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The concept of the aesthetic as it features in contemporary philosophy is a modern one deriving from eighteenth-century philosophical psychology and investigations into judgments of taste. The studies of Hutcheson, Hume and Kant were prompted by the question of how estimations of beauty, though expressing a personal response to nature or art, nevertheless seem to lay claim to truth, or at least are answerable to standards of correctness. Viewed from this perspective, modern aesthetics is a branch of philosophy of mind and theory of value. By contrast, medieval aesthetics may be said to belong to philosophical theology. This difference might suggest that a contemporary reader who is not interested in religious aesthetics has no reason to consider the ideas of medieval writers. This would be a mistake, however, since there are a number of places at which these philosopher-theologians find themselves posing questions and fashioning concepts and arguments that are of broad and enduring interest.

**Historical background**

The medieval period may be considered to extend for a thousand years from the ending of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century to the beginnings of Renaissance humanism in the fifteenth. We are inclined to see this period, and those preceding and succeeding it (the “ancient” and the “modern”), from the perspective of the West; but it is important to have a broader vision, particularly in order to understand the ways in which beauty and art were thought of, and in the case of the latter practiced. Future years are likely to see greater interest in Greek medieval thought, and given the richness and sophistication of Byzantine art, its aesthetics provides a valuable bridge to that intellectual world.

The first phase of Christianity involved its spread beyond Palestine, its disassociation from Judaism and its persecution within the Roman Empire. In 311, however, the Emperor Galerius issued an edict of toleration, and his successor Constantine the Great followed this in 313 with “the edict of Milan” legalizing Christianity, restoring property and permitting the building of churches. In 325, Constantine underlined the division of the Empire into western and eastern parts by founding a second capital, Nova Roma (“New Rome”), on the site of the eastern town of Byzantium,
which soon came to be known as “Constantinople.” In 380 Theodosius the Great, the last man to rule over both halves of the Empire, adopted Christianity as the state religion. By 395 the two parts were politically separated, and in 476, Rome and the western empire fell to Germanic tribes. The eastern empire, meanwhile, continued for a thousand years until the sack of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453.

The classification “early” (476–1000), “high” (1000–1300) and “later” (1300–1453) Middle Ages derives from these “moments” of imperial collapse, but it obscures the diversity of east and west which predated the medieval period, extended through it, and continued to influence intellectual and cultural developments long after it.

Sources of medieval aesthetics

Medieval aesthetics draws on two sources: one conceived of as an embodiment of divine revelation, namely the Bible (particularly the Hebrew books, or “Old Testament”); the other regarded as the product of human wisdom, namely the corpus of Greek and Roman philosophical writings. Immediately, the duality of eastern and western perspectives becomes relevant, in part because what was known of the ancient philosophical writings differed across the Empire, as did the influence of particular texts, and in part because there was a difference in the theological approaches of the Latin and Greek writers of the early period, the “Church Fathers.” Those in the Latin West tended (with the notable exceptions of Tertullian and Augustine) to reject philosophy as unnecessary given Christian revelation, and viewed its practice with suspicion, associating it with Roman oppression and intellectual vanity (negative attitudes that re-emerged in the period of the Reformation).

The Eastern Fathers, by contrast, engaged with it and adapted it to their purposes, in part because they inhabited a Greek culture in which philosophy continued to enjoy prestige but also because they discerned theology in the writings of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. Medieval aesthetics first emerged in the East due to this philosophical orientation, and because it was there that Christian art, architecture and music were first developed out of pre-existing ancient Greek and Near Eastern cultural forms.

Some Greek Fathers turned to particular philosophies for inspiration, but more often the influence was general as in the case of Clement of Alexandria (150–215) and Basil the Great (329–79). They also looked, of course, to scripture and in particular to those parts (such as Genesis, Wisdom and Psalms) where the cosmos and its creation are described and celebrated. The Greek rendering of the Hebrew Bible uses the terms *kalos* and *pankalia* to speak of beauty, and of the beauty of the created world, respectively. The Hebrew text, however, has a less narrowly aestheticized meaning, suggesting fineness of production or excellence. What can be seen in the patristic commentaries is a fusing of religious and philosophical notions into what would become the standard concepts of medieval aesthetics. Among these is the notion of light as being that which God creates (Genesis), as that which is itself the source of Being and Goodness (Plato, *Republic*, and Plotinus, *Enneads*), and as that by which the beauty of color, texture and structure are revealed.

The following statements are characteristic: Clement: “God is the cause of all that is beautiful” (*Stromata* 5, 14, see Clement of Alexandria 1885); “The best beauty is
spiritual ... then bodily beauty, the symmetry of limbs and members and parts, in conjunction with a fair complexion” (Paedagogus III, 11) – Basil: “beauty in bodies results from symmetry of parts, and the harmonious appearance of colours ... [with light] which has a simple and homogeneous essence, the symmetry is less shown in its parts than in the pleasure and delight at the sight of it”; “God does not judge of the beauty of His work by the charm of the eyes, and He does not form the same idea of beauty that we do. What He esteems beautiful is that which presents in its perfection all the fitness of art” (Homilia in Hexaem II and III, see Basil the Great 1895).

Before turning to the Latin West, where over the centuries the most significant developments in medieval aesthetics occurred, it is important to discuss two Greek-minded early figures of enormous importance across the medieval world. The first has already been mentioned, namely Plotinus (205–70); the second is the originally misidentified Dionysius the Areopagite, who drew heavily upon aspects of the former’s metaphysics. Plotinus studied philosophy in Alexandria where he absorbed elements of Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism, but he was also interested in mystical teachings associated with Asia, and later established himself in Rome. His system is based on the idea of a supreme reality: the One. Having neither parts nor attributes it is not a being but Being itself, from which the being (existence) of beings derives. This fits well with the idea celebrated by Jewish, Islamic and Christian thinkers (especially Maimonides, Avicenna and Aquinas) that when God answers Moses’s question “who shall I say that you are?” with the words “I am that I am” (Exodus 3:14) God was asserting that his essence is existence.

While neither a Jew nor a Christian, Plotinus had a markedly transcendent and “theological” orientation. He was also strong on poetic imagery, and following Plato he drew an analogy between the role of the ultimate reality and the sun, inasmuch as both are sources of light and life. In fact, light is thought of less as a metaphor than as a manifestation of Being, for the One radiates out through a series of emanations: first as Nous or Intellect, then as the Forms of Plato’s metaphysics, then as a universal, animating Soul by which the world of appearance is constituted. Plotinus also follows Plato in identifying a route from lower to higher forms of beauty and thence to the One itself. The source of this is the Symposium 210–11 (see Plato 2008; see also Plotinus 1966), where it is said that those who discern and love beauty should proceed from visible beauty in the form of bodies, to the beauty of souls, and to that of laws and constitutions and then, through more abstract structures of thought, to Beauty itself – this being either Being, the One or an immediate manifestation of such.

This route plan for aesthetic transcendence recurs in later authors and was revived in the Renaissance period by members of the Florentine Platonic Academy led by Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) under the patronage of Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464). Although it sounds mystical and abstracted from ordinary experience it is not difficult to see something in this idea of aesthetic ascent. Clearly physical forms may elicit sensual delight, but the language of refined description quickly proceeds from sensual appreciation of bodily beauty to talk of “gracefulness” and “elegance,” and these terms are easily transferred to descriptions of human character and thence to products of thought and imagination such as proofs and theories. In an age that is willing to entertain the idea of “a theory of everything” it should not be impossible to suppose that the diversity of beautiful things might be unified by reference to a comprehensive
idea of beauty itself. What Beauty itself might be one may certainly wonder, but wondering about it is exactly what this Neoplatonic tradition recommended as an appropriate response to experiences of beauty.

The great influence of Dionysius is due more to association than to originality, though he does give new emphasis to the search for a transcendental source of beauty. When St Paul visited Athens and spoke on the Areopagus he was rebuffed by most of the philosophers, but the Acts of the Apostles (17:34) records that he made one convert from among this group, namely “Dionysius” (hence “the Areopagite”), who later became the second bishop of Athens. This may have been true; what was false, however, was that this representative of Greek philosophy proceeded to write works of Christian theology, in particular the *Divine Names* (see Pseudo-Dionysius 1987) (*Peri theion onomatôn* translated as *De divinis nominibus*), which would prove a foundational source for Western medieval aesthetics. The true author of this work was a fifth- or sixth-century Neoplatonist, probably a Syrian monk, but in consequence of his identification with the biblical figure his writings came to receive reverential treatment. Aquinas, for example, mentions him more than a thousand times.

Where Dionysius develops discussion is in turning the enquiry entirely from experience to a priori speculation and in claiming that the Good (which is also God) is said to be beautiful because it is the cause of the beauty of other things in virtue of conceiving and causing the actualization of their natures, i.e. making things of certain sorts whose structure is well ordered and thereby perceived as beautiful. Where the general trend had been to reason from experienced to abstract beauty, Dionysius focuses on an ideal conceived a priori as perfection to which varying degrees of approximations may be found in created forms. Carrying over the theme of light, Dionysius adds the element of due proportion giving the formula that beauty is harmony and light *euharmostia kai aglaia*, which in the Latin *consonantia et claritas* would become a common expression in Western medieval aesthetics. From the perspective of the present day Dionysius seems to add little to Neoplatonic thought, but for the mediare the belief that he belonged to the apostolic period made him a focus of interest and a figure with whom to associate developing theories.

**Founders of Western medieval thought: Augustine and Erigena**

Before proceeding to the High Middle Ages it is important to say something about the thought of St Augustine (354–430) and about figures of the first renaissance, i.e. the period of Charlemagne (742–814). In terms of influence on Christian thought, Augustine comes behind Jesus and St Paul and ahead of the rest. Beyond the range and profundity of his thought, his standing is due in part to the fact that he mediates between the worlds of the pagan Roman Empire and Western Christianity. Born in present-day Algeria in what was then Roman Africa, Augustine studied the writings of Cicero and other Latin authors and became a follower of Manicheanism and Neoplatonism before converting to Christianity. His first work was “On the Beautiful and the Fitting” (*De pulchro et apto*), but Augustine reports in his *Confessions* (Augustine 1991) that it belonged to his Manichean phase and was lost. What he wrote on aesthetics thereafter is marked in part by the transcendentalism of
Christian Neoplatonism but is also much richer in drawing upon and synthesizing aspects of thought and experience, and in accounting for the ugly as well as the beautiful, the former in terms of privation of measure, form and order.

In *On Music* (Augustine 1947) Augustine identifies number and ratio, in particular equality between parts, as compositional principles of various arts, elsewhere explaining that beauty is a congruence of parts with pleasantness of color (*City of God* XXII, 19, see Augustine 1998) while ugliness is a diminishment or absence of appropriate harmony, symmetry and concordance (*On the Nature of the Good* 14–17, Augustine 1953), this being an instance of the general principle that “where measure, form and order are present in a high degree there are great goods. Where they are in a low degree there are small goods; and where they are absent, there is no goodness” (*On the Nature of the Good* 3, Augustine 1953). If this seems rather abstract it should be read in conjunction with his lyrical praise of the glories of nature in the *Confessions* where he writes of “the light shining from above: the sun to serve the day, the moon and the stars to give cheer in the night” and of the glories of the sea and land, of fish, fauna and flora (*Confessions* XXXII), thereby reconnecting the creation aesthetic of scripture, and anticipating the nature aesthetic of later times.

Between the period of Augustine and the High Middle Ages, i.e. from the fall of the western empire to the glory of Western medieval Christendom, came several centuries in which there was little in the way of philosophical or theological reflection. A century after Augustine, Boethius (480–525), a public figure of patrician Roman lineage, set about preserving what he could from the collapsed Roman world, while translating from Greek to Latin the known works of Plato and Aristotle. This made him an important source for later Western writers, but so far as aesthetics is concerned two of his own works are significant. First, and most extensively, his *Consolation of Philosophy* (Boethius 1999). After the Bible this was the most widely read text in the medieval and Renaissance periods. It pursues the classical question of the highest value and sets aside bodily beauty and that of nature as ephemeral. Yet the form of the work is itself a highly crafted dialogue, alternating high prose and verse, and it came to be viewed by Chaucer, Dante and others as a literary masterpiece. Beauty is also discussed in his earlier work *Fundamentals of Music* (Boethius 1989), but there the examples relate to rationally intelligible forms: number and ratio, as these are expressed in musical progressions and harmonies. Boethius provides a fourfold classification of music as relating to the cosmos (*musica mundana*), to body and soul (*musica humana*), to the divine (*musica divina*) and to instrumental form (*musica instrumentalis*). The influence of Pythagorean thought is evident and Boethius was the main source for the medievals’ knowledge of Greek musical theory.

Augustine and Boethius were conscious of cultural decline but hoped for a time when Christianity might be synthesized with the best of pagan philosophy to produce a Western renaissance. This intellectual revival began in the court of Charlemagne (Charles the Great) in Aachen where the principal figure was a British scholar, teacher and poet Alcuin of York (735–804). The Carolingian Renaissance was wide ranging, in part recovering the art and learning of classical antiquity but also engaging certain vernacular forms developed by the Germanic tribes that had occupied the territories he ruled. The resulting art and architecture was a synthesis, but so far
as theorizing about art and beauty was concerned the ideas maintained the trajectory previously described. Thus Alcuin writes of beauty of form (*pulchra species*) as pointing to eternal beauty (*pulchritudo aeterna*), adding that while the former pleasesthe sense, the latter brings true and enduring happiness (*De rhetorica* 46, see Alcuin 1965). Given the belief that scripture is the vehicle of divine revelation, and the emphasis on the Christianization of pagan culture, it is unsurprising that Carolingian writers ranked literature above the visual arts: “Glorifiers of pictures gaze at them, and let us devote our attention to scripture and penetrate secret thoughts” (*Libri Carolini* III, 30, see Charlemagne 1998).

Alcuin brought learning and schooling to the Carolingian court, but its main philosopher was Johannes Scotus Erigena (815–77). Again from the far west (in this case Ireland) he was a Neoplatonist who translated and commented upon the work of Pseudo-Dionysius; but while he endorses those ideas he also prepares the foundation for a new phase in thinking about beauty, in part by emphasizing the importance of wholeness or unity, and thereby of composition of parts; and by introducing, without developing, the idea that the experience of beauty involves, and perhaps requires, an attitude of disinterest. The focus of his attention on organic wholes is the world itself: “the beauty of the created world is a wondrous harmony of similar and dissimilar elements, and is made of different kinds of forms” (original Greek, *Periphyseon*; trans., *The Division of Nature* III, 6, see Erigena 1987) but the general holism is applicable at lower levels and in that form it is a feature of modern aesthetics.

Even more so is the theme of disinterest. Writing about the origins of “aesthetic disinterestedness” Jerome Stolnitz maintains that “if any one belief is the common property of modern thought it is that a certain mode of attention is indispensable to and distinctive of the perception of beautiful things,” and he adds “[e]ither it does not occur at all in the thought of antiquity, the medieval period and the Renaissance, or if it does, as in Thomas, the allusion is cursory and undeveloped” (Stolnitz 1961: 131). The Aquinas reference (1920) is to a passage in the *Summa Theologiae* (Ia IIae, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3, i.e. the first part of the second part, question 27, article 1, reply to third objection) to which I shall return, and what is found there is brief and abstract, as is characteristic of Aquinas’s few (but highly interesting) observations about beauty. Erigena, however, who predates him by four centuries, seems to have the issue more directly in view when he contrasts the attitudes of two different characters faced with the same object, a vase, one of whom sees and appreciates its beauty while the other does not. The man whose interests are only in the material or commercial value of things is moved by avarice (*cupiditas*), whereas the man of judgment attends to the form of the vase on its own account and sees its “natural beauty” (*naturarum pulchritudinem*); later Erigena writes, “The sense of sight is abused by those who approach the beauty of visible forms with appetite or desire [*appetunt*]” (*De divisione naturae* IV and V, see Erigena 1995). Evidently this does not offer an analytic account of the aesthetic attitude, nonetheless it is fair to describe it as maintaining that “a certain mode of attention is indispensable to the perception of beautiful things.” Admittedly, Erigena does not say it is distinctive of it, but at that stage the idea of a distinctive category of aesthetic experience had not been developed, and the later concept may have a better claim than “disinterestedness” to be the common property of modern thought, and even to be the founding notion of aesthetics as it is now understood.
Medieval aesthetics in the golden age

The practice of art was a source of significant reflection within medieval thought. So far as the representational arts are concerned one matter that occasioned some trouble but led to a fruitful resolution was that of the propriety of religious iconography. This had first been an issue in the East. Some Greek Church Fathers had condemned admiration of statuary of pagan gods but allowed that it was appropriate for paintings to depict Christ and the saints, and for architecture to symbolize creation and to orient the mind of the believer towards heaven. By the eighth century, however, opinion had turned towards the idea that the manufacture and veneration of religious imagery was idolatrous. This was a revival of the ancient Hebrew prohibition on graven images (e.g. Exodus 20:4); and part of the reason for its recurrence may have been political, to ease relations between Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Byzantine world. For a century, the dispute between Eastern iconoclasts and iconophiles went through various phases, and while it constrained religious art it also advanced the representation of nonreligious subjects. In the West, meanwhile, Charlemagne developed a middle position arguing that images are permissible but ought not to be venerated. This partly recapitulated the position advanced two centuries earlier by Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) who had declared that “to venerate a picture is one thing, but to learn through the story of a picture what is to be venerated is another. For what writing presents to the literate, this a picture presents to the unlearned” (Epistle to Serenus, see Gregory the Great 1898).

This provided a foundation for more extensive defenses of religious and figurative art, and Romanesque sculpture produced both naturalistic and abstracted depictions of flora and fauna (real and mythological) as well as portraits of biblical figures and later saints. The “Gothic,” as it came to be termed in the sixteenth century, was known in its own time as “Frankish work” (Opus Francigenum). It allowed for less massive walls, expanses of glass and soaring pinnacles and gave rise to an architecture of the plan rather than the elevation. The point being that the building, like a living plant, was thought of as growing upwards out of a planted “seed.” This led to a focus on the expressive potential of architecture and allowed a vivid demonstration of the Neoplatonist/Dionysian idea that beauty is associated with light. It also led to coloration and gilding of statuary and ornamentation, producing shimmering effects as the changing light filtering through stained glass played across the fluting and folding of forms. The dialectic of thought and art is illustrated by the contrasting attitudes of two Parisian figures: Peter Abelard (1079–1142), who wrote that “The decorations of a chapel should be necessary and not superfluous – no gold or silver – and there should be no graven images,” Letter 8 to Heloise (in Abelard 1974), and Abbot Suger (1081–1151) of St Denis, who writes, “The altar of wondrous workmanship and lavish splendor we have ennobled with bas reliefs so admirable in form and matter that some could say ‘this surpasses matter’” (De administratione XXXIII, Suger 1946).

Music was another aspect of the life of worship, but apart from its role in providing a setting for scripture and prayer (a practice that derived from the East, in which Christians continued the Jewish ritual of chanting the Psalms), it was conceived abstractly as reflecting the numerically ordered harmony of the cosmos – Boethius’s musica mundana.
The theory of literature was similarly inspired by, and keyed to, scripture. Hugh of St Victor (1096–1141) had produced in his Didascalicon (1991), a classification of the arts distinguishing theoretical, practical, mechanical and logical, with music falling under the first, architecture under the second, painting and sculpture under the third, and literature, in the form of poetry, under the fourth. For Hugh, poetry was not an art proper but an “appendage” (appendix atrium), but other classifications elevated it to an art on its own account. Medieval poetry also addressed secular themes but these classifications were historically oriented and looked to texts from scripture, treating the Bible as a model of literary composition and purpose. This recognized that little of it was poetry per se (versus), and so a distinction was drawn within the general category of the “art of words” (oratio) between verse and prose. This led to further distinctions between viewing texts from the points of view of literary form, authorial purpose, relation to truth and relation to affective character, i.e. emotion.

As regards the interpretation of religious and other ancient texts, there was a long tradition of distinguishing between allegorical and literal readings. In his On Christian Doctrine (1995) Augustine sought to provide believers with a methodology of reading, analogous to that provided by pagan authors under the heading of rhetoric. Distinguishing between natural and conventional signs and placing language within the latter he urges the need to further distinguish between what is said and what is signified at the level of deep meaning, and in pursuing the latter one may come to recognize that the surface form is allegorical, using metaphors and symbols to convey a literal truth. (Something similar was also argued for by the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides – Moshe ben Maimon, 1135–1204, in his Guide for the Perplexed III, Maimonides 1995). Inspired by this, the theory of interpretation was developed more extensively and then applied in the production of literary works, as by Dante (1265–1321) in La divina commedia.

Returning to the general account of beauty, and reaching the scholastic period to which the greatest thinkers of later medieval philosophy belong, there is common focus on relationships of form, and of aptness or suitability. The first introduces the notion of the composition of parts, and the second the idea that context and content are also determining factors. In that respect they combine elements of formalism with the aspect of what might be termed “presentationalism,” i.e. the theory that the forms in question, or the principle of their organization, present some intelligible aspect of reality. William of Auvergne (1228–49), for example, writes that “the body, when well-formed and properly ordered, derives its beauty from the harmony of its parts, so the soul receives its beauty from the ordered exercise of its powers” (On Good and Evil, William of Auvergne 1946) and a work of the same period begun by Alexander of Hales (1185–1245), the Summa theologica Alexandri, states that “truth is the disposition of form turned inwards while beauty is the disposition of form turned outwards” (Summa II, Alexander of Hales 1924–48).

Light had featured as a major theme in the metaphysics of the English Franciscan Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253) who like many others wrote a commentary on Dionysius’s Divine Names, but Grosseteste regarded the beauty of light as consisting mostly in the fact that it is by means of this that the beauty of things themselves is made visible: it reveals and further beautifies the beautiful. This applies both to nature and to art. Another Franciscan, Bonaventure (1221–74), emphasized the
beauty of the universe and attributed it to God. Like Plotinus and Dionysius, he was concerned with the mystical and saw in beauty and its association with light a route back from effect to cause; from creation to creator, not simply as an inference but as a journey of the soul to God.

So we arrive at Bonaventure’s contemporary, the greatest of the scholastics and greatest Christian thinker since Augustine: Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). His combination of range, rigor and consistency is without compare, but it is achieved in part by abstraction, concision and systematicity. From his first analytical writings he was concerned to develop and apply a metaphysical framework derived, via his teacher Albert the Great (1193–1280), from Aristotle. Central to this are notions of form and matter, actuality and potentiality, essence and existence, and cause and effect. In terms of these he explains nature, identity, difference, change, cognition and value. While he has no treatise on beauty or art there are passing mentions across the range of his writings and specific, be they condensed, treatments in the *Summa Theologiae* and in his commentary on Dionysius’s *Divine Names*. In the passage referred to by Stolnitz (Ia, IIae, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3), Aquinas (1920) writes as follows:

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

And earlier at *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 39, a. 8, he writes:

[B]eauty includes three conditions, integrity or perfection, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due proportion or harmony; and lastly, brightness or clarity, whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color.

Putting these together and drawing upon his general metaphysics yields the following. “Good” and “beautiful” differ in sense but not in reference. Objectively speaking they relate to things, primarily natural substances but derivatively artifacts (and by extension to parts and collections of both), which have natures in virtue of being quantities of matter arranged according to structuring principles, forms. The form of a thing determines its proper parts and their proper arrangement (integrity and proportion) and where this is unimpeded by material defect there is clarity (brightness). The metaphysical idea is that since form is determinate its presence should result in an equally determinate, precise nature; but defective matter, and indeed the granularity of matter per se, will compromise this to some degree. Nonetheless, where and
to the extent that form introduces parts and arrangement to matter so it also gives clarity of structure to the entity thereby constituted. Such a condition also comprises its ontological goodness or value. This, however, can also be viewed from the perspective of an agent seeking such a thing with a speculative (e.g. scientific), practical or a contemplative interest. In so far as a nature is an object of enquiry it is conceived in relation to judgments of truth; as an object of practical interest it is regarded as good; and as a focus of experience it is thought of as beautiful.

What else Aquinas and those who followed him have to say about other aspects of beauty and art follow from this core account, which, it should be noted, combines both objective and subjective conditions in the concept of beauty. No later medieval author adds philosophically to this, and the onset of the postmedieval renaissance sees a change from conceptual analysis, metaphysics and epistemology to literary humanism. While Aquinas looks back to Augustine, Dionysius and others mentioned above, his reflections on beauty remain fresh and relevant to the kind of analysis that characterizes modern philosophical aesthetics, and confirm the opening claim that a contemporary reader has reason to consider the ideas of medieval writers.

See also Plato (Chapter 1), Aristotle (Chapter 2), The aesthetic (Chapter 24), Beauty (Chapter 29).

References


Further reading


