or the beauty of a song.”

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Complementary Theological Considerations*, nr.2.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.3.

²⁰¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.22. Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708D-709A.

²⁰² Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 72.

²⁰³ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Matthaicum*, c.5, 34; Nicholas of Cusa, *The Gift of the Father of Lights*, c.V, nr.115-116: “For all created things are lights for actualizing the intellectual power. (...) A man sees that there are diverse creatures, and by means of this diversity he is enlightened, in order that he may proceed to the essential light of created things. For when he sees that one creature exists without vital movement, that another lives, and that a

illuminating experience of beauty is devised in such a way that it causes admiration in man, followed by the arousal of a power in the intellectual spirit: “But in our minds, at the beginning, life resembles someone asleep, until it is aroused to activity by wonder, which arises from the influence of perceptible objects.”²⁰⁴ Consequently, there has to be an actualization of the intellect’s living in truth by an encounter with sensuous reality.²⁰⁵ This prompts it to strive for the beautiful in a purely intellectual way. If man sought beauty in a purely sensual way, he would experience merely a tiny bit of what is possible in an intellectual encounter. The reason for this is that all realities strive for the beautiful, or, where man is concerned, should strive for the beautiful, in accordance with their distinctive nature, that is, “essentially, vitally or intellectually.”²⁰⁶ Since the nature of the Beautiful-and-Good is the form of the intellectual nature, man, having an intellectual nature, partakes of the nature of the Beautiful-and-Good in an intellectual way. Only by doing so can the intellectual nature live and be fed, for “its life consists in the intellectual contemplation and tasting of the Good and the Beautiful.”²⁰⁷ Intellectual contemplation is open to all spheres and even implies the element of truth, since intellectual natures are considered to be natures beholding truth.²⁰⁸ Hence, “we must magnify the nature of sensible vision and construct, from that nature, a ladder of ascent in the presence of the eye of intellectual vision.”²⁰⁹

Man’s cognition of beauty and his succeeding desire for it correspond to the inner attraction of all beautiful realities. Yet, his natural striving should be in accordance with the different levels of beauty. Thus, as indicated above, sensuous beauty must be seen as a starting-point, from which one ascends to the beauty of our spirit. The next and final step is directed to the admiration of the source of beauty.²¹⁰ Although he mentions fewer steps,

third reasons, immediately he is enlightened [and sees] that the absolute essence of created things does not similarly exist or live or reason.”

²⁰⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.V, nr.85.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Stallmach, *Ineinsfall der Gegensätze und Weisheit des Nichtwissens*, 39.

²⁰⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.16.

²⁰⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.17.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.26. Thus, Cusanus agrees with Plato’s *Philebus* that the so-called intellectual forms of beauty are linked to truth, through which they gain their value.

²⁰⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.19.

²¹⁰ In *The Layman on the Mind*, Cusanus enumerates five steps, the lowest of which is sensual

Cusanus uses the Platonic image of an ascent from a diversity of concrete things to a focus on oneness, and emphasizes also that the higher level embraces the lower one.²¹¹ He thereby evades the criticism often addressed to Plato that the ascent means an abandonment of sensuality. On the other hand, he does say that man leaves all ugly elements behind, that is, the sins revealed to him by his conscience. This implies that ugliness is considered the opposite of beauty rather than a lower degree of it, for a lower degree of beauty is in a way still beautiful.²¹² Hoye rightly states that “realities are not left behind. Contempt of the world has to be understood platonically: It means the relativization of a layer of perception, so that realities become signs. It is about light and shadow, pictures and copies, not about separated worlds.”²¹³

Cusanus obviously favors Platonic language here in his use of the image of an ascent from concreteness to abstract unity. This does not mean, however, that he neglects the Plotinic image of a return inwards. This approach is evident when he says that vision lives delectably in visible beauty, which it seeks in every discourse. Yet, in the intellectual vision of itself, the intellectual nature seeks to see the giver of the form, in whom nothing is

cognition, followed by imagination, rational cognition, intellectual cognition as the cognition of the forms of things (Michael Thomas interprets this as a “vision of the Ideas.” Thomas, 112) and finally the vision of the divine One. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Layman on the Mind*, c.VII, nr.100-106.

²¹¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.29; *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.VIII, nr.19: “Plato (...) considered higher things to be present in lower things by way of participation; but he considered lower things to be present in higher things by way of excellence.”

²¹² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.29. Otherwise ugliness would have to be included in the admiration of the source of beauty. That this cannot be the case in Nicholas’ eyes becomes clear in his use of the Neoplatonic doctrine of assimilation. For man’s aspiration intends “to be conformed to the source of beauty with our beauty in continuing love.” Man is drawn to absolute Beauty by apprehending it intellectually. The deeper the desire for absolute Beauty is, the closer man comes and the more he is assimilated to the exemplar. For desire or love transforms the lover to conformity with the beloved object incessantly. “Unless our intellect is conformed to him [God], it will not understand, because unless the absolute same is seen, the befigurings of his likeness will not be understood. [By comparison]: if Socrates is not known, then no one can recognize the image-of-Socrates.” Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Genesis of all Things*, c.IV, nr.172.

²¹³ William J. Hoye, “Wahrnehmung als Glückseligkeit nach Nikolaus von Kues,” *Aisthesis. Die Wahrnehmung des Menschen. Gottessinn. Menschensinn. Kunstsin*, ed. Harald Schwaetzer and Henrieke Stahl-Schwaetzer (Regensburg: S. Roderer Verlag, 1999) 45.

more beautiful and in which the search comes to rest.²¹⁴ How are these two approaches related to one another? Cusanus argues that it is necessary for man to know himself intellectually before he is able to know anything else, including God. He continues by claiming that the intellectual vision of oneself is actually a search for God in oneself. In contrast to this, he frequently mentions the ascent from sensuous reality via intellectual reality to the source of reality. Although it can be said that the second approach presupposes a vision of oneself, an answer to the question in which way God can be apprehended cannot yet be given. My analysis of the facial vision will be more conclusive.

Cusanus takes over Albert's differentiation between the speculative and the practical intellect, which work together in man not only in order to provide the ability to perceive a reality but also in order to be affected by it. This ability corresponds to one of the processions originating in God and perfecting the rational creature, for perception alone is not enough for man to become happy. Accordingly, whenever the intellect perceives a reality, it discerns it as true, which in turn "glows and is kindled as good" when appropriate. No sooner than this is human desire moved to the specific reality,²¹⁵ because truth is the human good and "aspiration generates truth."²¹⁶ Even during the vision of God in the eternal life – and despite the lack there of a desirous movement – both parts of the intellect are involved. A vision of absolute Truth itself through the speculative intellect would not be sufficient to make man happy, although it is a necessary presupposition. Truth must be apprehended under the aspect of the good by the practical intellect, or else there would be no love. At first glance, this theory originating in Albert's theology and adopted by Nicholas seems to be close to Thomas' definition of beauty. Both Albert and Nicholas take Thomas' step of connecting the good, the true and the beautiful. The two theologians

²¹⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLVI*, nr.17.

²¹⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.4; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71. Owing to this cooperation of the intellect and the will, it is not entirely clear why Balthasar considers the intellectual part to be more important: "Here, Plotinus' notion of the mind becomes decisively more important than the Eros of the *Symposium*, which strives for the beautiful, because it [Eros] does not possess it." Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik III. Im Raum der Metaphysik*, 564.

²¹⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXXXIII. Opera omnia*, vol.19,7, ed. Heide Dorothea Riemann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2005) nr.10.

say that man's apprehension of a true thing under the aspect of the good corresponds to the divine procession of the beautiful. The difference in comparison with Aquinas is that, first of all, the connection of truth with the good is only related to what happens in God. The aspect that he is the principle of causality is displayed by the procession of beauty. Secondly, for them beauty does not presuppose a unity of truth and the good, as it does for Thomas, who describes beauty as something that pleases when seen.²¹⁷ Although he might have learnt the overall idea of connecting the three concepts from his teacher, Thomas leaves the traditional path at the decisive point. For in Albert's and Cusanus' doctrine, a certain hierarchical structure is implied, since its starting-point is a true thing that is then regarded under one of its aspects, in this case the aspect of goodness. This indicates not that two aspects exist as a unity, but that the apprehension of the good aspect of a reality is subsequent to the apprehension of its truth. However, this succession does not apply to God, in whom Truth and Goodness do coincide. Cusanus concludes that God as the unknown can be loved in such a way that this love of the good brings about for man a knowledge of truth.²¹⁸

Man's task on earth is to find the creator in the world, who is "the fulfillment of all mental beauty."²¹⁹ In order to accomplish this task, the human soul, that is, man's speculative and practical intellect, has to move forward – or inwards. Influenced by Plato, Nicholas asserts that the nature of the soul is motion. Consequently, movement does not happen to it, since the intellect cannot be intellect apart from intellectual motion, through which the intellect is in act. Thus, intellectual motion is substantial, self-moving motion not directly moved by God,²²⁰ but nevertheless motivated by an encounter with reality. In the course of working Albert's and Dionysius' doctrine on beauty into his sermon on the same topic, Cusanus tries to integrate the threefold motion of the soul originating in Proclus and being used and analyzed by Dionysius, Albert and Thomas, as a means of approaching the primary Beauty.²²¹ Although he tries to keep to Albert, thus adopting the

²¹⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1.

²¹⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXXXIV. Opera omnia*, vol.19,3, nr.3.

²¹⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XXII, nr.95.

²²⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *The Bowling-Game*, I, nr.24; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c-246a.

²²¹ Cf. Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, VI 52; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 705A-B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 104-108; Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.IV, l.7, n.374-379.

Aristotelian position with regard to the matter of the agent and possible intellect, he shortens the nine questions in which Albert treats the different motions to a few lines. As a consequence, only a rough frame remains, in which the three kinds of motion are not even clearly distinguished from one another. The introduction is made by the general Dionysian remark that the beautiful, which is convertible with the good, is the cause of every movement of the spirit,²²² so that desire falls into its realm. Before considering the three motions of the soul, Nicholas examines, like his predecessors, those of the angels. There, the classification is still clear: Angels are shown the beauty of a good in the center, move to the periphery in order to reveal it and then return to this beauty for the sake of enjoyment. In contrast to his predecessors, who pointed out three individual motions, the whole process here is a circular motion containing straight and spiral components. The former sub-motion is identified with the striving to the periphery, the latter one with the return.²²³ In the case of the souls, there is the same number of motions, but Cusanus does not take the trouble to mention their distinctive functions. Instead he establishes an overall process of human cognition in the tradition of Albert, as previously described. Accordingly, the soul is able to see particular things with the help of the agent intellect. The latter in turn is imbued by the power of divine Light, with which the agent intellect can work. If the soul wants to take a look into the intellect itself, it has to withdraw from concreteness for the purpose of returning to the first Light. In order to do so, the possible intellect must absorb the light of the agent intellect and has then to return from the basis of concrete things to the vision of itself in itself. Finally, that which gave the intellect its actual being returns to the first intellect.²²⁴ In analogy to the angelic sub-motions, the capability of the agent intellect to grasp particulars is to be seen as straight motion, whereas the return of the intellect into itself and, by doing so, to the first and, therefore, divine intellect can be interpreted as the spiral motion of the soul. Cusanus obviously presents a circular motion in this theory, so

²²² Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 704C.

²²³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.10.

²²⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.11-12; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 103. At this point, it is not clear how far this theory really presents Nicholas' own philosophy, since it is obvious that it is partly inconsistent with what he says, for example, in *The Gift of the Father of Lights*. As mentioned above, he states there that God illuminates the intellect not directly but indirectly through his creation.

that he can make the connection with divine Beauty in the sense that “the motion emanates from the beauty of the first and returns to it.”²²⁵ By doing so, he goes back to his introduction, which he further elaborates, thus forming a circle himself.

In its search for God, the moving soul is supported by the world and the creatures surrounding it, since they serve as signs referring back to their origin. When, for example, one’s mind is favorably disposed toward some creature, it looks at the same time unto the creator, who is the mind’s own love and delight. The reason for this is that the beauty of man as the living image of God is so enormous that it is possible to enjoy divine Beauty in this image.²²⁶ Cusanus concludes that one who is seeking God should consider towards what his mind is directed when he loves, and should turn to what has been presupposed, where he will find the ineffable sweetness of love.²²⁷ Something similar is true for attributes of visible things – in particular, the size, beauty, and order of things – which lead man to an admiration of the divine art and its excellence,²²⁸ for the creator can be knowably seen through the greatness of the beauty of creation.²²⁹

Unfortunately, despite all these references to God, there remains a problem: There is no comparative relation of the creature to the creator, and no created thing, consequently, possesses a beauty through which the creator can be attained. The human knowledge emanating from an encounter with divine creation must be of a special kind. It is an elevation of man to the level of incomprehensibility: “But from the greatness of the beauty and adornment of created things we are elevated unto what is infinitely and incomprehensibly beautiful – just as from a work of craft [we are referred] to the craftsman, although the work of craft bears no comparative relation to the craftsman.”²³⁰ Despite the fact that man cannot conceive of

²²⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCXLIII, nr.12.

²²⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCLXI. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,5, nr.12.

²²⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Complementary Theological Considerations*, nr.7.

²²⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, II, c.13, nr.175.

²²⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.18; *The Book of Wisdom*, 13:5.

²³⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.18. Cf. *Compendium*, c.VIII, nr.24: “With the full sharpness of his mental sight [man] takes very intent note of how the eternal and inaccessible Light shines forth in these [intellectual, formal signs]. Thus, he sees that the incomprehensible cannot be seen to exist otherwise than in an incomprehensible mode of being.”

any likeness to God, this world is useful to the seeker, for otherwise man would be sent into the world to seek God in vain. Hence, this world must offer assistance to the seeker in that the seeker realizes that neither in this world nor in anything which man conceives is there any likeness to God.²³¹ In opposition to Thomas Aquinas, the German cardinal is of the opinion that God's concealment does not refer to himself. The reason for his incomprehensibility can instead be found in one of his attributes, namely, in his infiniteness, which, as Alvarez-Gómez underscores, is not the negation but the fulfillment of finiteness.²³² Therefore, there exists this tension between man's attempt to seek God, the assistance given in this search and the final impossibility of its success. For, "the mind's power to see exceeds its power to comprehend,"²³³ so that "quiddity must be sought beyond all cognitive power and before all variation and opposition."²³⁴ Nicholas demonstrates that this natural desire of the intellect to know God's quiddity is not innate to it; rather, the innate desire is to know that its God is so great that there is no end of his greatness. This assumption makes God greater than everything conceived and knowable. God is infinite; man is finite and cannot find a benchmark by which to comprehend infinity; therefore, God remains unknown. Cusanus bases this theory on Plato, who states that he would be surprised if God were to be found – and would be even more surprised if, having been found, God could be made manifest.²³⁵ Yet, "it is the concern of philosophy and also of the philosopher Nicholas of Cusa to turn this ignorare again to a scire,"²³⁶ as Siegfried Dangelmayr puts it. The better someone knows that this knowledge cannot be had, the more learned he is according to Cusanus.²³⁷ The knowledge of this incapacity is even the highest form of natural non-knowledge and is called *docta ignorantia*, a phrase coined by Augustine²³⁸ but based

²³¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.18.

²³² Cf. Alvarez-Gómez, 238; Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, nr.12.

²³³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, nr.10.

²³⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, nr.4.

²³⁵ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 28c; Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XII, nr.33.

²³⁶ Siegfried Dangelmayr, *Gotteserkenntnis und Gottesbegriff in den philosophischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues* (Meisenheim: Verlag Anton Hain KG, 1969) 23. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XXIX. Opera omnia*, vol.17,1, ed. Rudolf Haubst and Hermann Schnarr (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983) nr.11: "That which is loved most by the perceiving spirit, for whom non-knowledge is death, is cognition itself."

²³⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XII, nr.32.

on the wisdom of Plato's Socrates. With it, the intellect attains its natural perfection.

God is sought exactly because of his comprehensible-incomprehensible character, since the intellect can be satisfied only by what is understood by not understanding.²³⁹ Hence, he would not be the end of desire unless he were infinite. Moreover, the *docta ignorantia* is the presupposition of faith according to the German philosopher, while faith intensifies it and leads it to the vision of God,²⁴⁰ that is, to the supernatural perfection of the intellect. In this last sense, it can still be said that Cusanus refers to the Augustinian estimation of faith as the beginning of understanding.²⁴¹

If not even the Apostle Paul, "who was caught up unto the third heaven," comprehended the incomprehensible God, no one can.²⁴² This does not, however, imply that man should simply rest during his earthly existence, since God created human nature in such a way that makes rest impossible: "He has granted a definite period of time for men's being in this world, in order that they might seek him."²⁴³ Death means a loss of reality, and it is reality that man is seeking. An experience of reality itself would make man happy, so that the knowledge of an eternal life would undermine the need for this experience to be maintained. It would always be there, and man would, consequently, not search for it, that is, for reality itself in the form of God. But since the approach towards light – instead of towards that which is illuminated by it – ends in a darkness caused by light that is too bright, "the vision of the intellect is never sated with the apprehension of truth."²⁴⁴ For what the intellect can find is something true, a *verum*, but not Truth itself, that is, *veritas*. Every true object is a divine footprint, a quasi

²³⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XVI, nr.74.

²⁴⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.244. With regard to the relationship between the intellect and faith cf. Jasper Hopkins, *Glaube und Vernunft im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues. Prolegomena zu einem Umriß seiner Auffassung* (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1996).

²⁴¹ Cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, c.I.

²⁴² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Truth*, nr.2.

²⁴³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.17.

²⁴⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLII. Opera omnia*, vol.18,2, nr.11. The doctrine that God is too cognizable to be perceived originates in Augustine's *De libero arbitrio. Patrologia Latina*, vol.32, l.II, c.12, n.34. Cf. also Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 998A-B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1; Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, c.I, l.3, n.82.

divine signature which can be used as an aid in finding the creator. Cusanus illustrates this through the image of the hound: “Now, a hunting-dog makes use of the [capability of] inference with which he is endowed – makes use of it in regard to vestiges and in relation to sensible experience – in order by this means to attain, at length, what is sought.”²⁴⁵ These vestiges are not to be understood as mere static images, but as a “path of signifying reference of a fleeting goal to be traced,” as Blumenberg formulates it. For “firstly, there is truth, then its vestige; one cannot search for truth without walking in its vestige.”²⁴⁶ This implies that the search for God is not merely a passive reference to him in a state of ecstasy, but also an active attempt by man. And yet, the means with which one is equipped, such as logic and any philosophical investigation, are not wholly successful. They do not attain unto seeing.

The coincidence of opposites is the last thing reachable by intellectual cognition, since the human intellect is bound to the principle of non-contradiction. Cusanus alludes to Dionysius as the founder of this theory,²⁴⁷ for the latter claims that God is small and big at the same time. Yet, Nicholas is of the opinion that God still transcends the coincidence, or else

²⁴⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.14. Cf. also *On Eyeglasses*, n.62: “What does the creator intend when from a thorny bush he brings forth so beautiful and fragrant a perceptible rose by means of the movement of the heavens and the instrument of nature? What else can be replied except that that marvelous intellect intends to manifest himself in that ‘word’ of his? [He intends to manifest] of what great wisdom and rationality he is – and what the riches of his glory are – when by means of a small perceptible thing he so easily places such great beauty, so lovely proportioned, in the presence of the cognitive senses, [placing it there] together with a movement of joy and with a most pleasing harmony that gladdens a man’s entire nature.”

²⁴⁶ Blumenberg, 575. Cf. also Blumenberg, 576, where he proves the insufficiency of the divine footprints: “The vestige has merely the character of a signal (...). The vestige appeals to man’s longing for truth, but does not provide him with any, not even with partial fulfillment.”

²⁴⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, c.16, nr.43. In *On Eyeglasses*, n.32, Cusanus criticizes scholars such as Albert the Great for misinterpreting Dionysius: “I think that if with abiding perseverance they had followed the great Dionysius, they would have seen quite plainly the beginning of all things, and they would have written commentaries on Dionysius in accordance with the intention of that writer himself. Instead, when they come to [the doctrine of] the conjunction of opposites, they interpret the text of the divine teacher disjunctively.” Raymond Klibansky, on the other hand, suggests that the Latinized Proclus gave rise to this fundamental concept of philosophy. Cf. Klibansky, 26.

man would be able to grasp him. As a result, God would be reduced to the finite region and, instead of God, man with his measuring intellect would be the final instance, so that man would cease to strive for him.²⁴⁸ In order to remain the Good itself, it is, therefore, important that God not lose the character of incomprehensibility, which is why the theory is equated with the Dionysian darkness.²⁴⁹ This transcendence is, however, not substantial, but can be overcome eschatologically. Blumenberg points out that God freely withholds himself by being transcendent in order to make possible faith as a habit of subjection and as the precondition for the removal of the withholding. Moreover, “transcendence as a process corresponds to transcending as a chase after the withholder.”²⁵⁰ The human striving for higher intelligibility in the pursuit of wisdom causes the insatiability of man’s striving for more and more knowledge.²⁵¹ Yet, as described by the Platonic tradition, this is not a mystical but a philosophical ascent of active dialectics instead of passive ecstasy.²⁵² Cusanus also uses the Platonic style when his

²⁴⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.32. God is identified with the complication of all opposites only in the beginning of Nicholas’ intellectual life. With *On Surmises* he revises his theory in order not to refer infinity to finiteness. Cf. also *On the Vision of God*, c.IX, nr.39, where the same idea is presented in a more figurative way: “And [this coincidence] is the wall of paradise, wherein you dwell. The gate of this wall is guarded by a most lofty rational spirit; unless this spirit is vanquished the entrance will not be accessible. Therefore, on the other side of the coincidence of contradictories you can be seen – but not at all on this side.” By justifying this with the statement that “God is not the foundation of contradiction but is simplicity, which is prior to every foundation” (*On the Hidden God*, nr.9), the highest principle of Neoplatonism, that is, the One, shines through.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.22; Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 998A-B; 1000A; 1025B. Nicholas criticizes Albert for the latter’s ignorance of the paradoxes in the Dionysian text. When the original says that the invisible is seen, “Albert interprets it in such a way that he avoids the contradiction, but he thereby obviously presents an insufficient analysis.” Nicholas of Cusa, “Marginal 589,” 112. According to Nicholas, a sufficient interpretation would have been his coincidence of opposites. The only thing striking here is, as Rudolf Haubst points out, that the basic idea of the coincidence of opposites was communicated to Cusanus by Heymeric, who connected it with Albert’s commentaries on Dionysius. Cf. Rudolf Haubst, “Albert, wie Cusanus ihn sah,” *Albertus Magnus. Doctor universalis*, 173. Hence, there must be some inkling in Albert’s commentaries, although he reduces ‘coincidunt’ to ‘incidunt.’ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 86.

²⁵⁰ Blumenberg, 561.

²⁵¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, c.18, nr.52.

²⁵² Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276e-277a; *Republic*, 518c; Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 28; 61.

“burning enthusiasm towards the vision of the highest, which is also for Plato inaccessible by a direct determination of its content, connects itself to dialectics, so that the latter – far from being merely intellectual acrobatics – can become a stepping stone for the highest ascent,”²⁵³ although it must lead beyond itself. Darkness and non-knowledge are, then, not the goal but a stage that necessarily has to be passed, showing that the way one has taken is the right one. Man’s ability to gain insight is not to be eliminated. As the Christian tradition holds, nature is presupposed and perfected by grace. So, too, our intellect is perfected in a more intensified life.²⁵⁴

John Wenck criticizes Cusanus severely for his theory in *On Learned Ignorance*, where he is said to enter into intense darkness, to leave behind all the beauty and comeliness of creatures, and to vanish amid thoughts. “Still being a pilgrim, and hence not being able to see God as he is, he does not at all glorify God. Rather, going about in his own darkness, he leaves behind the peak-of-divine-praise to which all psalmody is brought.”²⁵⁵ Wenck, therefore, asks who among the faithful does not know that this is disbelief and most impious. Nicholas himself understands man’s problematic state on earth. God is invisible and incomprehensible, so that it is likely that man favors what he can see and understand. Yet, he is aware of a different possibility, namely, a life the style of which is influenced by Christ.

That man is an image of God illustrates that his nature includes an aspect of eternity. Jesus Christ, as that human being with the highest form of perfection in his nature owing to the fact that divine Beauty and loveliness are present in his humanity,²⁵⁶ has a special and singular relation to eternity, for he is able to understand both it and creation. In order to have this ability, a human nature is not sufficient. The perceiving intellect must rather have a divine nature apart from the human one, thus understanding God and with this condition also God’s act. Moreover, through Christ alone is all other human perfection and man’s final happiness possible: Jesus is called the goal of all understanding because he is Truth itself, of all sensing

²⁵³ Bredow, 59.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Völker, 252.

²⁵⁵ John Wenck, *On Unknown Learning*, transl. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988) nr.24.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXXV*, nr.22.

because he is Life, and of all being because he is Being itself. He is the perfection of every creature because he is both God and man.²⁵⁷ In Jesus “all things [exist]; and every creature [exists] in the supreme and most perfect humanity, which completely enfolds all creatable things.”²⁵⁸ The intellect is perfected and grows through the Word of God, that is, through Christ, and is made progressively more capable of receiving the Word. This perfection is not a corruptible perfection but is godlike.²⁵⁹ Nicholas calls the state of perfection to be attained by humanity “christiformitas”²⁶⁰ and uses the language of beauty to illustrate the process: The living intellectual beauty is carried to absolute Beauty by seeing or understanding it, and

²⁵⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.247.

²⁵⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.4, nr.204. Blumenberg indicates that there is an antinomy in creation which is overcome by Christ. On the one hand, creation is perfect in the sense that it actualizes all its possibilities, namely, owing to divine Goodness. On the other hand, it must not reach the limit of what is possible in its origin. Christ, finally, exhausts the possibilities of his human nature. He is, therefore, qualified to bring creation to its perfection (cf. Blumenberg, 634) by being sacrificed for it. According to Blumenberg, God’s sacrifice of his Son is not the result of man’s sin, but is due to a defect in creation. Cf. Blumenberg, 638. This last remark is severely criticized by Jasper Hopkins, because in *On Learned Ignorance* it is shown that “both the creation and sin, both the deficiency of nature and the deficiency of man press toward the consequence of Christ’s sacrificial death.” Jasper Hopkins, *Interpretive Study, On the Vision of God*, 88.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XXIV, nr.108.

²⁶⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.252: “Assuredly, the power of faith is great: it makes a man Christlike, so that he abandons perceptible things, divests himself of the contaminating things of the flesh, walks in the ways of God with reverence, follows the steps of Christ with joy, willingly bears a cross with exaltation – so that he exists in the flesh as a spirit for whom (on account of Christ) this world is death and for whom removal from this world (in order to be with Christ) is life.” Cf. also Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708D; *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165C-D; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.1; *Super Dionysii De caelestis hierarchia*, c.4; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1. As Christ has, so, too, has beauty the ability to assimilate and bind the viewer to it. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXXV*, nr.18, where it is said that spiritual beauty is the object that makes the intellectual spirit attentively adhere to it, and it immediately flows into its own similarity, so that it assimilates the potency to itself. Beauty in things converts the eyes to itself and binds to itself the one who sees somehow in an immobile way, so that it cannot leave. With regard to faith and love cf. also *Sermo CIX*, nr.6: “One who should come has to be worthy. (...) Worthiness is twofold: The first is that through which one enters; this is faith. The second is that through which one stays worthy; this is love.” As is here indicated, faith and love are closely connected to one another, so that it can even be said that one is not possible without the other.

the accompanied assimilation of man to it during his life on earth, so as to attain the highest possible human form of existence, serves as a preparation for the life to come in the sense of a necessary condition for the union with God.²⁶¹ However, the assimilation is only a presupposition, because it represents an infinite movement in spite of the attempt to become more and more perfect.

Christ leads man unto a clear contemplation of God by his word and example, so that assimilation implies for Cusanus, as it did for the theologians before him, an *imitatio Christi*, since “virtuousness of life, observance of the commandments, outward devotion, mortification of the flesh, contempt of the world, and other such things rightly accompany the one who seeks the divine life and eternal wisdom.”²⁶² These self-chastenings have the function of strengthening the will as well as of purifying man in order to make him focus on the apprehension of eternal wisdom, for “he who desires with utmost intensity to apprehend eternal wisdom, places nothing before it in his love.”²⁶³ On the other hand, Nicholas carries the neglect of earthly life to extremes in his assertion that this lover of eternal wisdom “cannot be conformable to it if he clings to that other, corruptible worldly wisdom or to sensible delight. Hence, leaving behind all things, he hastens expeditiously onward in the fervor of love.”²⁶⁴ The reason for

²⁶¹ Nicholas “thinks the potentiality to unity of thinking, its synthesizing power of seeing, to an end by leading it beyond himself towards the no longer thinking experience of the unity (...) of his own origin.” Werner Beierwaltes, “Visio facialis – Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus,” *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 18 (1989): 107. Cusanus’ doctrine of similiarity corresponds to Albert’s philosophy on the same topic. In that sense, they both must be seen in contrast to Master Eckehart, who pleads for the thesis that the deification of man results in an identity with God rather than in a similarity. For a more detailed analysis of the three theologians with regard to this question cf. Führer, “The Theory of Intellect in Albert the Great and its Influence on Nicholas of Cusa,” 54-55.

²⁶² Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.42.

²⁶³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.42. Cf. *Sermo XXVII. Opera omnia*, vol.17,1, nr.3: “The lesser cannot return to the taste of happiness, if it does not get rid of the lesser dirt. (...) It is, therefore, necessary, if we want to return to the taste of the sweetness of eternal happiness, that we be qualified for it in our nature.” With regard to the necessity of purification cf. Plotinus, I 6.6.1-2.

²⁶⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.42. Nicholas again recalls Plotinus’ return inwards when he demands that “you turn yourself toward him by entering daily more deeply within yourself and leaving behind all that is outside so that you may be found to be on that

this is that the freer thinking is from earthly things, and the more spiritual, illuminated and separated it is from the cares of this world and from all passions, the more dearly and quickly and the more burning with love it pursues wisdom.²⁶⁵ Moreover, the more one concentrates oneself on the attempt to apprehend God, the more one's ability to perceive him increases.

This imitation and this abandonment of concrete reality are a human responsibility, but are nevertheless again brought about solely with the help of Christ: "Leaping beyond all things which are visible and mundane, man obtains the full perfection of his nature. This is the perfect nature which we who have been transformed into Christ's image can obtain in Christ after the flesh and sin have been mortified."²⁶⁶ Michael Thomas calls the Son, therefore, "the mediator for the vision of God for every human being."²⁶⁷ While Nicholas does not make the explicit claim, Plato's concept of Eros as the mediator between man and the Idea of Beauty is an adumbration of his Christology.

c) Love

According to Cusanus, cognition is not the only means of approaching God. He remains in the Platonic tradition by emphasizing its connection with love. For him, knowledge is a result of love, since love includes knowledge

pathway whereby God is discovered – so that thereafter you can apprehend him in truth." *On Seeking God*, nr.50.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLVIII*, nr.12. Cf. also *Sermo CLVIII*, nr.10, where it is said that the love of wisdom is the good, while tasted wisdom is love.

²⁶⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.252-253. This retreat from the plurality of the world is necessary owing to God's simplicity. If the intellect intends to see him, it has to assimilate to the simplicity, thus parting with all plurality: "If you want to get to God, sense the origin of the many." *Sermo XXIV*, nr.18. Cf. also *Sermo XL. Opera omnia*, vol.17,2, nr.16; *Sermo CCLXXXVIII. Opera omnia*, vol.19,7, nr.5, where it is said that the simple can only be perceived by the simple. The origin of this doctrine can, of course, be found in Neoplatonism and its emphasis on oneness. Accordingly, the more creation partakes of the transcendent Not-Other, whose way of being immanent in the world is defined by individuality, the more it increases in individuality. Cf. Paul Bolberitz, *Philosophischer Gottesbegriff bei Nikolaus Cusanus in seinem Werk De non aliud* (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag GmbH, 1989) 64-70.

²⁶⁷ Thomas, 116.

in itself²⁶⁸: “Love without cognition does not exist.”²⁶⁹ Yet, whatever is loved, is loved as a good, which is impossible if one does not know the good. This applies to human love for God as well. Man has to have a certain knowledge of him in order to love him,²⁷⁰ even if this knowledge manifests itself solely in a desirous movement towards his beauty: “If you love what you search for, you love something unknown and yet not unknown, namely, because you search for it.”²⁷¹ This implies that there cannot be a priority of negative theology, but that our love for God reveals that we do not have him completely, or else it would lose its heat.²⁷² This coincidence of some knowledge and no knowledge is captured in the term ‘docta ignorantia.’

Man is the only creature with a knowledge of love (*scientia amoris*): “All being has its existence from love, but intellectual being alone perceives God as love by loving God, who is love.”²⁷³ This is due to the fact that “the image of absolute and eternal love has a tendency by nature to love its creator.”²⁷⁴ Since God is Love itself, it is not possible to perceive him without loving him.²⁷⁵ This applies to every beauty that the human intellect encounters, for Cusanus takes over Dionysius’ assertion that man and every other reality face beauty with a sentiment of love. This is to be understood simply as a desirous and longing attitude or a certain movement towards it, for love in the modern sense does not refer to all realities. Indeed, Cusanus goes even further by claiming that everything that is done and wanted is so for the sake of the desire not for the Beautiful but for the Dionysian unity of the Beautiful-and-Good.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXX. Opera omnia*, vol.19,2, nr.9. This makes it clear that Nicholas rejects Bonaventure’s hypothesis that the union with God concerns the affect alone and leaves the intellect aside. Cf. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum/Der Pilgerweg des Menschen zu Gott*, transl. Marianne Schlosser (Münster: Lit, 2004) c.7. It is quite to the contrary: Love and knowledge work together.

²⁶⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLXXII. Opera omnia*, vol.18,3, nr.2.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief vom 14.September 1453 an Kaspar Aindorffer,” *Autour de la Docte ignorance. Une Controverse sur la Théologie Mystique au XVe Siècle*, 115.

²⁷¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXXXVII. Opera omnia*, vol.19,3, nr.12.

²⁷² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief vom 22.September 1452 an Kaspar Aindorffer,” *Autour de la Docte ignorance. Une Controverse sur la Théologie Mystique au XVe Siècle*, 112.

²⁷³ Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief an Nikolaus Albergati,” 30, nr.12.

²⁷⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief an Nikolaus Albergati,” 30, nr.13.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLXXII*, nr.3.

The result of this inflammation of desire is satisfaction, since one gets to see the beloved beauty and goodness. Yet, this experienced satisfaction provokes a longing for more satisfaction: “In inflaming me you feed me, and in feeding me you intensify my desire.”²⁷⁶ The impossibility of man’s love being totally satisfied applies both to God and even more to everything outside of him. This becomes clear when Nicholas uses the Platonic images of shadows and illusions of divine love, through which he expresses something that goes beyond Plato. For in the cardinal’s eyes, these shadows bring only agony and suffering. In this sense, the abandonment of earthly love does not even seem to be a sacrifice. Its only effect is dazzlement owing to a wrong measure of the lover’s judgment. He does not judge in harmony with real insight, but according to his passions (*secundum affectum*).²⁷⁷ In contrast, Plato, who knows of the same negative effects of sensuous love, accepts the shadows of divine love as necessary steps of human love integrated in the highest form.²⁷⁸ However, Nicholas is not quite consistent in his rejection of earthly love. For example in a sermon, he attributes perfection to human love because it is the image of divine love: “If the love of one’s neighbor is not an image of divine love, it is not perfect. (...) Loving one’s neighbor means loving God in his copy. (...) Through the love of one’s neighbor, we attain knowledge of God as through an image and an analogy.”²⁷⁹ To my mind, an evaluation of human love depends on the perspective one takes in its analysis. Accordingly, one can stress either the likeness to divine love or the deficiency in contrast to divine love. In *Complementary Theological Considerations*, Nicholas goes so far as to subsume human love into the afterlife: “If everything loved has from love the fact that it is lovable, then if absolute Love is tasted of, it will not be abandoned.”²⁸⁰ All in all, Cusanus rather follows Augustine by calling God the satisfaction of love.²⁸¹ Man receives only positive gifts by loving God, namely, freedom and life: “The spirit rooted in love remains free and independent from every earthly bondage, since he is united with

²⁷⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.IV, nr.13.

²⁷⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLI*, nr.12.

²⁷⁸ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210a-e.

²⁷⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLI*, nr.2. Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 133, where Albert argues that created love is an image of divine love.

²⁸⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *Complementary Theological Considerations*, nr.7.

²⁸¹ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, l.I, c.1, n.1.

his God, who is Love itself, without being tied to any creature, which cannot give anything from itself. Thus, love is the connection of our free spirit to animating life.”²⁸² When the rational spirit loves, its love is accompanied by joy as a perception of the spirit’s fullness of life.²⁸³ The connection is totally fulfilled when God as Beauty, Goodness and Truth itself is clearly seen, so that intellectual love cannot be satisfied until the beatific vision.²⁸⁴

Nevertheless, Cusanus adopts the picture of peace which is suggested by the doctrine: Both the love between creatures and the love between a creature and God brings steadiness into the restlessness of life. Moreover, it propitiates creatures and makes them care for one another. Hence, the philosopher quotes Dionysius’ teaching on the effect of the love of any beauty: For the sake of beauty, inferior realities love superior ones in their assimilation to them, while superior creatures caringly love their inferiors.²⁸⁵ Santinello comments on this doctrine by concluding that “love, which is born from beauty and the good, is the universal bond.”²⁸⁶ Nicholas takes over the traditional Neoplatonic doctrine, according to which love transforms the lover into conformity with the beloved object.²⁸⁷ Since he claims, furthermore, that the goal of love is a union, as Plato and Dionysius did before him, he can define love as the union of oneness and being:

“The intellectual union of love can neither fail nor perish, since the activity of understanding is nourished by immortal wisdom. Therefore, the natural union of the intellectual nature – a nature inclined toward wisdom – not only conserves the intellectual nature, in order that it may

²⁸² Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCXX, nr.8.

²⁸³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCLVII. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,4, nr.4.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CLXXII, nr.4; *Sermo* XLI, nr.22: “Whoever wants to have true love has to banish all imperfect love from himself. (...) Perfect love loves the one beloved exclusively.” Cf. also *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXV, nr.73: “In this union of love the intellect finds happiness and lives happily.”

²⁸⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCXLIII, nr.14; Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 53; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 708A; 709D; 713B; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 125. With regard to the notion of peace cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, c.5.

²⁸⁶ Santinello, *Il pensiero di Nicolò Cusano nella sua prospettiva estetica*, 20.

²⁸⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCXLIII, nr.29; *Sermo* CLXXII, nr.1; Dionysius, *De coelesti hierarchia*, 165C-D; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii De caelestis hierarchia*, c.4; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1.

exist, but also adapts it to that which it naturally loves, in order that it may be united thereto.”²⁸⁸

In the same sense, man receives the capability to “partake of divinity by means of a union (...) which is the light of love. Therefore, the more you partake intellectually of love (...) the more divine you will be.”²⁸⁹ In God, being loved coincides with loving. As a consequence, man, as God’s likeness, ought to love himself in order to achieve rest.²⁹⁰

The Neoplatonic circle of being loved, loving oneself in order to improve one’s ability to love, and, as a result, being loved even more, is a mirror of the whole process of nature. God’s creation of the world is due to love, is pervaded by love and led back to love by means of love: “All things descend from love, which is God, to being” and are “preserved by means of love and return to God through it.”²⁹¹ Simultaneously, Cusanus fully abandons Aristotle’s doctrine on the first mover, as presented above. According to the cardinal, God wants to be loved because beauty naturally wants to be loved. That is why he bestows the theological virtue of charity upon mankind, with which he makes it possible for man to love him not only during man’s lifetime but also in glory.²⁹² Charity is defined as the “beauty which is amiable by itself.”²⁹³ Without this gift of grace, there would be no possibility for man to apprehend God, the absolute Beauty, for grace is the principle which brings man and his weak nature to perfection.²⁹⁴ According to Nicholas, God necessarily must be in the lover if God is truly to be loved.²⁹⁵ This indicates that man as a creature is not an absolutely independent being. Therefore, he cannot receive this highest and truest love, if he is not willing to make sacrifices. As long as there is some kind of resistance or fear in him, he does not have the right disposition of total abandonment.²⁹⁶ This implies that, even though God loves his whole creation, he can love one reality

²⁸⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXV, nr.73.

²⁸⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Surmises*, II, c.73, nr.174.

²⁹⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XV, nr.70.

²⁹¹ Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief an Nikolaus Albergati,” 30, nr.13.

²⁹² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLVIII. Opera omnia*, vol.19,4, nr.20.

²⁹³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.28.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXIX. Opera omnia*, vol.19,6, nr.19.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLXXII*, nr.2.

²⁹⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XLI*, nr.22.

more than another.²⁹⁷ The gift of grace can be received exclusively by a real lover, since God “loves those who love him, for he is Love (*caritas et amor*).”²⁹⁸ Nicholas thereby adopts Dionysius’ plea for the importance and value of both names – in the latter’s case of the Greek equivalents, of course – but refers *amor inter alia* to the specifically human form of love instead of suggesting a complete identity: As *amor* opens itself to the form of the beloved in order to incorporate it and to enjoy itself in the unity and uniformity with it, so is *caritas* the Love of love, that is, God.²⁹⁹ The love which is a sign of man’s attraction of God, that is, *amor*, is one with *caritas*, since the attraction is an answer to the divine gracious offer.

Owing to the fact that the eternal God is Love itself, every type of love longs for the eternal, that is, for truth, justice, virtue and so on.³⁰⁰ As a consequence, human love should normally strive for the eternal God by means of the gracious gift of *caritas*. But man is free to reject the divine gracious gift and mistakingly to refuse to love God.³⁰¹ God places this decision within man’s freedom despite his knowledge that this freedom can be used contrary to the sense of freedom: “But you, Father, allow us (on account of the freedom conceded to us because we are the sons of you who are freedom itself) to depart and to waste our freedom and our best substance in accordance with the corrupt desires of the senses.”³⁰² By this Augustinian treatment of human sensuousness one can either increase or decrease one’s capability for receiving grace³⁰³ and one’s own love for God: “The greater his endeavor to look more lovingly unto you, the more loving he will likewise find your face to be.”³⁰⁴

²⁹⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLXXII*, nr.1.

²⁹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.42.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXX*, nr.5. In respect of the Dionysian doctrine on the two forms of love cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712C-713B.

³⁰⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXX*, nr.5.

³⁰¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VII, nr.27.

³⁰² Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VIII, nr.30.

³⁰³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.IV, nr.12.

³⁰⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.20.

7. The Three Viae and the Kingdom of Beauty

“Contemplation is beautiful.”³⁰⁵

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Cusanus is of the opinion that not only Aristotle but also Plato inquires about God and heavenly things “as if all these things were necessary for this earthly world and as if this [earthly] world were the goal of all these things’ works.”³⁰⁶ To his mind, beauties, such as the existence of the countless stars, are made not for the sake of the earth, but for the praise of the creator – an aspect which seems to have been ignored by the ancient philosophers. In order to praise these beauties, one must have the capability to perceive something as beautiful. Man is the only creature equipped for this with the necessary power of judgment:

“Therefore, intelligences ought to be conceived of as universal powers and as powers governing over contracted rational-entities. It is as if in their own regions they held the place of a sun, so that just as in this present perceptible world the eyes proceed perceptually, with the help of the brightness of the perceptible sun, to a judgment about the beautiful and the ugly, so in the rational world an intelligence contributes brightness for a knowledge of the true.”

Intelligences receive this power of judgment from God, the “infinite sun,” while they “are as various more greatly contracted lights for rational minds.”³⁰⁷ Nicholas is the origin of this doctrine on the *iudex pulchritudinis*, which goes far beyond Dionysius’ and Albert’s approach on the topic: Man, as a rational being, has the capability to judge beauty in order to prevent the desire aroused by an encounter with a beautiful reality from moving in the wrong direction. This implies that he knows what is beautiful and what is not, what is more beautiful than something else and what is of a kind of beauty different from that of another. The presupposition of this knowledge is that the judging intellect has the Idea (species) of God’s

³⁰⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CLXXXVI. Opera omnia*, vol.18,4, ed. Silvia Donati, Harald Schwaetzer and Franz Bernhard Stammkötter (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2004) nr.13.

³⁰⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXI, nr.63.

³⁰⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Surmises*, II, c.13, nr.136.

beauty in itself, containing all sensuous beauty, such as to be able to compare different grades of sensuous beauty. Cusanus even claims that without the human intellect, there would no longer be any sensuous beauty at all.³⁰⁸ He, therefore, calls the intellect “a certain universal beauty” or the Idea of concrete beauties (*species specierum*). On the one hand, he thereby keeps to Plato’s and Augustine’s approach, both of whom are of the opinion that the Ideas are in some way or other present in the human mind.³⁰⁹ On the other hand, Nicholas is not perfectly consistent, since he uses the term ‘species’ in different ways. In the case of the intellect, the meaning seems to be in accordance with the Platonic abstract meaning of the term, such as is the case with the Idea of Beauty (*species pulchritudinis*). Yet, he suddenly refers to concrete types of beauty as a description of the ‘specierum’ in ‘species specierum.’ Consequently, he cannot have the same meaning in mind at this point as Plato has when he identifies the Idea of the Good with the Idea of Ideas. One sentence later, however, Cusanus reverts to the first meaning of ‘species,’ thus making a statement that is incompatible with the notion of the Idea of the Good in the Platonic tradition: “As fire complicates the form and Idea (*formam et speciem*) of all warm things in itself, so is the intellect the complicating power (*vis complicativa*) of all intelligible Ideas.”³¹⁰

This is the first time in the sermon on beauty that the complicatio-explicatio-doctrine appears. The theory generally referring to God is further developed with regard to the human intellect in the following paragraph: Man’s complicating and judging ability is due to the fact that his intellect is the first irradiation of the Beautiful insofar as it is the image of God as absolute Beauty: “The intellect is a living and intellectual image of God.”³¹¹ With this characteristic, it encompasses in itself all natural beauties conceptually, which are explicated through their natures (*species*).³¹² This means that the Idea of Beauty is not really present in the mind in the sense of a Platonic Idea, but “the Idea of Beauty, actualized in the use of the intellect, turns out to be an image of absolute Beauty shining back in

³⁰⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLI. Opera omnia*, vol.19,4, nr.14.

³⁰⁹ Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione*, c.32; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250a-e, where the ἀνάμνησις-theory illustrates that the Ideas themselves are not in the mind, but rather the Ideas as viewed, as recollected.

³¹⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.18.

³¹¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XVII, nr.50.

³¹² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.18.

the intellect,”³¹³ as Marc-Aeilko Aris concludes. As a result, the life of the intellectual nature consists in the intellectual contemplation and tasting of something good and beautiful³¹⁴ when the intellect judges it to be an adequate image of the one Beauty per se: “Ineffable is that joy which is present when someone attains, amid a variety of intelligible truths, the oneness of infinite Truth. For in the otherness of intellectually visible things he sees the oneness of all beauty.”³¹⁵ Senger relates the judgment on beauty to an aesthetical judgment in the modern sense by considering it a preliminary stage, insofar as artificial beauty, the beauty of art, of institutional constructions and of individual virtues must meet this. However, this is not a matter of a totally autonomous intellectual judgment, as Senger rightly states, for the dependance on transcendent Beauty as the absolute measure never ceases. Consequently, “man creates neither the beautiful nor its measure; but the cognition and differentiation of the beautiful are a concern of his intellect”³¹⁶ nonetheless.

Man’s judgment on the type, degree and value of the beauty of a beautiful reality does not solely concern concrete objects, but refers to abstract as well as – at least as an attempt – to absolute Beauty. Although Cusanus is not quite consistent in his theory of how an apprehension of divine Beauty really does work – as for example within *On the Vision of God* or between this work and *On Seeking God* – he always chooses the intellect as the starting-point in order to make positive assertions about God. This via is possible because the intellect is itself beautiful.³¹⁷ It is nevertheless doomed to fail, since it reaches finite wisdom instead of infinite; yet, it is an important step. Those who “have become humble, acknowledging that they are ignorant,” are on the right way, since they have “undertaken to live as desirers of eternal wisdom.”³¹⁸ For “wisdom is what is being sought,

³¹³ Marc-Aeilko Aris, “‘Praegnans affirmatio.’ Gotteserkenntnis als Ästhetik des Nichtsichtbaren bei Nikolaus von Kues,” *Theologische Quartalsschrift* 181,2 (2001): 107.

³¹⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.17.

³¹⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Surmises*, II, c.6, nr.105.

³¹⁶ Senger, “Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nicolaus Cusanus und seinem italienischen Umfeld,” 522.

³¹⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XVII, nr.49. In *On Seeking God*, nr.36-37, he says for example: “From the intellect elevate yourself unto God, who is the light of the intellect.”

³¹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.41. As in Plato’s *Philebus*, the beauty of mathematics

because wisdom nourishes the intellect. Wisdom is immortal food; therefore, it nourishes immortally.”³¹⁹ Those who “have become humble” can be compared to Socrates’ and Plato’s understanding of what philosophers are: not possessors of wisdom, but lovers of it, searchers for it. The next, still natural, step is, therefore, to apply a negative approach by removing the intellect, “for even the intellect is bounded in its power. Although it encompasses all things, nevertheless, it cannot perfectly attain unto anything’s quiddity in that quiddity’s purity.”³²⁰ Even though we pursue the truer way through the *via negativa*,³²¹ this approach still includes a positive aspect in order to avoid the final consequence of a negative theology which would “end in a Proclitic silence.”³²²

Since one does not find within one’s natural self anything like God, the natural sphere of affirmation and negation has to be surpassed by a supernatural step accompanied by the acknowledgment “that God is above all those things as the cause, the beginning, and the light of the life of your intellectual soul.”³²³ ‘Supernatural’ means that man needs God’s support in the form of a gift of grace as a necessary presupposition to apprehend his absolute beauty.³²⁴ Grace is based on human nature. It is neither anything that man has to experience after a moral failure, nor is it anything totally different from his nature, as if grace furnished some new organ to make the vision possible. Then it would no longer be man’s vision of God, but God’s vision

is mentioned as one possibility that directs man to this eternal wisdom: “We can say without reproach that in the mind of the creator number is the first exemplar of things. This fact is evidenced by the pleasing beauty that is present in all things and that consists in proportion. Now, proportion consists in number. Hence, number is the principal indicator directing [us] unto wisdom.” Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on the Mind*, c.VI, nr.94.

³¹⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.I, nr.4.

³²⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.49.

³²¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Actualized-Possibility*, nr.66.

³²² Senger, “Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nicolaus Cusanus und seinem italienischen Umfeld,” 518. Thurner says just the opposite in this context. According to him, the positive approach illustrates the revealability of God, while negative theology exposes his secretiveness. The opposition to Senger’s position arises when Thurner suggests that the affirmative approach does not touch the divine secretiveness, as the negative one does not reveal anything. His solution again corresponds to the usual one, namely, that there has to be a “subsuming unification” (*aufhebende Einung*) of the two ways. Cf. Thurner, 357-359.

³²³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.49.

³²⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.28.

of himself.³²⁵ It is rather the case that God illuminates human nature by his light, thus elevating it to higher faculties: “We are drawn unto the unknown God by means of the motion of the light of his grace.” The philosopher chooses this image in order to connect a familiar sensuous phenomenon to the abstract divine sphere. Accordingly, light brings forms (*figurae*) into sight, so that in this way the form (*forma*) of the sensible world ascends unto reason and unto the intellect and, by means of the intellect, attains its end in God.³²⁶ The reason for this gift is that he wants to be sought – God “wants to be apprehended, for he wants to disclose and manifest himself to those who are seeking [him]”: When Cusanus addresses God, he acknowledges that he does “not hide the source of love, of peace, and of rest.”³²⁷ God “also wants to give, to those who are seeking, the light without which they cannot seek him.”³²⁸ Cusanus goes so far as to suggest that “we are not the ones who know but rather God [knows] in us.”³²⁹ This supernatural step is called ‘mystical’ and is characterized by a divine self-revelation. According to Cusanus, no one can see God except insofar as God himself grants that he be seen.³³⁰ The place where God can be found is beyond the wall of the coincidence of opposites, the garden within it being unattainable by any intelligence through its own power.³³¹ Nicholas adds a condition for God’s revelation, namely, that he be sought by those who come with the desire of apprehending him.³³² This underscores the fact that human nature is not replaced, but is actively involved in the process of a mystical vision granted by its creator. Yet, despite the revelation, man’s cognition remains in darkness in the sense that God’s quiddity is not accessible: The viewer

³²⁵ With regard to this problem of natural desire and divine grace cf. Fritz Hoffmann, “Die unendliche Sehnsucht des menschlichen Geistes,” *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 18, 69-86.

³²⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.37.

³²⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XXV, nr.113.

³²⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.39.

³²⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.36.

³³⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.V, nr.15; c.XVII, nr.78.

³³¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XII, nr.49. With regard to the meaning of this wall of the coincidence of opposites, also referred to as the wall of paradise, cf. Rudolf Haubst, “Die erkenntnistheoretische und mystische Bedeutung der ‘Mauer der Koinzidenz,’ ” *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 18, 167-191.

³³² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.39.

does not know what it is that he loves;³³³ a knowledge of God's quiddity is reserved to God alone.³³⁴ Yet, the positive element is more dominant than the negative one owing to the divine initiative or, to be more precise, owing to Christ's mediation which makes a participation in his knowledge of his Father possible. In order to attain knowledge of God's beauty, thus perfecting the human nature, the intellect needs this sensuous figure, which is given to him through a divine self-humiliation, for beauty can reveal itself exclusively in a sensuous way.³³⁵ By partaking of Christ's knowledge, man receives the ability to transcend himself and the knowledge *that* God is.³³⁶ Cusanus agrees with Albert and Thomas here.³³⁷ However, in this context, Albert's separation of affirmative and negative theology originating in Dionysius is rejected,³³⁸ for they finally converse. According to the Cusan view, the *viae* must not be seen as two parallel ways, but as a succession of approaches which are never purely affirmative or purely negative.

Nicholas very frequently describes that which is taking place during a mystical contemplation of God as a union with him, for example in *On the Vision of God*. By doing so, he turns away from medieval mysticism and its Neoplatonic tradition. For him, "the mystic strives to 'put himself in God's viewpoint,' " as Blumenberg expresses it, "by searching for an identification with the Absolute."³³⁹ Consequently, as Blumenberg continues, the position from which the diversity of the visible world shrinks to an invisible point is only the external aspect of the finite. By appropriating it, one can achieve a viewpoint different from what is possible by means of the mystic's fervent longing, as was central for mystical theology before Cusanus. Beierwaltes goes even further. A search for identification in this union is, to his mind,

³³³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, "Brief vom 22.September 1452 an Kaspar Aindorffer," 112.

³³⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLVIII. Opera omnia*, vol.19,5, nr.12-14.

³³⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CXLI. Opera omnia*, vol.18,2, nr.5.

³³⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.22; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2. Thurner remarks that the reason for the human incapability to apprehend divine Truth itself can be found in the fact that "truth is the presupposition of every human intellectual process, which is always set." Hence, "it cannot be seen in the field of reason, but it can only be perceived in an act of self-transcendence of the intellect as the imperceptible cause of all cognition in principle." Thurner, 340.

³³⁷ Cf. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, c.2; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.12, a.12.

³³⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, "Marginal 589," 112.

³³⁹ Blumenberg, 596.

not sufficient. His description of what happens borders on a total identity. Accordingly, he claims that in a mystical union

“every border and difference and, at the same time, every intentionality and relation towards the object is undifferentiatedly and unintentionally removed. A mystical vision does not merely become *like* that which it sees, but becomes *one* with it; it merges – delimiting – in the latter’s way of being, into absolute in-finity.”³⁴⁰

In my opinion, Beierwaltes goes too far and seems here to confuse Cusanus with Plotinus and Master Eckehart.³⁴¹ Birgit Helander, on the other hand, can be found at the very other end of possible interpretations of the Cusan theology. She argues that there is no mention of a unio mystica in his writings: “He constantly remains conscious of the human distance from God, who remains esse in his impersonal being, while man as creation belongs to actualized being, that is, to entia.” She nevertheless insists on a mystical vision that goes beyond the usual consciousness of intellectual cognition in order to experience a transcendence, and suggests in this context that “only in such a mysticism is the vision of God at the same time an encounter with the God of revelation.”³⁴²

What one sees during a mystical vision is not made totally clear. Cusanus falters, because Dionysius, whose mystical theology created the issue in the first place, states that there is a union with God after one has vaulted oneself upwards in a non-cognitive way (“ἀγνώστως ἀνατάθητι”).³⁴³ This uncertainty is intensified by the statement that as long as the intellect sees

³⁴⁰ Beierwaltes, “Visio facialis – Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus,” 105.

³⁴¹ See p. 98; p. 322, note 261.

³⁴² Birgit Helander, *Die visio intellectualis als Erkenntnisweg und -ziel des Nicolaus Cusanus* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1988) 165-166. Helander criticizes Jaspers for denying the possibility of Nicholas’ having had a mystical experience. Rather than accept a mystical experience in the case of the theologian, Jaspers argues that Nicholas’ thinking leads him to a point from which he cannot continue. This is interpreted as a “dialectical confusion,” a “dizziness” in which it becomes clear what is actually felt “at home,” namely, that there is a light in the darkness beyond the wall. Cf. Karl Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus* (München: Piper, 1964) 50-52. Nicholas explicitly says that he tried to submit himself to the rapture, but that he does not know how far this extremely difficult undertaking has led him. God alone knows of his success. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XVII, nr.80.

³⁴³ Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 997B.

something, it cannot be the thing it is seeking.³⁴⁴ Given such an unambiguous assertion, it is strange that Flasch insists that God can be seen beyond the wall of coincidence – which he wrongly identifies with the intellect – by means of an apprehension of the intellect.³⁴⁵ God must rather be seen as beyond the coincidence.³⁴⁶ Thus, only after the coincidence of opposites has been transcended is there the possibility of apprehending God in an unveiled union.³⁴⁷ Nicholas speaks here of the violence that the intellect must inflict upon itself when faced with the paradox that “impossibility coincides with necessity.”³⁴⁸ He argues that “the darker and more impossible that obscuring haze of impossibility is known to be, the more truly the necessity shines forth and the less veiledly it draws near and is present.”³⁴⁹ The jump into intellectual impossibility illustrates that the search for God cannot succeed through philosophy, which has been bound by the principle of non-contradiction ever since Aristotle.³⁵⁰ As a consequence, Völker is wrong in his view that the search represents a philosophical instead of a mystical ascent. His exclusion of human passivity and ecstasy in favor of dialectics³⁵¹ is not capable of reaching its goal. Philosophy is superceded by grace. The means for gaining knowledge about the coincidence and for the jump beyond it is the *intellectus videns* and not the *ratio discurrens*.³⁵² For this reason, the way of approaching God seems to be inaccessible and impossible to all philosophers.³⁵³ Why Cusanus at one point says that God’s truth is seen with the mental and intellectual eye,³⁵⁴ but later that

³⁴⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.22.

³⁴⁵ Cf. Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung*, 433. It is similarly strange that he defines the topic of *On the Vision of God* as the excession of the ratio to the intellectus. Cf. *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung*, 389.

³⁴⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.9.

³⁴⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XVII, nr.80-82.

³⁴⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.IX, nr.39.

³⁴⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.IX, nr.38.

³⁵⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief vom 14.September 1453 an Kaspar Aindorffer,” 115.

³⁵¹ Cf. Völker, 252.

³⁵² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.15.

³⁵³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.IX, nr.39. His demand that all concepts and science be left behind can already be found in Plotinus’ strategies for attaining a mystical vision. Cf. Plotinus, VI 9.4.1-6.

³⁵⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.19.

every intellect would judge it to be far removed from truth,³⁵⁵ and why he suggests in another book that no intelligible things are present in eternity, which precedes everything intelligible,³⁵⁶ remains unclear. These contradictions are likely to be unavoidable when speaking about the unknowable. Beierwaltes rightly suggests that the incomprehensibility of God does not have to become an opponent of thinking. There is no radical negation of the intellectual sphere, but rather a higher intensity of vision and thinking: a visio absoluta and a conceptus absolutus.³⁵⁷

A closer look must be taken at the relevance of the coincidence of opposites to the mystical vision. In Flasch's eyes, "the Christian God as the unity of concealment and revelation seems to correspond to the non-additive unity of negative and positive theology."³⁵⁸ As a consequence, a mystical vision of him would not have to surpass the coincidence of via positiva and via negativa. In contrast to this, Hoye considers Flasch's solution of characterizing mystical theology as a coincidence of the two ways to be inadequate.³⁵⁹ Nicholas' claim that God can be reached in the coincidence of opposites is to be found solely in his early work, *On Learned Ignorance*. Flasch seems to remain at this early stage in order to interpret Nicholas according to the idealism of modern times, and to Hegel in particular. Yet, Cusanus' philosophy matured, so that he came to the understanding that God is beyond the coincidence in eternity. Accordingly, his mystical theology makes the same jump to a higher, more abstract level. To give an example, one can say that red and blue can coincide either in violet – in which case we are confronted with Flasch's solution – or, at the more abstract level, in color – which is what Cusanus really means. The Christian God transcends this unity. The coincidence is the wall surrounding paradise and not the crossing of the wall, as Flasch argues.³⁶⁰ Hence, Hoye rightly states that

³⁵⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.IX, nr.38.

³⁵⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.V, nr.13.

³⁵⁷ Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, "Mystische Elemente im Denken des Cusanus," *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang. Neu erschlossene Texte, neue methodische Ansätze, neue theoretische Konzepte*, ed. Walter Haug (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000) 428-433.

³⁵⁸ Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues*, 321.

³⁵⁹ Cf. Hoye, "Die Vereinigung mit dem gänzlich Unerkannten nach Bonaventura, Nikolaus von Kues und Thomas von Aquin," 492-493.

³⁶⁰ Cf. William J. Hoye, *Die mystische Theologie des Nicolaus Cusanus* (Freiburg: Herder, 2004) 66; Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues*, 204.

“*coincidence* does not have the last word in the Cusan thinking, but *revelation*.”³⁶¹ Mystical theology is then “not intellectual cognition, let alone an experience, but a revelation which is attained by means of a leap of faith.”³⁶²

Hence, faith must be seen as the concrete means by which to leap over the coincidence of opposites into the sphere of infiniteness. Since the intellect is not capable of attaining knowledge of the eternal God, Cusanus concludes that a mystical vision and an ascent of the intellect is possible only “through faith’s conceiving,”³⁶³ for “the totally unknown can neither be loved nor found.”³⁶⁴ Yet, faith cannot be interpreted as something contradicting rationality: “Faith enfolds within itself everything which is understandable. But understanding is the unfolding of faith. Therefore, understanding is guided by faith, and faith is increased by understanding.”³⁶⁵ The intellect is illuminated in faith, which leads to a rapture³⁶⁶ towards Truth, towards which faith is constantly directed: “You enrapture me, in order that I may transcend myself and foresee the glorious place to which you invite me.”³⁶⁷ Cusanus thereby takes over the Plotinic principle of rapture as the highest form of every intellectual ascent leading to Truth: “Truth is only attained through faith,” while “faith is revealed Truth, which is accepted in a humble acquisition.”³⁶⁸ “The highest vision is preceded by utmost faith,”³⁶⁹ through which man is taken out of his body, so that “faith overcomes the paralysis

³⁶¹ Hoye, *Die mystische Theologie des Nicolaus Cusanus*, 50. He agrees here with what Helander says about the vision, namely, that it is at the same time an encounter with the God of revelation. Cf. Helander, 166.

³⁶² Hoye, *Die mystische Theologie des Nicolaus Cusanus*, 53. The idea of a learned ignorance can again be applied here. During a mystical contemplation, the viewer does not know what he sees, but he knows about his failure. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XIII, nr.52. Joseph Lenz agrees with this interpretation, but continues by suggesting that the *docta ignorantia* goes beyond a mere criticism of cognition, becoming an instruction for mysticism, for how to find God. Cf. Joseph Lenz, *Die docta ignorantia oder die mystische Gotteserkenntnis des Nikolaus Cusanus in ihren philosophischen Grundlagen* (Würzburg: C.J. Becker, 1923) 83.

³⁶³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.49.

³⁶⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief vom 14.September 1453 an Kaspar Aindorffer,” 115.

³⁶⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.244.

³⁶⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.244; nr.245; nr.252.

³⁶⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XXV, nr.113.

³⁶⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XXXI. Opera omnia*, vol.17,1, nr.1.

³⁶⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XXXII. Opera omnia*, vol.17,1, nr.3.

of the intellect”³⁷⁰ caused by sin, as Albert Dahm expresses the function of faith. Thurner even claims that “in the Cusan thinking, the supernatural light of faith receives the same systematic place as the hyper-being light of truth of the Platonic Idea of the Good.”³⁷¹ It must be noted, however, that faith is not an active movement, but a gift of grace passively received and answered with a humble acceptance.³⁷² The reason for this is that faith is one of the three theological virtues given by divine grace, so that this vision is also a matter of grace. As a consequence, it is true that “the soul’s journey is impelled by choice,” but “in the case of the journey to the center, choice is shaped by faith.”³⁷³ Furthermore, another theological virtue must be added to faith in order to bring about a mystical vision of God, for such a vision is a supernatural gift in the form of charity.³⁷⁴ Cusanus claims that love is important for faith, “for without love, faith cannot be maximum,”³⁷⁵ which it has to be for the highest vision. The two work together: Through faith the intellect approaches God; through love it is united with him.³⁷⁶

A summary of this earthly search for God – for absolute Beauty – shows the following steps: To call him beautiful affirmatively is the starting-point of one’s attempt to describe him. However, this – symbolic³⁷⁷ – affirmation has to be withdrawn, since one does not actually know the divine quiddity. Nevertheless, this negation includes a positive element, since the latter represents the basis for the former, namely, that it is certain that God cannot be reached through the human concept of beauty, but that he transcends it, that he is, consequently, hyper-beautiful. The human mind has to transcend itself – since divine Beauty is not mentally visible – and all concepts of beauty, stepping towards a supernatural knowledge of God’s possible beauty through his revelation of himself as beautiful in the form

³⁷⁰ Albert Dahm, *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues. Ihre Entwicklung von seinen frühen Predigten bis zum Jahr 1445* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1997) 181.

³⁷¹ Thurner, 273.

³⁷² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.244. Cf. also *Sermo XLVIII. Opera omnia*, vol.17,2, nr.7, where God’s grace is expressed by the metaphor of light: “Spiritual light is divine, wonderful, inexpressible, unnameable, highly pleasurable; cognition is possible through it and in it.”

³⁷³ Bond, 76.

³⁷⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.28.

³⁷⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, III, c.11, nr.250.

³⁷⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.XXIV, nr.109.

³⁷⁷ Cf. Jasper Hopkins, Interpretive Study, *On the Vision of God*, 20.

of a mystical vision of the mind. There it becomes clear that God transcends the qualities of beauty and non-beauty. This level is comparable to the Dionysian *via eminentiae*.³⁷⁸ Yet, the revelation does not remove the divine unknowability, but underscores it. Divine Beauty is conceived of as inconceivable. Man remains in a learned ignorance. The more the human intellect assures itself of its ignorance, the clearer divine Beauty shines through. The type of knowledge during this mystical vision is a knowledge of faith. Man believes that his creator is more than beautiful if he bears in himself the theological virtue, for the love of a good does not imply that the good has already been perceived.³⁷⁹ Since this is not intellectual knowledge, God's real beautiful quiddity remains obscure. It is a matter of infinity, because God is Infinity itself. Under this aspect, the viewer can be certain that God infinitely transcends all contradictions, such as our description of him as beautiful and non-beautiful, and that all names and predicates that one affirmatively applies to God – Beauty itself included – are enfolded and justified.³⁸⁰

In his scriptural language, Cusanus also describes the place where absolute Beauty is apprehended unrestrictedly as beautiful. With death an ascent to the heavenly kingdom of beauty takes place through the attraction of beauty or divine glory, both of which are present in their fullness in this heavenly Jerusalem.³⁸¹ The philosopher insists that glory can be found nowhere else than in the kingdom of beauty, corresponding to the traditional understanding that glory replaces grace in God's kingdom. The sense of these assertions is, of course, the same, but Cusanus goes beyond tradition by connecting glory and beauty with one another. According to him, to be in glory means precisely to be in the vision of Beauty itself and to be united with it in love.³⁸²

The fullness of beauty in the kingdom is expressed by the fact that it surpasses mere actualized being, for “everything is beautiful in the kingdom of

³⁷⁸ Cf. for example Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 697A.

³⁷⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief vom 22. September 1452 an Kaspar Aindorffer,” 112.

³⁸⁰ Beierwaltes emphasizes that even the word ‘in-finitum’ negates a main feature assigned to God in an affirmative theology, namely, ‘*finis omnium*.’ Cf. Beierwaltes, “Mystische Elemente im Denken des Cusanus,” 433.

³⁸¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo VIII. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.34.

³⁸² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.29.

beauty, what is and what can be.”³⁸³ This sounds strange, especially when compared to Aquinas’ concept of God as pure reality devoid of possibility. The only explanation that makes sense is to interpret the “what can be” as ‘what can be imagined by us, but has no reality beyond our imagination.’ This could then enjoy full reality in God’s kingdom, undoubtedly provided with perfect beauty. What cannot be is that something should exist there which does not exist here, but which we could nonetheless experience. The reason for this is that our vision there has our individual lives as its basis, which are perfected and not confronted with anything completely unknown. Otherwise, man could not become totally happy. Although Cusanus does not explain his thesis in this sermon, he does so in another. There he writes that man’s supernatural fulfillment must remain within the limits of human desire.³⁸⁴ Consequently, the individual has to be fulfilled, but the fulfillment must be of a human kind and not the happiness, for example, of an angel. For then there would be a super-fulfillment that would rob man of his happiness.³⁸⁵

Cusanus describes the kingdom of beauty in great detail. It is characterized by purity, order and infinity. These descriptions correspond to Plato’s account of the Idea of Beauty.³⁸⁶ Despite this similarity in attributes, there is a difference, namely, insofar as the kingdom is a less abstract and more metaphorical notion – Senger defines it as a “rational explication of the one absolute Beauty into the many types of beauty and then into the numerous beauties of nature and art.”³⁸⁷ For Nicholas actually refers the attributes of

³⁸³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.23.

³⁸⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XLI*, nr.9; *On Learned Ignorance*, II, c.12, nr.169: “With regard to the intellectual natures a nobler and more perfect nature cannot, it seems, be given (...) than the intellectual nature which dwells both here on earth and in its own region. For man does not desire a different nature but only to be perfected in his own nature.” Cf. also *Sermo CCIV*, nr.4 and *On the Genesis of Things*, c.V, nr.183: “For to depart from [one’s species] (...) is to distort the beautiful form of the reflection of the Same, which is, unqualifiedly, the fount of all beauty and of every good.” Thomas says the same in *In IV Sententiarum*, dist.49, q.2, a.3, ad 8.

³⁸⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo XLI*, nr.7: “Species enim est caelum quoddam ambiens omnem individualement motum suae naturae. Hinc extra suum caelum non movetur quidquam, sed motus cuiusque est attingere perfectionem speciei suae, extra quam non iudicat se posse perfici.”

³⁸⁶ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 210e-211a.

³⁸⁷ Senger, “Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nicolaus Cusanus und seinem italienischen

purity, order and infinity to the individual beauties included in the beauty of the kingdom. By doing so, he departs from Plato's focus on the most abstract beauty, which is distinguished precisely by its oneness. To Nicholas' mind, there is diversity in the kingdom, although the diversity does not affect the oneness of God, the absolute Beauty, for "God himself is prior to all difference."³⁸⁸ He proceeds by enumerating different earthly goods and showing that they increase in beauty in the divine kingdom. The beauty of terrestrial kingdoms excels in purity in the kingdom to come and is characterized by its non-restriction by space and time and by its transcendence of them. This non-restriction is contradictory in a certain way to Cusanus' use of the mythological image that would indicate that this kingdom is understood as a certain place, whereas the Platonic ascent to the Idea of Beauty does not indicate anything similar.³⁸⁹ With regard to the attribute of infinity, the beauty of objects, places and areas is mentioned. This beauty is of a spiritual kind in the kingdom of beauty apart from being infinite. The last attribute is closely connected to all effects of virtue. Thus, the beauties of innocence, purity, youth, manliness, chastity and courage are not in a state of chaos, but well-ordered in God's kingdom, as is necessary for its harmonious beauty. Virtuous people, in particular, who are "decorated by the splendor of virtue," find a "beautiful mansion" there in correspondence with their respective virtue.³⁹⁰ The traditional Christian doctrine that eternal happiness is individual happiness is thereby again implied, although the decisive factor in tradition is not the moral merit of the individual but his love.

As indicated above, divine Beauty is apprehended without any restriction in the kingdom of beauty: "I see, O Lord, that in this way and in no other the inaccessible light and beauty and splendor of your face can be approached

Umfeld," 521.

³⁸⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XIII, nr.35. In this book, Cusanus makes again a reference to Dionysius as the one who inspired the theory of the coincidentia oppositorum by having said that "opposites are to be affirmed and denied of God at the same time." *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXII, nr.67. Cf. Dionysus, *The Mystical Theology*, 1000B.

³⁸⁹ This refers to the ascent to Beauty itself described in the *Symposium*, where there is no indication of the existence of a heaven of Ideas as there is in *Phaedrus*.

³⁹⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.26-27.

unveiledly.”³⁹¹ Although Cusanus speaks of an apprehension of God himself,³⁹² he never uses the technical term of a quid-apprehensio. It is rather the case that the divine quiddity remains in darkness in the beatific vision as well, for *Sermo IV* says that in this life we can know *that* God is, in the life to come we can perceive *how* he is, but never, neither here nor there, can we know *what* he is, for his quiddity is incomprehensible.³⁹³ Thus, at this point, it remains unclear what Nicholas means by this unveiled vision. The problem might be solved if we consider a passage in *On Being a Son of God*:

“Now, knowing occurs by means of a likeness. But since the intellect is a living intellectual likeness of God, then when it knows itself it knows, in its one self, all things. Now, it knows itself when it sees itself in God as it is. And this [seeing] occurs when in the intellect God is the intellect. Therefore, the intellect’s knowing all things is nothing other than its seeing itself as a likeness-of-God – something that is sonship.”³⁹⁴

Here, it is indicated that the viewer sees himself during the vision. This hypothesis gains traction in similar statements in other Cusan writings. In *On the Vision of God*, it is said that “every face that can look upon your face sees nothing that is other than itself or different from itself, because it sees its own truth.”³⁹⁵ In *Complementary Theological Considerations*, Nicholas adds that the mind views all other things apart from itself in God as the light of Truth.³⁹⁶ In *The Bowling-Game*, we can read that “beautiful is our speculation, through which a man is made perfectly content when he knows himself.”³⁹⁷ Jasper Hopkins supports this

³⁹¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.22.

³⁹² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo LXII (57)* (Codex Vaticanus latinus 1245) fol. 62r.

³⁹³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo IV. Opera omnia*, vol.16, nr.32; Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 592B-C. This must be seen in contrast to Albert’s assertion that one sees the naked divine essence during the beatific vision. Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.3, q.13, c.4.

³⁹⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Being a Son of God*, c.VI, nr.86. Cf. Albert the Great, *De resurrectione*, tr.4, q.1, a.9, § 1, where a self-experience is implied in the apprehension of God.

³⁹⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.19. With regard to a possible self-experience in the vision of God cf. also Albert the Great, *De resurrectione*, tr.4, q.1, a.9, § 1.

³⁹⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Complementary Theological Considerations*, nr.2.

³⁹⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Bowling-Game*, I, nr.43.

interpretation by justifying it with the Platonic explanation of form: God as the form of forms gives the form of being to the creature, so that the creature's form of being is present in God as what is caused is present in its cause.³⁹⁸ Owing to man's inability to judge other than in a human way,³⁹⁹ he misinterprets that which he sees in the face of God as an image of himself and has to learn to recognize it as the original, as God himself. This corresponds to what I said above. Man always has to know himself before he can know anything else. Furthermore, this passage seems to give the answer to the problem of whether the way to God is a return inwards instead of an ascent of abstraction. The only remaining problem is that the events after death seem to be on a totally different level, so that a comparison between the beatific vision and mystical theology is likely not to succeed. Had Cusanus claimed that a mystical vision is actually a vision of oneself, the matter would have been clearer. Beierwaltes, for instance, analyzes this passage from *On Being a Son of God*, but makes the mistake of referring the vision face to face described there to a mystical vision,⁴⁰⁰ although a visio facialis traditionally refers exclusively to the beatific vision. It is strange that he even places the Latin phrase "visio mystica sive facialis"⁴⁰¹ in quotation

³⁹⁸ Cf. Jasper Hopkins, Interpretive Study, *On the Vision of God*, 38; Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.16.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VI, nr.20.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. Beierwaltes, "Visio facialis – Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus," 102. Later he mentions both a mystical and a beatific vision as possible meanings for the visio facialis. Cf. "Visio facialis – Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus," 110. In Flasch's eyes, it refers to an earthly apprehension, which becomes clear in his interpretation of the cardinal's assertion that "whoever merits to see your [God's] face sees all things plainly, and nothing remains hidden from him." Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, c.VII, nr.26. For Flasch does not interpret this as a promise for the life to come, but as an indication of a "renewal of our world-view" and as a "guidance to a natural philosophy on this earth." Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung*, 422. In contrast to these two interpretations, Senger pleads for the traditional solution in the sense that the visio facialis refers to the beatific vision. Cf. H.G. Senger, introduction and notes, *Die höchste Stufe der Betrachtung*, by Nikolaus von Kues (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1986) 101, note 11,29f. With reference to Senger's statement, Hoye also favors an eschatological vision. Cf. Hoye, *Die mystische Theologie des Nicolaus Cusanus*, 103.

⁴⁰¹ Beierwaltes, "Visio facialis – Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus," 109.

marks, thus suggesting that the reader is faced with a Cusan quote. However, the claimed identity is not as self-evident as Beierwaltes pretends it to be, for the phrase cannot be found in any of Nicholas' writings. What is more, Jasper Hopkins shows in the footnotes to his translation of *On Being a Son of God* that what Nicholas has in mind is a beatific vision:

“The present passage attests that the perfection of sonship occurs in the next life (and not in some mystical experience in the present life). For sonship occurs when the intellect attains unto a unity with itself and becomes the actual notion of all things. But this attainment and this actuality occur only after the intellect has been freed from *enlivening* the body – i.e., only after the death of the corruptible body and the initiation of the resurrected state with its incorruptible, glorified, and elevated body.”⁴⁰²

Cusanus himself gives enough references in this context to demonstrate unambiguously that he means a “future state” when he says that the intellectual power is “transferred from out of this world,” a state in which the intellect is “freed from enlivening the body” or “separated from enlivening a corruptible body.”⁴⁰³ It is, consequently, no proof when Beierwaltes calls attention to the fact that Plotinus and Proclus teach something similar in connection with a mystical vision: According to the former, the return inwards results in the mind's seeing no light which would be ‘something other on something other.’ It is rather light that “suddenly appears purely and independently for itself alone.”⁴⁰⁴ In Proclus' eyes, “the ascent or the transformation of the soul leads into the dynamic self-identity of the $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ to a closer and closer union of thinking with itself.”⁴⁰⁵ For Cusanus, as for the Platonic tradition, there is a difference between the mystical and the beatific vision, since the former is not completely fulfilling because it is a mere tasting of affirmation in negation, that is, of the coincidence of opposites. This coincidence cannot be perfectly possessed in life on earth owing to man's bondage to matter and his consequently inescapable bondage to

⁴⁰² Jasper Hopkins, notes, *On Being a Son of God*, by Nicholas of Cusa, 368, note 76.

⁴⁰³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Being a Son of God*, c.VI, nr.85-86.

⁴⁰⁴ Plotinus, V 5.7.31-34.

⁴⁰⁵ Beierwaltes, “Visio facialis – Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus,” 114.

alteration. It is not possible for the human intellect to penetrate absolute Infinity itself totally, even though mystical theology attempts just that.⁴⁰⁶

The total fulfillment is, however, possible in life after death, provided that, apart from divine glory as the main instrument for a beatific vision, the two basic parts of the human soul, that is, the intellect and the will, are involved and work together:

“If I say that eternal life is the cognition of love and you concentrate exclusively on cognition, eternal life will consist in cognition for you and is, thus, a matter of the intellect. But if you concentrate on love, eternal life will rest in the will for you, because love as such is perceived by love alone. But if you rise to simplicity, where cognition and love are one, you will understand that these two potencies of the soul, that is, intellectually perceiving and loving, coincide in the highest happiness.”⁴⁰⁷

This is similar to what Cusanus says about a mystical vision resulting from faith and love. Moreover, it implies that what takes place in the vision of God is the same as what Thomas Aquinas describes for the encounter with beauty, namely, a coincidence of truth and goodness. Albert’s doctrine of beauty as man’s apprehension of a true thing under the aspect of the good cannot be integrated as easily into the vision of the divine.⁴⁰⁸ Therefore, I would assume that Nicholas simply copied it when composing the sermon on beauty without really considering whether it fits into his own doctrine. Unfortunately, he does not offer any serious definition of beauty in his writings independent from his predecessors with which the idea above could be compared.

The beatific vision is for Cusanus a state of paradox, of coinciding opposites. On the one hand, it leads to a resting, remaining silent and contemplating.⁴⁰⁹ He thus calls the beatific vision a “vision of peace.”⁴¹⁰ The instrument bringing about this fulfillment is Christ, who “enlightens every man and fills up, by his own light, that which is lacking in us in order

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, “Brief vom 14. September 1453 an Kaspar Aindorffer,” 116.

⁴⁰⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLXXXIII*, nr.11.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1; Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, c.4, 71.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.7.

⁴¹⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCXLIII*, nr.27.

that we may attain (...) a most pleasant life of quietude.”⁴¹¹ This calm state, in which everybody is content with his own gradation in relation to the goal of the universe, is again characterized by its beauty, for nothing is more beautiful.⁴¹² However, a reaction of wonder is added to that of fulfilled love.⁴¹³ Cusanus uses quite metaphorical language here. He speaks of a flame growing beyond the human mode and melting the human mind like wax in the same way as exceedingly strong light darkens vision. The result of this melting is an alienation of the mind by the amazement of the upper beauty in a magnitude of exaltation.⁴¹⁴ Even the platonically coined term ‘ecstasy’ is used in the context of the wondering gaze upon the infinite.⁴¹⁵ Nicholas explains this coincidence of satisfaction and excitement in the following way: The beatific vision is not merely a transient appearance of truth, as it is on earth. Therefore, the loving encounter with it is accompanied by true delight. This heavenly joy is without deficiency and never remains the same, for “if someone loved something because it was lovable, he would rejoice that in the lovable object there were found infinite and inexpressible grounds for love.”⁴¹⁶ This love is never in danger of becoming boring. To the contrary, it is always new, but not in the sense that it is in a constant flux. It represents a renewal of one and the same.⁴¹⁷ Consequently, this pleasurable rest does not mean stagnation. Since the divine fullness is infinitely great, the soul’s rest is in intense movement – a paradoxical motif taken from Augustine and Master Eckehart – and can never be totally satisfied even in the beatific vision:

“For [the intellectual spirit] is always moved by most joyous desire, so that it will attain unto never becoming satiated with the delightfulness of its contact [with divine wisdom]. For it is a most delicious food – one which, in satisfying, does not diminish the desire of the consuming

⁴¹¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Gift of the Father of Lights*, c.V, nr.122.

⁴¹² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, c.XXIX, nr.90.

⁴¹³ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.46. With regard to the wonder when encountering the beauty of the first principle and the disdain for everything that seemed to be beautiful earlier cf. Plotinus, I 6.7.1.9-17.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo LXXI*, nr.25.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, nr.11.

⁴¹⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, c.11.

⁴¹⁷ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo CCLVII*, nr.9-14.

[intellect], so that [the consuming intellect] will never cease to take delight in its eternal repast.”⁴¹⁸

There is nevertheless a difference between earthly longing and the desire in the life to come, for the former is always in danger of finding no answer at all, while the latter is met with dependable permanence resulting in happiness owing to the beauty and loveliness of God.⁴¹⁹

Cusanus defines happiness as “the end of perfection in permanent eternity.” This implies that it cannot be found in knowledge, since the latter admits a ‘more or less,’ and what admits a ‘more or less’ is in danger of ceasing completely. Thus, a mere knowledge of divine Beauty, Goodness and Truth is not sufficient. It has rather to be the highest form of cognition, namely, an intellectual vision of God, which cannot be attained by philosophy, logic or dialectics, but only by the Gospels.⁴²⁰ This apprehension of truth and man’s loving union with it is not only the highest beatitude as it is for Aristotle,⁴²¹ but the whole content of happiness,⁴²² since Truth itself embraces all realities. Even though “all the beauty of this world becomes worthless to our eyes, when we as sons aspire to God’s reign itself, which is the absolute Beauty of every beautiful thing,”⁴²³ the experience of happiness encompasses all encounters with beautiful realities, including even sensuousness, despite the spiritual character of the vision: “In that kingdom [the King] is the joyfulness of all the joys taken in by means of the eyes, the ears, taste, touch, smell, the senses, life, movement, reason, and intellect.”⁴²⁴

⁴¹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, c.18. Cf. *Sermo* CLII, nr.12. Cusanus goes further here than both Albert and Thomas, who emphasize that all longing ceases during the beatific vision. Cf. Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae*, I, tr.2, q.7, c.2; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q.27, a.1, ad 3.

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCLXXV, nr.20.

⁴²⁰ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCLXXXIX. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,7, nr.7.

⁴²¹ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* LIV. *Opera omnia*, vol.17,3, ed. Rudolf Haubst and Hermann Schnarr (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1996) nr.9; nr.24; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b8-1179a32.

⁴²² Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CCXVI. *Opera omnia*, vol.19,1, nr.31.

⁴²³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Sermo* CXLVI. *Opera omnia*, vol.18,2, nr.51.

⁴²⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, nr.31.

8. Summary

Cusanus calls God both absolute Beauty and hyper-substantial Beauty. This fullness expresses the fact that he is the *complicatio* of all beauty and all being. The knowledge of his own beauty motivates creation in general and the creation of all other beauty. This process is described as the *explicatio* of his love. As the form of forms, God actualizes all specific forms, which make being and beauty possible. Accordingly, Nicholas considers concrete beauty an excelling in the splendor of a consonant form. Both splendor and the unity in variety included in the concept of consonance show that the divine reason is apparent in the beauty of creation. Yet, God himself remains hidden. Man is caught between a certain referential knowledge and an actually total non-knowledge. Yet, this is the very reason for his worship of and his desire for the creator. This desire is naturally inborn, but can be perfected in the cooperation of the affect and the intellect, with the goal of lovingly apprehending the highest Beauty in an intellectual way. Thus, all sensuous beauty must be surpassed in favor of spiritual beauty. This attempt receives support from the intellectual senses. At the same time, the cardinal demands an *imitatio Christi*, accompanied by an assimilation to this role-model, in order to attain a *christiformitas* as a necessary precondition for the union with God. God encourages the return by sending the gift of grace of *caritas*. Cusanus mentions three ways of returning to the divine origin. The first is based on the doctrine that man is a *iudex pulchritudinis*, such that he can attempt to make positive statements about God. Since this approach does not reach its goal, man can go further by means of the negative way. This still includes, however, a positive aspect, namely, in the sense that one has to accept that one cannot truly know anything. This *docta ignorantia* advances as far as the coincidence of opposites. God, however, is beyond this wall, which can only be surmounted in the third step. This mystical step is brought about through a divine self-revelation, disclosing the fact that God exists. The divine gift of faith functions as the means to leap over the coincidence of opposites into divine infiniteness. No sooner than in the beatific vision, however, does man attain what his nature has been longing for since coming into existence. There, in the kingdom of beauty, God can be seen unveiledly – a vision of his quiddity excluded.

Marvel, excitement and rest coincide in the happiness instigated by the glory of being in the vision of true Beauty and of being united with it in love.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion

*“Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God,
beauty’s self and beauty’s giver.”¹*

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Above all, the preceding analysis of the different doctrines on beauty arrives at three conclusions: Firstly, man is open to the spheres of beauty, truth and the good, and has, therefore, the capability to inquire as to the origin of these intertwined concepts, that is, as to God. Secondly, it has become clear that the Christian faith has given rise to a plurality of doctrines. As a consequence, one cannot speak of a specifically Christian teaching on beauty, except in a very rudimentary sense. Different theologians emphasize different aspects, the majority of which one cannot consider false. Each is rather influenced by his own respective theology and world-view. Thirdly, Christian theology allows for independent theological thought that nevertheless does not simply reject the truths of tradition and attempt to begin anew. In addition to the classical Platonic view of the world, which Christian theology had always dealt with, the more modern Aristotelism was introduced in medieval theology. Yet, Plato never “ceased to be a name to conjure with.”² For this reason, the influence of both Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy upon Christianity can be neither repudiated nor ignored. By integrating both approaches into Christian theology, it increased in value, maturity and complexity. One can even argue that, apart from certain points of conflict between Platonism and Aristotelism, the latter branch of philosophy presents an enrichment of the Platonic theology of the Middle Ages, making the medieval theologians more mature and independent, for example,

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo.”

² Henry Osborn Taylor, 271. Taylor emphasizes that it was even due to the love of the beautiful that the Platonic revival was stimulated. Cf. Henry Osborn Taylor, 273.

with regard to the theory of the human intellect, the concept of form and the teaching on final causality. On the other hand, Christianity itself either brought its own peculiar elements into the doctrine on beauty or amplified the already existing Platonic elements, thus indicating that Platonism must be enhanced in order to be of full value for the Christian view on beauty. For instance, Augustine intensified Plato's and Plotinus' critical attitude towards the sensuous world and its beauty, while the later tradition emphasized that the world as a divine creation is not necessarily of absolutely lesser value. This already implies a second peculiarity, namely, the introduction of the Christian doctrine of creation. Simultaneously, God assumes the position of the highest Platonic Idea, freely creating the world out of love and goodness. This teaching entails two more peculiarities: God is identified with Love itself and, owing to the world's need for redemption, the figure of Jesus Christ is added and receives a central or *the* central position in Christian doctrine. The connection of these innate elements with the traditional Greek elements resulted in the richness and independence of medieval theology. The following paragraphs will summarize the attempts of Dionysius, Albert, Thomas and Nicholas to combine the Platonic tradition on beauty with their own original ideas.

Dionysius agrees with Plato that beauty is an ontological aspect of reality, but in contrast to the latter he defines it in an Aristotelian way, namely, as the form in which we get to see being, whereas Plato forsakes the attempt to search for a definition. Since Dionysius does not so much hold the view that earthly beauty instigates longing, his understanding of beauty cannot be called romantic or sublime. It is rather of an intellectual kind, the meditation on which serves as a basis for negative theology and mysticism. All in all, the Areopagite is more concerned with God's beauty. As a consequence, he refers to God all those characteristics that Plato attributes to the Idea of Beauty. He considers God either the unity of the Beautiful-and-Good, or the Good itself as the first principle. This last point corresponds to the Greek philosopher in the sense that the Good as the Idea of Ideas can be considered divine. For both, it functions as the efficient and exemplary cause, which adds to the absolute transcendence an immanence in the world. Despite this immanence in the form of participating copies, the perceptible beauty of which is a reflection of the invisible original, the essence of the Good is inexplicable. Even though both argue that the first principle is beyond

being, Dionysius describes creation differently. According to him, it is not a necessary limitation of the infinite, but a bestowal of being out of love and goodness. This Christian view is further developed in the doctrine that the beautiful Christ is sent into the world for the same reason. Therefore, the Platonic Ideas cannot hold the same position for Dionysius as they do for Plato. They are rather described as God's being-producing λόγοι. With regard to the meaning of beauty, the Areopagite falls far short of Plato, for he neither mentions the wish to beget upon the beautiful in order to gain immortality, nor the importance of morality, pedagogy or truth. On the latter point he simply states that God is the hyper-bright Light, an identification which can conform with Plato's teaching that god gives truth by making things intelligible. Both thinkers recognize the danger that beauty can mislead the viewer by focusing on merely apparent beauty instead of true Beauty. Dionysius goes beyond the Greek philosopher when he argues that even non-being partakes of the Beautiful-and-Good. To my mind, this then raises the question of what role truth plays in the Dionysian scheme. The sense that he does ascribe to beauty is that it is loved as a manifestation of the divine, with whom man feels an urge to unite. This concept roughly corresponds to Plato's teaching. Both thinkers aspire to an ascent from the many to the One, while the meditation on concrete beauty is a necessary basis which nevertheless must be surpassed in favor of a negative approach. Plato places his ἀνάμνησις-doctrine before the positive and negative ascent, whereas Dionysius goes one step further than the dialectical method recommended by the Greek. His non-cognitive unification with God transcends the νοῦς, so that God must illuminate man in order to be uniformly apprehended. The closest Plato comes to this is to say that the ascent is accompanied by a madness sent from the gods, which tears man out of himself. Yet, the understanding of Eros, on which the idea of divine madness is based, is quite different. Although both thinkers consider love to be a connection between God and humanity, Dionysius also identifies God with Eros, which is impossible in Plato's eyes owing to its desirous movement, which implies imperfection. Moreover, the former does not begin with the love of humans for each other, which is for the latter the starting-point of the ascent to the Idea of Beauty, but rather concentrates on the love of man for God. They both emphasize the need for purification before Beauty itself is apprehended, but Dionysius interprets it in a Christian way

as an *imitatio Christi*. As soon as the goal is reached, however, they agree with one another by arguing that a true identity with absolute Beauty in the vision of it is not attainable.

Albert is also of the opinion that beauty is an ontological phenomenon, namely, in the sense of formal beauty. He unites the two classical Platonic elements of splendor and proportion. Beauty is no longer either splendor or proportion, but the splendor of form upon proportional matter. With this definition, that is, with the connection of splendor and proportion, of splendor and form, of proportion and matter, and of form and matter, he goes far beyond Plato's less complex view. Although Albert continues in agreement with the Greek by claiming that beauty draws to itself, he adds that this is so only insofar as it is seen as a good. Moreover, he argues that it is good only if it is directed to the Good. Thus, a reality itself must be directed to the Good in order to attract other realities. These ideas already indicate that Albert, in contrast to Plato, considers the beautiful and the good identical in their subject. With regard to other assertions about the good, however, the two philosophers are not opposed to each other. Accordingly, they underscore the oneness of this principle, its priority to being, the beauty of a morally good conduct, and its role as the *causa causarum*. Yet, it is precisely this last point which also precipitates major differences. Albert interprets the Platonic Ideas as merely inborn principles of the intellect. As a Christian, of course, he explicitly states that God himself is this first causing principle, which must be seen on a totally different level than all other causes. His God, who is divine Beauty, is the maker of all beauty. Yet, the dependence is again Platonic: There is a formal causality between Beauty itself and all other beauty, which partakes of it in the manner of a formal similarity. But Albert's God is different from the more static concept of the Idea of Beauty; by his love he involves himself in the world. A further point distinguishing the medieval theologian from the pagan philosopher is that according to the former *all* being is beautiful. It is indeed the degree of beauty that determines the degree of being of a reality. Plato would certainly have maintained the contrary: the greater the degree of being, that is, of truth, the more beautiful a reality. Albert recognizes a similar relationship, namely, in his thesis that a true thing seen under the aspect of the good corresponds to the beautiful. This implies that to call something beautiful depends on its being true, and that if one

is confronted with something beautiful, one can conclude that it is a truly beautiful thing. However, it does not mean that truth depends on beauty. In the same context, Albert uses vocabulary which mirrors the Platonic importance of truth. He speaks of an inflaming of the viewer of a true thing, which is then accepted as good, so that his desire is moved to it. What is more, the final union with God is described as the union with Truth and the Good. The immutability of divine Beauty implies the same. It is reality itself saturated with utmost truth. According to both thinkers, man does not by nature have truth. While Plato explains certain true knowledge by means of his ἀνάμνησις-theory, Albert proceeds with Aristotelian language, suggesting that God gives truth through an illumination of the agent intellect. Hence, neither holds truth on earth to be very richly sown. For Plato, this is because everything in the world is a mere copy; for Albert, it is because every creature is a combination of potentiality and actuality. This Aristotelian duality contradicts the oneness favored by Platonism. Both philosophers aspire to an ontological perfection made possible by beauty, namely, the attainment of divine Beauty accompanied by ultimate happiness. Whereas the Greek teaches that the human longing for this happiness cannot be fulfilled before apprehending the Idea of Beauty, Albert teaches the possibility of some happiness on the way to the goal, since he places more value on God's gift of life on earth. The nature of the goal represents a further major difference between the two philosophies. Even though the medieval theologian grants that beauty is concerned with the goal, one does not explicitly strive for it, as is the case in Plato's teaching; rather one strives for it only insofar as it is a good. The path to fulfillment is, however, roughly the same. Concreteness has to be transcended, non-knowledge must be conceded and, yet, the intellect remains active. Albert nevertheless adds the necessity of a divine illumination and the wholly unplatonic suggestion that God makes himself similar to man in order to compensate for human incapacities. This is rather influenced by the Christian doctrine of God's mercy. On the other hand, both philosophers teach that a morally good life is a presupposition, as well as a life harmoniously composed of desire and reason. Albert also mentions the role of love as an instigator of the return to God, but the topic does not receive the same attention as it does in the Greek's philosophy. The most profound difference, however, can be found at the end of the ascent of the composite to

the oneness of the goal. According to Plato, man can apprehend the Idea of Beauty during his present life. In contrast, Albert claims that the ascent ends in clandestineness. Man is offered no more insight until the beatific vision.

Like his predecessors, Thomas considers beauty an ontological principle grounded in the form of being. He assigns proportion to the relation of form to matter, emphasizing that it has to be appropriate in respect of reality. Hence, the factor of truth receives the same significance as it does in Plato. A similar idea underlies his claim that geometry is ideal beauty owing to its absolute perfection. He continues by arguing that beauty must be perceivable, thus indicating the need for splendor. This recalls the Greek's assertion that the Idea of Beauty has sensibles among its instances. Apart from this intellectual type of beauty, Thomas adds moral and functional beauty in conformity with Plato. What is new in comparison with the latter is that the appetite is said to come to rest in the cognition of something beautiful. This holds for Plato only insofar as the appetite is at once stimulated again to strive for more and for more real beauty until true Beauty is attained. True Beauty is characterized for both by absolute existence, by utmost actuality and truth. In Aquinas' eyes, this is mirrored in every concrete form of beauty, since a reality is loved owing to its beauty and is not called beautiful because it is loved. His so-called definition of beauty, namely, that we call those things beautiful which please us when they are seen, involves an appreciation of the objective degree of beauty in a reality that precedes our reaction to it. It wants to express that we possess a bonum precisely as a verum. It is then not surprising that Thomas sees some of the same dangers in art as Plato does. Although he pleads for the thesis that there is an analogy between divine and artistic creatorship – something that the Greek would never do – he admits that art cannot compete with reality and that it ties the viewer to it as a result of its familiar sensuousness. Beauty has rather the purpose of leading man beyond itself to the highest self-actualization in the encounter with Truth itself. Like the Christians before him, Thomas identifies this goal of life with God, the Beautiful, the Most-Beautiful, the Hyper-Beautiful and Beauty itself, whose being is identical with his essence. Thus, he agrees with Plato that the essence of this highest principle cannot be touched, because the beauty in man and on earth is a mere copy, or, to put it more positively,

a mirror of divine Beauty. These forms of beauty are analogously related to one another, because the highest Beauty communicates similarity to the lower forms. The Dominican theologian, however, considers this communication a free act of creation out of love by God, Love itself. The consequences of this Christian doctrine are, firstly, that Thomas distances himself from the Platonic Ideas, which are embraced by God; and, secondly, that the concept of love differs at this decisive point. To Plato's mind, love is neither divine nor beautiful, but a desirous response to the beautiful, though Aquinas does not reject this latter aspect: The love that is an incentive to apprehend true Beauty is on a level different from divine Love. And yet, it is a beautiful image of divine perfection. Furthermore, the two thinkers agree with one another on questions concerning the way to human fulfillment. They hold the view that the number of people who actually want to know true Beauty is small. The starting-point is defined by an encounter with concrete beauty – by means of the sense of sight according to Plato, and through seeing or hearing according to Thomas. Moreover, both of them concede the existence of a spiritual perception of beauty. Finally, they suggest that the encounter with the highest Beauty is a matter of a vision. Although Thomas admits that the divine revelation of true Beauty can be better perceived in abstraction from the senses, as in prophecy – one of Plato's divine madresses – he reserves the highest vision for the beatific vision. Hence, one must be dead, for in life God's essence cannot be touched. The presupposition of this is an assimilation towards his essence in order to be purely unified with him during the vision. This goes far beyond the Greek's view of the final encounter, in which there remains still a certain distance between the viewer and the viewed reality.

Cusanus differentiates beauty as an ontological aspect of reality in the sense of the substantial form of being, as an artistic aspect determining the accidental form, and as a moral standard. The former aspect orientates itself closely by Plato's philosophy. Accordingly, Nicholas mentions the splendor of the form and beauty's uniting force with regard to harmony as the coincidence of unity and diversity. These elements come together in his definition of order as the resplendence of wisdom. Hence a certain ordered harmony in the beauty of the world mirrors divine reason. He thereby includes the notion of truth into every beautiful reality. Yet, he also agrees

with the Greek that the degree of truth in sensuous beauty is merely impure and imperfect. Nevertheless, he is of the opinion that a larger degree of truth can be attained, namely, by an aspiration for a true good, that is, for something beautiful. In contrast, art is considered an imitation of true Beauty. At the same time, the cardinal distances himself from Plato by evaluating art more positively: It is even said to have the ability to ennoble and correct the beauty of nature, as well as to create something totally different from that which can be found in nature. To call man in this context a human God, as Nicholas does, is an arrogation Plato would never have dared to make. In other contexts, Cusanus respects the total otherness and superiority of the divine principle in a fashion more like Plato. For example, he considers the created world to be the same in the other, a concept easily harmonized with the Greek's archetype-copy understanding of the structure of being. Their interpretations of the concept of this archetype partly correspond with one another. Although both explicitly argue that the One is beyond being, Nicholas' teaching that it transcends the coincidence of opposites, and thus all difference of unity and diversity, is an original idea, of which only fragments are present in the Platonic philosophy; at the very least, it does not contradict the latter. A field where the two, however, diverge is the Christian identification of God with absolute Beauty and the accompanying theology of creation. For the cardinal, creation in general is an analogy of the "generation" of the Trinity. The latter is motivated by God's knowledge of his own beauty, which results in love for himself. This love, which he allows to stream into his creation as well, is considered to be the cause of all creation. Accordingly, the beautiful God is not only the efficient and formal but also the final cause of all being and beauty. Even though the Greek philosopher does not explicitly identify the divine principle with a final cause – since it is an Aristotelian concept – he does emphasize the drawing power of beauty. This, consequently, corresponds to Nicholas' claim that the beautiful, in addition to the good, arouses desire. The cardinal again alters the role of the Platonic Ideas. In his eyes, they can be understood as God's thoughts. As a result, he, as the ultimate One, includes the whole variety of mental notions. Man, as the image of God, has a judging intellect and, therefore, access to these mental notions. As a consequence, the concept of divine Beauty is in himself, embracing all sensuous beauty in order to evaluate

it. This doctrine diverges decisively from the Platonic ἀνάμνησις-theory, though both come to the same conclusion. With regard to the relevance of beauty, the two philosophers hold that sensuous beauty causes admiration, inspiring the viewer to strive for truer beauty. Cusanus interprets this striving for truer beauty as a purely intellectual aspiration, since each instance of beauty points to the form of forms – something that is detached from the matter of sensuous beauty. For this reason, they connect the perception of a beautiful object with the more intellectual senses, which should serve the rational spirit right from the beginning. A similar idea underlies their concept of purification, according to which one should focus on the apprehension of eternal wisdom instead of the corruptible world. With his assertion that all good things are divine, while all bad things are human, Cusanus even goes beyond Plato's critical view of the world. The former very much emphasizes the infinite gap between man and God, which can be overcome solely by divine grace. Related to this is his analysis of mystical theology. It is said to be concerned with a divine self-revelation, through which man can see only the quia of God's existence. Man is rather in need of the sensuous figure of Jesus, who is a divine gracious gift, since beauty can reveal itself only sensuously. Through Christ man must attain a christiformitas. As I mentioned above, such a divine intervention exists for Plato only in the sense of divine madness. Aside from this, his philosopher is more active in his search and love for wisdom. Both share the attitude that this search is actually in vain and that the better someone knows that knowledge cannot be had, the more learned he is: the *docta ignorantia* meets the Socratic wisdom. In contrast to the Greek, Nicholas concludes that true knowledge, that is, insight into the divine quiddity, must be sought beyond all cognitive power, thus, before all variation and opposition. With this small detour, he, finally, returns to the Platonic concept of the One. Yet, the Greek philosopher never refers to it as an attainable goal for man. He makes do with the vision of Beauty itself. Nicholas adds the loving unification with it in the kingdom of beauty in order to integrate both the intellect and the will into his eschatology, for his God is not only Beauty itself, but also Love itself that wants to be loved in return.

Apart from the relationship between these doctrines and the Platonic original, each position deserves to be critically studied in its own right.

The overall problem of the Dionysian teaching for contemporary theology is that it pays so little attention to ordinary life. By concentrating basically on the description of the beautiful and good God and his causing ability, the theologian cuts off the practical side of the Platonic original. This is mirrored in his illustration of the mystical vision of God. Already problematic in itself as a foreshadowing of the divine nature, it is described as a non-cognitive unification with God. Dionysius fails, however, to explain what is meant by this assertion or how it is brought about. The degree of difficulty that such an unfounded doctrine entails becomes apparent by taking into account the fact that every major theologian of the Middle Ages philosophized on it. On the other hand, the Areopagite's theology on beauty does include relevant aspects. The most pertinent is the Proclitic idea of the chain of love, implying that a world considered from the perspective of beauty is characterized by creatures caring for each other. Moreover, his teaching that beauty is a manifestation of the divine, which man can approach through an *imitatio Christi*, bears important relevance. Albert focuses more on the life of the individual Christian and not solely on the description of God's beauty, for, according to him, human life has meaning in itself. It is, thus, not surprising that he pleads for a union with God before death, accompanied by contemplative happiness. However, these views are in constant danger of rendering life after death meaningless. Furthermore, his theology is not as valuable for the field of beauty as that of others, since Albert distances himself from the thesis that beauty explicitly draws desire to itself. As a result, it does not directly lead to God. In the same context, he severely criticizes Plato, for example, because of his own misinterpretation of the Platonic view of the heaven of Ideas as a separate world, which makes an aspiration senseless. Thomas is even more down to earth and the most mature thinker of the four. One reason for this is his consistency. I would even go so far as Willehad Eckert, who suggests that the incidental and widespread remarks on beauty lead to the final and deepest conceptions of the Thomistic thinking.³ For beauty is a topic with which many other important topics can be associated in Thomas' theology. Furthermore, it is less problematic for him

³ Cf. Willehad Paul Eckert, "Der Glanz des Schönen und seine Unerfüllbarkeit im Bilde. Gedanken zu einer Theologie der Kunst des heiligen Thomas von Aquino," *Thomas von Aquino. Interpretation und Rezeption*, ed. Willehad Paul Eckert (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1974) 229.

to integrate a Platonic world-view despite the superiority of an Aristotelian influence. Accordingly, to his mind, God embraces the Platonic Ideas, so that he does not have the same difficulties as Albert. He rather holds that beauty reveals the more profound aspects of created being, as well as of God. This is easily comprehensible, since Aquinas mentions the manner in which this is done, namely in the form of a sensuous or intellectual vision. Cusanus, in turn, is faced with severe problems. He frequently changes his position, so that a consistent doctrine is hardly traceable. One of these fields of inconsistency is in the question of mystical theology. Moreover, he often adopts theories without considering whether or not they fit into his own theology. Hence, in my opinion, Hans Urs von Balthasar goes too far in attributing to him a synthesizing function of ancient and medieval ideas. With regard to beauty, in particular, Nicholas remains by and large on Albert's level of development. The topic must rather be seen as an excursus of his theology. Although he tries to connect it with his own ideas, he does not really adopt it as his own. There are, however, points of relevance. The outer form of his writings is inherently appealing. Both the sermons as well as his dialogues offer a more accessible approach to theology than is the case with his quite academic predecessors. What is more, his concept of faith accommodates the needs of contemporary Christians, for it offers the possibility of overcoming the infinite gap separating absolute Beauty from its creation.

What makes these four positions so meaningful for theology and life in general is their ontological approach: Reality itself is beautiful. In this context, Wucherer-Huldenfeld points out that this is not a question of what is beautiful in a reality, because then beauty would be just an added embellishment.⁴ The situation must rather be seen as it is in Plato's *Phaedo*: "If anyone tells me that what makes a thing beautiful is its lovely color, or its shape or anything else of the sort, I let all that go, (...) and I hold simply and plainly and perhaps foolishly to this that nothing else makes it beautiful but the presence or communion (...) of absolute Beauty."⁵ Thus, the different theories that either splendor and harmony, or clarity, integrity and magnitude make a reality beautiful are secondary. What counts for theology is that God as Beauty itself involves himself in the world by creating it out of love

⁴ Cf. Wucherer-Huldenfeld, 31.

⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 100c-d.

and by redeeming it through every kind of beauty, and foremost through the beautiful Christ. This Platonic circle is visible in each of the four doctrines, indicating how man can attain ultimate happiness by following the direction towards which beauty points and by being supported by a divine illumination of truth and an accompanying assimilation to the beautiful goal.

The basic view on beauty and, hence, on all reality is that it is not merely true but also good. This represents the decisive point where Christian theology surpasses Platonism. Although the Idea of the Good is the ultimate principle of everything for Plato, it does not create out of goodness, nor does it redeem for this reason, nor is it attainable for man. Since Christianity identifies God with Love itself, its view of reality is different. As Pöltner states, being is not simply being there but being good.⁶ Consequently, beauty is not the mere splendor of Truth, as it is according to Plato, for if it were only informative, it could not be at all, and it would not be able to prompt us to perceive and to understand it. Yet, all that exists consists in the communication of itself, so that it is good – and not only true – that something exists.⁷ This regard of the goodness of beauty corresponds to the basic Christian understanding of God and his creation as good. Therefore, beauty should rather be considered, as Balthasar puts it, “the pure gleaming of the True and the Good for its own sake.”⁸

All four theologians make a connection between the two concepts. Dionysius sees the unity of them already anchored in God himself as the Beautiful-and-Good, but he seldom leaves the divine sphere. Even though Albert and Cusanus both integrate the will and the intellect in the final union with God, their connection of the notions of the true, the good and the beautiful remains problematic. Thomas, on the other hand, consistently refers the coming-together of the three aspects of reality to the beatific vision, as well as to any other encounter with a beautiful reality. The capability to perceive beauty is then not an additional human capability but a connection of the two ways of approaching reality, namely, the intellect and the will. The perception of beauty causes the fulfillment of striving in the sphere of cognition. By experiencing and appreciating beauty, man becomes beautiful himself, for his

⁶ Cf. Pöltner, “Die Erfahrung des Schönen,” 15.

⁷ Cf. Wucherer-Huldenfeld, 31.

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Wahrheit: Ein Versuch* (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1947) 254.

two ways of meeting reality are thereby brought to an inner harmony in the person himself. Beauty is thereby not only considered to be a quality of being, but also a quality of realization, as Pöltner emphasizes.⁹

At this point, the question of how far the four positions are, at least in their basic foundations, compatible with later aesthetical theories can be added seamlessly into this analysis. Dionysius' special focus on God and his unity of the Beautiful-and-Good points rather towards the opposite direction. Yet, it is precisely this remark, which makes the doctrine hardly accessible for present-day Christianity, that could make it interesting for aesthetics, namely, that there be a non-cognitive unification with the Beautiful-and-Good. Albert, too, offers a point of interest, for he adopts the Aristotelian differentiation between the speculative and the practical intellect, integrating beauty into the latter field. From this perspective, the topic of moral beauty is understandable and worth considering. His assertion that the Platonic Ideas cannot be interpreted as other than principles inborn in the human intellect is close to what many modern thinkers say on the topic. Thomas' connection to modern aesthetics is rather ambivalent. Owing to Aristotle's influence, he can speak both of moral beauty as well as of beauty created by man. Although he sets himself apart from the superiority of art in modern times by clarifying that it cannot compete with reality, he admits an analogy between divine creatorship and human art. What is more, his mere description of what man calls beautiful emphasizes the constant conflict in the world between an appreciation of a given reality and the subjective view of it. As a consequence, it is not surprising that his depiction of an encounter with a beautiful reality is compared to an aesthetical experience. His demand that beauty must be somehow perceivable underscores this relation. Yet, he shows that aesthetics does not go far enough, for according to him the highest perfection of such an experience can be found only in the beatific vision. Cusanus' doctrine on beauty contains even more points of contact. By taking over Albert's doctrine on the theoretical and practical intellect, he can integrate moral and artistic beauty, the latter having a significance similar to that in modern aesthetics, for it is said to be able to ennoble and correct natural beauty, and even to create something totally different. Nicholas' remark that man is a human God further

⁹ Cf. Pöltner, "Die Erfahrung des Schönen," 12.

corresponds to the modern view of man; likewise, his thesis that a vision of the highest Beauty is actually concerned with a self-contemplation. His doctrine on beauty definitively shows the highest relevance to aesthetical theories today.

What the four theologians of the Middle Ages all have in common is that they root beauty in the concept of form. They either argue that beauty comes with the form, that the form per se is beautiful, or that beauty is generated by a coming-together of form and matter. Since every reality has a form, they conclude that all being is beautiful. Theodor Adorno sees a problem in this primacy of form:

“The fatal universality of the notion of the beautiful is not contingent. The transfer to the primacy of form, which codifies the category of the beautiful, results in formalism, in the correspondence of the aesthetical object with the most universal subjective determinations, from which the notion of the beautiful suffers.”¹⁰

Welsch agrees with Adorno by drawing attention to the fact that the currently spreading tendency to aestheticize everything turns in on itself. For where everything is beautiful, nothing is beautiful anymore. The constant excitement of one’s emotions should lead to an emotional blunting.¹¹ In his eyes, global beautification blemishes the world instead of perfecting or redeeming it.¹² From a Christian point of view, this opinion is, however, problematic, for beauty is actually considered the “symbol of symbols.”¹³ This means that it refers to the whole, thus forcing the immersion of oneself in the abysmal secret of being.¹⁴ Despite the fact that they admit the classical Platonic danger that beauty of lesser value can mislead the viewer, all four theologians underscore that all beauty usually refers and leads beyond itself to true Beauty because of its inability to fulfill man’s desire completely. In Pieper’s words:

“Earthly contemplation is imperfect contemplation. There is disquietude right in the middle of its quietude. This is due to the fact that in the instant

¹⁰ Adorno, 82.

¹¹ Cf. Welsch, 57.

¹² Cf. Welsch, 146.

¹³ Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997) 842.

¹⁴ Cf. Wucherer-Huldenfeld, 22.

of its success, the overwhelming infinitude of the object and one's own boundary is experienced. It is part of the nature of earthly contemplation that it encounters a light the abysmal brightness of which produces both things at the same time: happiness and blindness."¹⁵

It is the very imperfect fulfillment caused by an encounter with beauty that renders a theological analysis possible.

As indicated at the beginning of this book, contemporary theology has rather neglected this opportunity. There are, however, two authoritative thinkers, namely Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, who attempt to grasp the full meaning of beauty. By basing themselves on traditional thinkers, they show that theology has reasons and means to deal with beauty in order to establish a doctrine which distances itself from the superficial subjectivity of modern aesthetics and which takes up the former, more substantiated ontological aspect of beauty. Although both of them are highly influenced by Plato's teaching, they show that it needs a Christian enhancement and even completion to be of validity for contemporary theology.

In a brief message sent by Ratzinger to a Communion and Liberation meeting,¹⁶ he describes the redemptive power of the beauty of Christ, basing his view on beauty on the motto "the beautiful will save us" (coined by Dostoyevsky). His starting-point is the assumption that "beauty is truth and truth beauty," since beauty arouses man to the real greatness of truth, the latter of which appears in the beauty of God himself. Thus, apprehending any kind of beauty has nothing to do with superficial aestheticism and irrationalism. Quite to the contrary: The beautiful is knowledge in a superior form as a result of its reference beyond itself: "Being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound kind of

¹⁵ Pieper, *Glück und Kontemplation*, 216. With regard to the problem of defining the notion of beauty, Pieper states that "this difficulty or even impossibility of a positive determination results presumably in the fact that we, when experiencing sensuous beauty, are referred to something which is simply not present and findable. What happens to us is not actually satisfaction but something more like an arousal of expectation. We are confronted not with fulfillment, but with a promise." Pieper, *Über die Liebe*, 306. Cf also Adorno, 128: "The unsatiable longing with regard to the beautiful (...) is the longing for the fulfillment of the promised."

¹⁶ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Beauty and the Truth of Christ," *L'Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English*, 6 November (2002): 6.

knowledge than mere rational deduction,” owing to “the extraordinary force of reality that we realized, no longer by deduction, but by the impact on our hearts.’

Ratzinger continues by emphasizing that beauty also has something to do with pain. He elaborates this thesis under three aspects. Firstly, beauty prevents man from being content with merely daily life. “The arrow of nostalgia pierces man,” lifting him upwards towards the transcendent. In contrast to this, a beauty that is “deceptive and false, a dazzling beauty” does not bring human beings out of themselves. Yet, man has to free himself from the impression of the merely sensible by perceiving what actually appears, namely, the splendor of divine glory. He is to be led “on an inner way, a way of overcoming” himself through the drawing power of God’s beauty and the capturing force of “the wound of Love.” Secondly, Ratzinger analyzes common questions and doubts with regard to beauty: Can the beautiful be genuine? Is reality not perhaps basically evil? Is beauty still possible after Auschwitz? He concludes that “a purely harmonious concept of beauty is not enough.” This assumption finds justification in Jesus himself, for, thirdly, “the One who is the [sic] Beauty itself let himself be slapped in the face.” It is precisely the resulting disfiguration of his face that makes genuine and extreme beauty appear, namely, the beauty of love that is willing to go to the very end. Ratzinger concludes his treatment by imposing a condition. It is necessary that “we let ourselves be wounded by him [Christ], and that we believe in the Love who can risk setting aside his external beauty to proclaim, in this way, the truth of the beautiful.” For faith to grow, “we must lead ourselves and the persons we meet to encounter the saints and to enter into contact with the Beautiful.”¹⁷

For Balthasar, beauty is of enormous significance. It is “the word that should be our primary one.” What is more, it is “the last thing our reason can dare to analyze, since it – as an intangible gleam – only entwines the celestial pair of the true and the good and its indissoluble correlation.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Ratzinger, “The Beauty and the Truth of Christ,” 6. With regard to the connection of beauty and pain cf. also Friedrich Schiller, “The most beautiful appearance”: If you have never seen beauty in the moment of suffering / Never have you seen beauty. / If you have never seen joy on a beautiful face, / Never have you seen joy.

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961) 16.

The theologian conforms with tradition by claiming that “beauty entails an evidence that immediately makes sense.”¹⁹ This aspect also serves as a starting-point for his criticism of the modern world: “Beauty, without any interest, without which the old world did not want to understand itself, but which said its farewell to the new world of interests impalpably-palpably in order to abandon it to its voracity and sadness.” He considers this farewell a danger to religious philosophy and life in general, since its loss is accompanied by the loss of other data vital for a religious, enlightened and cultural life: “Beauty, which is no longer loved and cared for even by religion, but which – like a mask taken off the latter’s face – reveals lineaments underneath that are in danger of becoming uninterpretable by mankind.”²⁰ To his mind, “it is, thus, not necessary that theology, as it is mostly done in our century, abdicate the aesthetical unconsciously or consciously, owing to weakness, forgetfulness or false scientism. For it would have to give up a good part, if not its best.”²¹

According to Balthasar, the existence of beauty is the result of God’s wish to reveal himself as understandably as possible.²² The Incarnation achieves this better than anything else, for beauty shows itself in the form of a reality.²³ Theological aesthetics should be able to extract its doctrine on beauty from this data of Revelation with genuinely theological methods. This assertion is for Frank Burch Brown an indication that revelation would have to show us whatever is true about art and beauty. He rejects this by suggesting that it is the same arrogation that is present in the claim that Revelation discovers the truth about quantum mechanics.²⁴ Reinhard Hoeps, on the other hand, points to the positive aspect of such a philosophy: “This procedure wants to obviate a subordination of God under the categories of human intellectual activities, and guarantee a justification of theology through divine self-communication

¹⁹ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 34. In the original text, Balthasar expresses this idea by making use of the metaphor of light: “Das Schöne führt eine Evidenz mit sich, die unmittelbar ein-leuchtet.”

²⁰ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 16.

²¹ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 110.

²² Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 179.

²³ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 111.

²⁴ Cf. Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics. A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 20.

alone.”²⁵ As a consequence, man’s turn to Christ is not a matter of human faith, but of Christ’s capability to illuminate the incapable.²⁶ To Balthasar’s mind, it is the goal of theological aesthetics to emphasize this divine prevalence.²⁷ Hoeps indicates that, in opposition to philosophical aesthetics, a theologically aesthetical theory as such is not based on possible cognition but on the ontological aspect of reality. He considers it a theory of appearance rather than an epistemological theory.²⁸ Owing to his prevalence, Christ can, therefore, be called the “archetype of beauty”²⁹ and the only possible basis for an understanding of God’s own beauty.³⁰ Balthasar claims that the world might not exist without this beauty³¹ and that God’s Incarnation perfects the whole ontology and aesthetics of created being.³² Accordingly, an appearing form of this creation is beautiful, because the delight that it causes is grounded in the self-revealing and self-giving of the deep truth and goodness of reality. It is a real presence of deepness as well as a real reference beyond itself towards this deepness.³³ Taking these ideas into consideration, Balthasar concludes that Christian beauty cannot be interpreted solely within the light of the Platonic tradition. Firstly, the figure of Christ must not only be added, but must be given the key-role. Secondly, it must be understood that God effectively causes that which he allows to appear in the sign, such that a platonically idealistic metaphysics of the Ideas meets the Aristotelian metaphysics of the causes on a higher level.³⁴

Despite these relevant attempts by Ratzinger and Balthasar, a full appreciation of beauty by contemporary theology, comparable in depth and stringency to what can be found in the Middle Ages, still remains to be realized. Although modern aesthetics treats the topic, this branch of philosophy

²⁵ Reinhard Hoeps, *Das Gefühl des Erhabenen und die Herrlichkeit Gottes. Studien zur Beziehung von philosophischer und theologischer Ästhetik* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1989) 204.

²⁶ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 174.

²⁷ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 155.

²⁸ Cf. Hoeps, 205; 216.

²⁹ Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 459.

³⁰ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 117.

³¹ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 17.

³² Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 26.

³³ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 111.

³⁴ Cf. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik I: Schau der Gestalt*, 116.

no longer considers beauty a means of learning something about or of approaching God. As a result, the transcendent element typical of the history of the analysis of beauty is largely missing today, thus making it difficult to assign any importance to beauty. For this reason, beauty must be brought back to God, as Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem at the beginning of this conclusion suggests. Studying the thoughts of important philosophers and theologians of the past can provide us with intellectual equipment for the rediscovery of the forgotten reference.

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All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. The translations used were changed whenever necessary.

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The Dawn of the Invisible

Melanie Bender

Um die Relevanz des Schönen für die gegenwärtige Theologie herauszuarbeiten, muss man zur Geschichte zurückgehen: zu Platon als Wurzel der philosophischen Behandlung des Themas, sowie zu seiner Rezeption im Mittelalter, dem Höhepunkt des klassischen theologischen Denkens. Im Bereich des Schönen kann ein Einfluss der platonischen Philosophie auf das Christentum weder zurückgewiesen noch ignoriert werden. In einem gewissen Sinn offenbart das sichtbar Schöne seinen unsichtbaren Ursprung oder weist zumindest auf diesen hin, um die Aufmerksamkeit des Menschen auf seinen Schöpfer zu lenken. Auf der anderen Seite hat das Christentum selbst seine eigenen spezifischen Inhalte in die Lehre über das Schöne eingebracht, und zwar in den Bereichen Schöpfung, Christologie und Eschatologie.

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