

Article

Beauty Is the *Gravitas Amoris*: A Trinitarian Correlation of Beauty and Love

Sean Luke 

Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL 60015, USA; zsluke@tiu.edu

Abstract: There have been many attempts to give a precise definition of beauty. In this article, I join a tradition of trinitarian reflection on beauty and attempt to add further clarity to a trinitarian definition of beauty. Beauty, in my construal, is the *gravitas amoris* of the triune being of love—it is, in other words, the objective attractional “force” or “weightiness” exerted by triune love on the soul by which one, if she yields to triune love, experiences the bliss and delight of triune love and is thereby drawn into deifying union. This article will proceed as follows: First, I will survey the relationship between beauty and love found in the classic philosophical tradition represented by Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Then, I will survey this beauty–love relation in Christian thought from Augustine, Aquinas, Ficino, Edwards, and von Hildebrand. These figures will provide supporting evidence for my construal of beauty. I then turn to the constructive task. I argue that there is an abductive fit between the features of beauty and the nature of the Trinity. In light of this fit and the sources of traditional thought above, beauty is best thought of as the *gravitas amoris*—the weighty impression of God’s triune love in created things that draws one into the triune life and is experienced as delight when perceived. I conclude by answering objections and reflecting on how this account reframes the transcendentals and coordinates the experience of beauty with Christian love.

Keywords: beauty; love; Trinity; aesthetics



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1. Introduction

I was sixteen when I first heard the stars sing. The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson suddenly came alive to me:

“The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic. The anciently reported spells of these places creep on us. The stems of pines, hemlocks, and oaks, almost gleam like iron on the excited mind”. (Emerson 1969, p. 416)

But when the stars sing their tune, what is their song? This article flows from an attempt to articulate my encounter with beauty in the face of Jesus Christ. More specifically, I will attempt to theologically correlate beauty and love within the triune being of God. I will argue that beauty is the *gravitas amoris* of the triune being of love—it is, in other words, the objective attractional “force” or “weightiness” exerted by triune love on the soul by which one, if she yields to triune love, experiences the bliss and delight of triune love and is thereby drawn into deifying union. This article will proceed as follows: First, I will survey the relationship between beauty and love found in the classic philosophical tradition represented by Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Then, I will survey this beauty–love relation in Christian thought from Augustine, Aquinas, Ficino, Edwards, and von Hildebrand. These figures will provide supporting evidence for my construal of beauty. In Section 3, I turn to the constructive task. I argue that there is an abductive fit between the features of beauty and the nature of the Trinity. In light of this fit and the sources of traditional thought above, beauty is best thought of as the *gravitas amoris*—the weighty impression of God’s triune love in created things that draws one into the triune life and is experienced as delight

when perceived. I conclude by answering objections and reflecting on how this account reframes the transcendentals and coordinates the experience of beauty with Christian love.

2. Beauty and Love in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus

In this section, I will give an overview of the classical beauty–love relation from Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus as representative voices of the classical tradition through history.

2.1. Plato

For the sake of space, I will draw my analysis from two key works: the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. In the *Symposium*, Diotima’s speech seems key in revealing the beauty–love connection. Plato, through Socrates, seems to argue that eros is love for the good via *begetting in the beautiful*. He denies that love’s object is the beautiful, but rather that love loves the beautiful as a kind of context in which to beget the good (F. C. White 1989, 2008; Zovko 2020; Levy 1979; Chen 1983). Per Plato, since love wants that object, it must lack that object. If love wants beauty and goodness, then it must lack these things. As such, it cannot be a god, since gods do not lack beauty and goodness. But it is not ugly or evil; rather, love is an intermediary between the gods and humanity (Plato 2008, pp. 108–9). Love is the child of plenty and poverty, and is not “for the beautiful” but for “begetting and birth in the beautiful” (Plato 2008, p. 110). Eros desires the good as its possession, and since the closest humans can come to possessing the good everlastingly is through begetting (e.g., generation of either offspring or famous works through which one “lives on”, as it were), eros desires the good via begetting. Yet eros seeks the beautiful as a kind of means or medium in which to beget the good. The one who sees the beautiful in itself generates not just copies of virtue, but true virtue itself (Hyland 2008, pp. 58–60). Eros does love beauty, then, but as its context or medium in which it obtains its proper object via generation unto immortality: the good.

But what does it mean to “beget in the beautiful”? The *Phaedrus* sheds light on this question. According to the character Socrates, a lover is a lover of beauty who has been possessed by a kind of “madness” that springs from being reminded of true beauty from beauty on earth (Plato 2009, pp. 32–33). The one initiated into this kind of “madness” starts to reverence the “beloved as if he were a god”; the sight of beauty prompts a kind of ascent of the soul (the growth of “wings”) that moves the lover to be close to the beloved (Ibid., pp. 34–36). The sight of beauty inflames the soul and is poured into the soul, moving the lover towards union with the beloved from the sight of beauty (Corrigan 2018, pp. 74–80). Thus, the lover loves the beloved on account of a striking resemblance to the beautiful (F. C. White 1990).

This suggests the following synthesis: In Platonic eros, love seeks to possess the good by begetting in the beautiful. To “beget in the beautiful” means, per the *Phaedrus*, that love is inflamed *towards* possession of the good *by* the sight of beauty. Thus, beauty is the atmosphere in which love stretches towards possession of the good and the fuel by which love is inflamed to do so. Beauty is the air and food of love.

2.2. Aristotle

Aristotle writes that “the apparent good (καλον) is the object of appetite, and the real good (καλον) is the object of wish”. (Aristotle 2014, p. XII.7) “The beautiful”, then, seems to have some aspect of final causality and “points ultimately to the first or supreme best” (Corrigan 2018, p. 25). The language of beauty seems to give way to the language of the good, such that Aristotle finds some sort of identification between these realities (Corrigan 2018, pp. 35–36). Indeed, Aristotle says the good is of one essence with the beautiful (Aristotle 2014, VII.6). For him, moral action acts for “the sake of the beautiful”, such that it is “for the sake of the beautiful, for that is the end toward which virtue is directed” (Aristotle 2014, 1115b). Virtue is pursued so that lives exhibit *beauty* (Kosman 2010). Beautiful actions define a class of good actions towards which virtue is oriented and for which virtue aims (Torrente 2019). Insofar as beauty has the character of a final cause for Aristotle, beauty is the aim of love (Irrera 2019).

There seems to be some difference between Aristotle and Plato's notion of love. Whereas for the latter, love's object is properly speaking the possession of the good via begetting *in* the beautiful, Aristotle locates the beautiful as a kind of final cause. Furthermore, I have only inferred that love's aim is "το καλον" for Aristotle, but significantly he seems to drop the discussion of *eros* altogether. For Aristotle, the emphasis is on beauty's relation to *eudaimonia* (Sheffield 2010). A significant thread gleamed from Aristotle, then, is that beauty somehow *elicits* virtuous action.

2.3. Plotinus

In the *Enneads*, Plotinus famously critiques definitions of beauty that root it in harmony or proportionality (Anton 1964). He writes,

"What does it mean to say that there is proportion in beautiful practices or customs or studies or types of scientific understanding? For how could theorems be proportional to each other. If it is because they are in concord, it is also the case that there is concord among bad theorems". (Plotinus 2018, p. 93)

For example, if one speaks of the "harmony" of math equations, they are using the word "harmony" metaphorically. Yet such harmonies can be found among theorems that are true and false; ugly theories can agree with each other. "Harmony" therefore does not tell us what exactly beauty is. For Plotinus, beauty is closely related to that which has the role of a form. Beauty seems to denote something about the ability of a form to bring organization and order among parts (and this explains why harmonies are beautiful). Hence, he writes,

"This is the reason why fire, above all the other bodies, is beautiful; it has the role of form in relation to the other elements, highest in position, finest of the other bodies, being as close as possible to the incorporeal, and is alone not receptive of the other elements, though the others receive it. For it heats them, but is itself not cooled, and is primarily coloured, whereas the others get the form of colour from it. So, it shines and glows as if it were form. That which fades in a fire's light, unable to dominate the matter, is no longer beautiful, *since the whole of it does not partake of the form of the colour*". (Plotinus 2018, p. 95)

A "whole partaking of a form" exhibits the beautiful. Thus, because the soul is the form of the body, it is the beauty of the body; the body is only beautiful insofar as it partakes in a form (Gál 2022, pp. 30–32). This form is the "ideal-form", which co-ordinates and imposes pattern on material things—coherence and unity (Plotinus 1991, pp. 48–49). Those who feel the "keener wound" of beauty are known as *lovers* (Ibid.).

Importantly, however, beauty is closely associated with the Good (in a similar way to Plato). Beauty functions as a kind of draw towards the Good—the impression on the soul by the Good (Gál 2022, pp. 33–34). It is the "porch", as it were, that stands in front of the Good (Ibid.). But how does this fit with Plotinus's claim that love *is* concerned with "pure beauty"? Does love not desire pure beauty alone? Alberto Bertozzi suggests that Plotinus, in tractate 5 of the third *Ennead*, speaks of a "beauty of a more comprehensive kind" than sheer intellectual beauty (Bertozzi 2021, p. 151). However one tries to reconcile Plotinus with himself, what is clear is that he perceives a correlation between the beauty of ultimate Goodness and the eliciting of love in the soul. Love flowers when beauty is perceived.

2.4. Some Common Threads

In the writers surveyed above, beauty is closely associated with the Good. Whereas Plato and Plotinus seem to see some distinction (though this is more debatable with the latter) between beauty and goodness, Aristotle seems to identify the two. However, these writers agree that the sight of beauty and aim towards beauty is a manifestation of the soul's aim to possess its proper good. The love which springs from beauty facilitates a desire for union with (or exemplification of, in Aristotle's case) the Good. Beauty evokes unitive love.

We will find these themes echoed in our Christian writers surveyed below.

3. Beauty and Love in Christian Thought

Here, I survey the following representative voices of Christian thought on beauty and love: Augustine, Aquinas, Ficino, Jonathan Edwards, and Dietrich von Hildebrand. I will then trace common threads running through their thinking.

3.1. Augustine

Augustinian aesthetics draws quite heavily on the notions of order and harmony in conceptualizing beauty. Augustine's defense of hell, for instance, largely depends on the notion that beauty arises from well-ordered contrarities, as when the beauty of the stars shines more brightly against the backdrop of the night sky (Sohn 2007). He writes,

"And thus evils, which God does not love, are not apart from order; and nevertheless He does love order itself. This very thing He loves: to love good things, and not to love evil things—and this itself is a thing of magnificent order and of divine arrangement. And because this orderly arrangement maintains the harmony of the universe by this very contrast, it comes about that evil things must need be. In this way, the beauty of all things is in a manner configured, as it were, from antitheses, that is, from opposites: this is pleasing to us even in discourse". (Augustine 2020, 1.7.18)

Importantly, beauty is configured by the maintenance of the harmony of the universe. If one could glimpse the totality of the cosmos, they would see a beauty of the whole emerging from an overall harmony (Ord. 2.4.11). The consideration of beauty arises not from considering one part that might be in itself ugly, but from the universal whole of which that one thing is a part (Augustine 2005, 40.76). For "just as the color in a black picture becomes beautiful within the whole, so too the immutable providence of God puts on a worthy production of this whole contest by assigning one part to the vanquished, another to the contestants, another to the winners, another to the spectators" (Ibid.). One might hear echoes of Plotinus insofar as beauty emerges from parts partaking in a whole, or in an overarching form.

What is the relationship between beauty and love in Augustine's thought? For him, beauty is that which "attracts us and wins us to the things we love", inhering in fitting or apt correspondences in wholes (Augustine 2019, IV.13.20). The experience of God's beauty is alike to loving a "kind of light and melody, and fragrance" of the inner man (Augustine 2019, X.6.8). The beauty of created things tell of their authorship by God (Augustine 2019, X.34.53). Thus, all beautiful things call people to love the God who is the "beauty of all things beautiful" (Augustine 2019, III.6.10). Beauty is supposed to lead people onward and upward to the Immortal and Eternal Beauty from whom all beauty emanates (Djuth 2007). Beauty, for Augustine, is thus a harmony that draws the soul towards the Immortal Light: God, who is Beauty itself.

3.2. Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas famously taught that beauty includes three conditions: integrity or perfection, proportion or harmony, and brightness or clarity (Aquinas 1952, ST. I.q39.a8). Integrity or perfection seems to refer to the perfect and complete integration of a thing—its being complete and wholly conformed to its ideal (Sevier 2015, pp. 117–18). A Rembrandt exhibits integrity, for instance, insofar as the painting is *complete* and whole in an ideal manner. The notion of "proportion" complements the notion of integrity, as Aquinas sees proportion existing in anything that relates to another thing (Sevier 2015, p. 108). Beautiful proportions require integrity, insofar as one thing is *well-proportioned* or *fittingly* proportioned to another thing. For Aquinas, the Son is perfectly proportion to the Father as the express image of the Father who *perfectly* represents the Father as the visible image of the invisible God (ST. I.q39.a.8). Clarity, for Aquinas, seems to be the "light that makes beauty seen", which can even metaphorically describe the light of reason insofar as an act of reason can make beauty seen (ST. II-II.q180.a2).

What is the relationship between beauty and love for Aquinas? He writes,

Love demands some apprehension of the good that is loved. For this reason the Philosopher (Ethic ix. 5, 12) says that bodily sight is the principle of sensitive love: and in like manner the contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the principle of spiritual love". (ST. I-II.q27.a2)

The contemplation of *spiritual beauty*—beauty that transcends merely physical beauty—is the principle of love (Schindler 2019). But how does this square with Aquinas's claim that *goodness* alone is the cause of love? He answers this question, arguing that the beautiful is the "same as the good, and they differ in aspect only". The beautiful is that which satisfies by being seen or known, rather than that which satisfies as such; therefore, beauty is a kind of apprehension of goodness in the intellect, it would seem (ST. I-II.q27.a1). It is an intellectual good that pleases the intellect when perceived. With Plotinus, then, Aquinas might argue that beauty is a kind of draw to the good—an apprehension of goodness that evokes spiritual love.

3.3. Ficino

For Marsilio Ficino, the Renaissance Priest and famous interpreter of Plato, beauty is disclosed to us as a power of attraction. It is that which draws the soul to love (Weiss 2022). God is "good when he creates; when he attracts, beautiful; and when he perfects each thing according to its merit, just. Beauty, therefore, whose property is to attract, stands between goodness and justice" (Marsilio Ficino 2023, II.1). Ficino seems to echo Plotinus in seeing beauty as the radiance of the good, insofar as beauty is the "blossom of goodness, by the charms of which blossom, as a kind of bait, the hidden internal goodness attracts beholders" (Marsilio Ficino 2023, V.1).

How does the love of beauty relate to the love of God, who is ultimate Goodness? Beauty is the splendor of God shining through things that attracts the soul unto love; love is the desire to enjoy beauty (Marsilio Ficino 2023, II.9). Therefore, love is the desire to enjoy God's countenance in things. We love the shadows of God in bodies, and his likeness in the soul (Marsilio Ficino 2023, VI.19). Love's end is beauty, such that the greater the beauty, the greater the love (Marsilio Ficino 2023, I.4); thus, love seeks God above all things as the highest beauty and the form of all beauty (Marsilio Ficino 2016, pp. 129–30). Beauty, then, is the attractiveness of God's countenance that draws the soul unto God, inflaming the soul with love.

3.4. Jonathan Edwards

Edwards might seem like an odd choice for a survey, given that the thinkers cited so far have been Roman Catholics. However, Edwards is a great example of Christian thinking on beauty during the Enlightenment. Edward Farley even argues that for Edwards, "beauty is more central and more pervasive than in any other text in the history of Christian theology" (Farley 2001, p. 43).

For Jonathan Edwards, the world is a school of images that portray, in the language of flowers, streams, rivers, and mountains, the majestic splendor of Divine Beauty (Lane 2004). He saw beauty in the world as a dynamic portrayal of various facets of the divine being. For instance, the beauty of planetary motion is such that it resembles a "decent trust, dependence, and acknowledgement in the planets continually moving round the sun, receiving his influences by which they are made happy, bright, and beautiful. . . how much a resemblance is there of every grace in the fields covered with plants and flowers, when the sun shines serenely and undisturbedly upon them" (Edwards 1980, vol. 6, p. 305).

In order to understand Edwardsian aesthetics, it will be useful to survey his concept of primary and secondary beauty from *The Nature of True Virtue*. Edwards believed that the spiritual world—the immaterial—was "higher" in the hierarchy of being than the physical world; as such, the latter served as types and shadows of the former (Edwards 1993). Primary beauty, or true virtue, is a union of heart with and consent to "being-in-general". It is to so order oneself towards the whole system of existence, such that one wishes the good for the whole of reality (Danaher 2007). Thus, Edwards argues,

“Beauty does not consist in discord and dissent, but in consent and agreement. And if every intelligent being is some way related to being in general, and is a part of the universal system of existence; and so stands in connection with the whole; what can its general and true beauty be, but its union and consent with the great whole?” (Edwards 2017)

To illustrate this point, consider two lovers who walk down the street at a park, laughing with one another. We might initially consider that a beautiful scene. But suppose this couple are so immersed in one another that they do not even notice a child tugging at them asking for help in finding her parents. This scene of initial beauty, once we expand our scope, turns out to be rather ugly. Edwards’s point is that true virtue disposes one to be at harmony with the *universal* system of existence, so that no matter how much one enlarges their scope, a beautiful action will remain beautiful because of its harmony with “being-in-general”.

For Edwards, beauty (or “excellency”) consists in “equality of relation”, wherein some equality repeats or facilitates a relation between two or more things. For instance, in a line segment ABC, where B is the midpoint, Edwards argues that there would be less beauty in AB and BC than if B were placed more closely to A (Edwards 1980, p. 334). His universal definition of beauty is “the consent of being to being”—a kind of harmony or agreement with being founded on some equality of relation (Ibid., p. 336). Thus, the reason why AB and BC, where B is the midpoint, is more beautiful than AB and BC if B were not the midpoint, is because there is a greater consent of being to being amidst the first pair of line segments. The notion of being agreeing to being, then, is at the heart of the Edwardsian picture (Louie 2013, pp. 17–62). When applied to the spiritual realm of virtue, the consent of being to being is love (Louie 2013, p. 116).

The relationship between beauty and love, then, is quite straightforward for him. Beauty is “consent of being to being” and *is love* in the realm of virtue. For in love, the soul consents to “being-in-general”, and thus longs for union with God (who is Being itself). And since natural beauty is a type and shadow of spiritual beauty, it follows that natural beauty is a type and shadow of *love*. For Edwards, the beauty of the world consists in its typological (or spiritual) embodiment of triune love.

3.5. Dietrich von Hildebrand

Von Hildebrand, writing in the twentieth century, pictures a clear relationship between beauty and love. For him, love *is* a value-response to the particular beauty of the beloved (Crosby 2015). To understand what he means by this, it is important to understand several von Hildebrandian categories of value. There are two relevant aspects of value we will focus on here: the “important-in-itself”, and the “important-for-me”. Von Hildebrand argues that “value” is fundamentally a notion of “importance” or “weightiness”. If something has value, it has an objective significance which *demand*s recognition, such that the failure to recognize intrinsic value is a failure to recognize some aspect of reality (Rovira 2015). There are two relevant kinds of value: the objective good for me and the important-in-itself. Consider gratitude and its object. The object of gratitude—a gift, for instance—presents itself as “an objective good for me, as something is objectively in my true interest, that has a beneficent character with respect to my person and is in the direction of my good” (von Hildebrand 2020, p. 52). Values—objective values—are those things that are good irrespective of being good for any individual. They are objectively good—it is, in other words, good that they exist (von Hildebrand 2020, pp. 83–95). For instance, a human being has intrinsic value regardless of their being enmeshed in any particular relationship. She does not have value merely because she is good for another, but good in herself. Or consider the act of forgiveness itself. We might say that it is good not *merely* because it bestows a benefit on another; rather, it is good *that such acts are part of our world*. John Crosby has called these sorts of goods “contentful” good (Crosby 2007). They carry an importance-in-themselves, such that they demand reverence in their own right (Schwarz 1949).

For von Hildebrand, beauty—or at least, *metaphysical* beauty, which is the object of love’s response—is the irradiation of other values. Metaphysical beauty “is the beauty

of moral value—its ‘face’ or ‘appearance’. It announces moral value” (von Hildebrand 2016, p. 87). This beauty of value is the glory or fragrance of moral values (von Hildebrand 2016, p. 89). This fragrance is what awakens love, such that the beloved is precious to the lover. Love is a response to the overall beauty of the beloved, which radiates from the moral splendor and overall value-instantiations inhering in the beloved (von Hildebrand 2009, pp. 21–23). This love is such that it includes an intention of union—the lover wants to somehow join her life to the beloved on account of the beauty of the beloved (von Hildebrand 2009, pp. 43–57). Thus, love detects the “important-in-itself” signaled by beauty and drives the lover towards willing the good for the beloved and a desire for union befitting the relationship (Spencer 2019).¹ Beauty is thus the aroma that love catches, and from which love is catalyzed.

3.6. Some Common Threads

While space prevents a full comparison of the above figures, there are common threads running throughout these thinkers. For all of these theological thinkers, beauty in some way or another elicits love by drawing it out. Furthermore, for these thinkers, the beauty that draws love out is a beauty pre-eminently found in God. All beauty in creation is an instantiation of an Original Beauty found in the divine being as its source. And finally, there is a tight connection between beauty and goodness. For von Hildebrand, beauty is the fragrance of metaphysical goodness. Augustine, Aquinas, Ficino, and Edwards similarly see beauty is that which draws us to the Good, which is God himself. These observations will be incorporated into my own account of beauty, to which we now turn.

4. Beauty as the *Gravitas Amoris*

To develop and argue for this account, I will proceed as follows: I will first define what I mean in claiming that beauty is the *gravitas amoris*—the “gravity” or “weightiness” of love. Then, I will argue that there are six features of beauty that fit well with this claim. Along the way, I will appropriate various thinkers surveyed above.

4.1. Beauty as the *Gravitas Amoris* Defined

In claiming that beauty is the *gravitas amoris*, or the “gravity of love”, I am claiming that beauty is the piercing impression of triune love displayed in an object that exerts a draw on the soul into participation in God’s life of triune love. In other words, it is the impression, as it were, of triune love displayed in things and experienced as a delightful draw of the soul.

For Cicero, *gravitas* denoted a kind of moral weight or significance; if one walks into a room with *gravitas*, they command a kind of reverence via the sense of felt importance (Schofield 2021). Newton later appropriated this term to speak of physical “gravity”. I am incorporating both senses into my understanding here: *gravitas*, or the gravity of love, will denote the weighty impression triune love makes in and through beautiful things, drawing the soul towards deification. The notion of “import” or “significance” is especially apt here, since, I argue, triune love is, in fact, the deepest import and meaning of all things. Thus, my understanding of beauty as the *gravitas amoris* presupposes a world in which the excellencies of triune love are displayed in the material creation as their deepest meaning and referent (see Johnson 2020). In claiming that beauty is the gravity of love, then, I am claiming that it is the gravity of *triune love* in particular. My definition thus has resonances with Plotinus, insofar as beauty draws one to the Good. I also incorporate Aristotle’s insight that beauty has the aspect of a final cause by claiming that beauty is the impression of the Final Cause of all things—the triune God—stamped into things we call “beautiful”. Ficino would, I think, also approve, insofar as beauty is the attractive glow of God’s countenance in things. And Edwards would certainly applaud the identification of beauty with Ultimate Love.

With this definitional framework in place, we can move onto defending it.

4.2. *Triune Love as Beauty's Fitting Home*

There are six features of beauty which, I think, fit well in a world where beauty is the gravity of triune love. Beauty is generatively diffusive, an end-in-itself, gratuitous, a healing herald of hope, united with the good, and engenders love in its wake.

4.2.1. The Generative Diffusiveness of Beauty

Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed, “the beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (Emerson 1849, pp. 20–21). Beauty, in other words, has a power to impress itself on the soul and *generate* new things from its impression. As noted above, Plato spoke of the “madness” of loving beauty as something that leads one into generating offspring—whether physical or biological. For instance, one can walk through a forest at twilight and find themselves “begetting the offspring of thought” insofar as they write of the beauty they see in a journal, or find themselves prompted to sing, or feel their minds set ablaze with contemplation. Elaine Scarry writes,

“Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people. Sometimes it gives rise to exact replication and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognizable. A beautiful face drawn by Verrocchio suddenly glides into the perceptual field of a young boy named Leonardo. The boy copies the face, then copies the face again. Then again and again and again. He does the same thing when a beautiful living plant—a violet, a wild rose—glides into his field of vision, or a living face: he makes a first copy, a second copy, a third, a fourth, a fifth. He draws it over and over, just as Pater (who tells us all this about Leonardo) replicates—now in sentences—Leonardo’s acts, so that the essay reenacts its subject, becoming a sequence of faces: an angel, a Medusa, a woman and child, a Madonna, John the Baptist, St. Anne, La Gioconda. Before long the means are found to replicate, thousands of times over, both the sentences and the faces, so that traces of Pater’s paragraphs and Leonardo’s drawings inhabit all the pockets of the world (as pieces of them float in the paragraph now before you)”. (Scarry 2013, pp. 3–4)

Beauty, in other words, dynamically begets beauty.

This feature of beauty makes a great deal of sense if beauty is the stamp, or impression or character, of triune love irradiating forth. In God’s own dynamic life of love, the divine nature exists as the eternal act of the Father begetting the Son in the bond of love of the Spirit (See Weinandy 2010; Weinandy et al. 1996). That is, as St. Anselm argues, the eternal Word in the Father’s utterance of himself—the radiance of the Father, in whom the divine nature fully subsists (Anselm 2008, pp. 46–48). Drawing on an older tradition, he argues that the Son is the Father’s self-understanding (Anselm 2008, pp. 57–60). Aquinas agrees, arguing that the Word is analogous to the Father’s self-concept (ST I.q34.a1). Augustine famously finds a shadow of the Trinity in memory, understanding, and will—insofar as the mind remembers itself through memory, and understands that memory in understanding (which is itself catalyzed and aligned with the memory by an act of will) (Augustine 2012, p. XIV.II.10). The Word is, in this sense, the Father’s self-understanding. Jonathan Edwards illustrates it as such,

“If a man could have an absolutely perfect idea of all that passed in his mind, all the series of ideas and exercises in every respect perfect as to order, degree, circumstance, etcetera, for. . .the last hour, he would really to all intents and purposes be over again what he was that last hour. And if it were possible for a man by reflect perfect to contemplate all that is in his own mind in an hour, as it is, and at the same time that it is there in its first and direct existence. . .a man would really be two during that time, he would be indeed double”. (Studebaker and Caldwell 2012, pp. 25–26)

The upshot here is the depiction of the Word as the Father's eternal self-contemplation. Importantly, with Augustine, the Holy Spirit proceeds *in this very self-contemplation*—in the very act of will that aligns memory with understanding. The Spirit, in other words, is the dynamic *impulse* of God's love in his being (Levering 2016, pp. 139–40; see also Sanders and Swain 2017; Kevin Giles 2012). The Spirit is the bond of love between Father and Son. As Feingold writes,

“The Son comes forth from the Father as his Word that is uttered. The Word then breathes forth love for the Father, giving himself back to him, and the Father likewise by the same perfect impetus gives himself to his Son. The Spirit proceeds thus from the mutual and eternal self-gift of Son to Father and Father to Son. Thus the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the bond of unity. The filioque is not merely an abstruse point of theological speculation, but something that is existentially vital. If the Spirit truly proceeds from a love that is agape, how could that love be one-sided?” (Feingold 2019; See also Padley 2018; Jones 2017)

I argue that beauty finds a neat fit with the notion that it is an impression—or the impressed weight and attractive force—of the trinitarian life breaking into our world in this aspect of generativity. Beauty, like a mirror of the generativity in the Trinity, generates beauty. The experience of beauty, as Scarry has noted, catalyzes a replication of the beauty seen, and in this way is a kind of vestige of the Trinity. Furthermore, the animating impulse towards this generation is something very much like love (as well be further explored below and is noted by the authors above). In the experience of beauty, then, one is caught up into the generative dynamic of God's trinitarian life, insofar as, through beauty, they are drawn unto generativity via love.

4.2.2. Beauty as an End in Itself

Beauty, it seems to me, has the character of an ultimate value—something pursued for its own sake. While a long defense of this point could be an article or book in its own right, I will briefly argue for this here.² When a sunset colors the horizon with gold and purple, no one looks at the sunset in order to get *some other thing*. That is, where I might look for a car in order to travel to some place, beautiful things are enjoyed *for their own sake*. We simply do not sit for symphonies the way we might wait in a line for food. This is why Aristotle argues that beauty has the aspect of a *final cause* (Coelho 2022). As von Hildebrand argues, beauty strikes us as a value that is important-in-itself—worthy of reverence for its own sake.

This fits well in a world where beauty is, as Pseudo-Dionysus argues, the radiant appearing of Goodness (Ramos 2020). It is the blossoming of goodness (per Ficino), and in this way the fragrant signal of Ultimate Goodness (per von Hildebrand), precisely because beauty is the radiant appearing of Ultimate Goodness *that is triune love*. If beauty is the gravitas of triune love, then it is the deep, radiant impression (per Aquinas) of triune love displayed in things that draws the soul unto deification; hence, beauty is sought for its own sake because beauty is the countenance of the Triune God of love who is the final end of all creatures (Anatolios 2022; Ortiz 2020).

One might object that we do not *seek* beauty just like we do not seek the gravity of an object. Hence, per Plato, one might argue that beauty is the *context* in which love pursues goodness, but not itself the object of our pursuit. But this seems to misstate the way in which beauty is the gravitas of love. In using the phrase “gravitas”, I mean to include *both* the sense of a “draw” and the sense of “weighty impression”. Plato's account, to my lights, seems slightly off just insofar as we *do* seek beautiful things on account of their beauty. A symphony is listened to precisely because it is beautiful. Beauty, then, is an *aspect* of ultimate goodness (Schindler 2018). It is the weighty radiant appearing of the Divine Goodness—the richness of the triune life—displayed and communicated.

4.2.3. Beauty as Gratuitous Gift

The gratuity of beauty refers to the fact that it strikes us as a super-abundant *gift*. The world did not have to be filled with such resplendent color; the flowers on a thousand

fields did not need to sing a symphony sung in notes of reds, greens, yellows, and richly textured purples. The beauty of our world renders us profoundly grateful. In a lovely passage, John O'Donohue writes,

“True beauty is from elsewhere, a pure gift. It cannot be programmed nor its arrival foreseen. It never falls simply into the old patterns of what is already there nor is it frivolous or burdened with leaden solemnity. Frequently, beauty is playful like dancing sunlight, it cannot be predicted, and in the most unlikely scene or situation can suddenly emerge. . . The things we never notice, like health, friends, and love emerge from their subdued presence and stand out in their true radiance as gifts we could never have earned or achieved”. (O'Donohue 2005, p. 22)

Anecdotal evidence is, of course, tricky, but I suspect others will resonate with this. When I was fifteen, I found myself alive to the wonder of fruit trees. A friend of mine gave me a fresh pear off a pear tree, and a bite into that pear opened up a new world to me. I had only ever eaten store bought pears up to that point. Yet, for whatever reason, when I ate this pear, I suddenly found myself *astounded* at the rich diversity of fruit that appeared from the ground. Why are there riches like *this* from creation? When I similarly gaze at a sunset, or walk through a garden, or look at a star speckled sky, I find myself *grateful* to be alive. And as O'Donohue writes, the experience of beauty in the stars can color the rest of our lives with the hue of gift. One might walk away from a sunset grateful that they have friends, for instance!

If beauty is the resplendent impression of triune love displayed in things, then the character of beauty as gift derives itself from the nature of triune love as divinity-in-self-gift. As Feingold wrote above, the Trinity is the divine-nature-in-self-gift, where the Father gives himself and all that he is to the Son, and the Son back to the Father, in the bond of the Holy Spirit. The language of “gift”, historically, was fitted to the Holy Spirit (Knell 2009, pp. 151–62). Yet this was because the Spirit was seen as the ad intra gift of love from Father to the Son *and* from the Son to the Father (Castelo and Loyer 2022, p. 174). Thomas Joseph White calls this the love of mutual “impressio”, whereby the Son is impressed in the Father, and the Father in the Son, by the Holy Spirit (T. J. White 2022, pp. 487–88). Thus, beauty feels like a gift because the impression of the dynamics of triune love are communicated in beautiful things. The one who beholds beauty tastes, as it were, the fragrance of the gift-dynamic in the life of the Trinity.

The gratuity of the gift—the feeling that we are being given something freely as an unconditioned good—is grounded in the constitution of the persons. That is, the Father *is* his paternity, the Son *is* his filiation, and the Spirit *is* divine spiration. Therefore, the Father does not give himself to the Son *because* of foreseen merit or worth (although the Son is, of course, infinitely worthy), but simply because he *is* the movement of deity-given-to. Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to the other persons of the Trinity (see T. J. White 2022, pp. 425–41). We feel as though we are being *given to* in beauty, then, because we detect the *giving-ness* of the triune life in the moment of the beautiful.

4.2.4. Beauty Is a Healing Herald of Hope

Trauma can darken the lived experience of a trauma victim by fracturing their sense of self and the world. The world loses any sense of stability and goodness it once had under the shadow of the traumatic wound. Timothy Patitsas, an Orthodox priest who works with combat veterans, writes, “Trauma results from a very powerful encounter with ugliness, especially if that ugliness strikes us as a kind of revelation, disclosing to us the *real* truth about the world” (Patitsas 2020, p. 47). For Elie Wiesel, the trauma and ugliness of the Holocaust disclosed a world in which God is dead:

“But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing. . . and so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me I heard the same man asking ‘For God’s sake, where is God?’ And from

within me, I heard a voice answer: ‘Where is He? This is where—hanging here from this gallows’. (Wiesel 2006, p. 65)

From that moment, Wiesel found that the God proclaimed in Rosh Hoshanna was undeserving of praise and thanksgiving (Ibid., pp. 66–67).

Alienation from the self also often follows in the wake of trauma. A dear friend of mine wrestles with DPDR—depersonalization–derealization disorder. This disorder results in her feeling “outside”, as it were, of her experience—as though she were watching a movie of her life through her eyes (Pienkos and Sass 2022). This disorder often results from the trauma victim acclimating to such extreme cases of suffering that alienation from the self becomes a frequent and habitual coping mechanism.

Art and beauty, as it turns out, seem to have healing and re-integrating effects for trauma victims (Stuckey and Nobel 2010; Hu 2023). My wife and I have a dear friend whom we will call “Jane”. Jane experienced brutal sexual assault throughout her childhood and adolescence, such that her image of men forever bore the evil taint of her abusers. Whenever she approached the Old Testament narratives of violence, she would feel traumatic memories welling to the surface. She could not read it without re-experiencing trauma. My wife, in the process of discipling her, used a form of art therapy. She had Jane draw images articulating, in words of paint and brushstrokes, her own traumatic feelings rising up upon reading the Old Testament. Jane produced some of the most moving artistic depictions of darker passages I have ever seen. For instance, at the end of Judges, we read of a woman who is brutally raped and murdered as an expression of the lawlessness of the land. Jane narrated *her own story* artistically in the painted image. As she worked through the Old Testament this way, she found an expression for her own trauma via images drawn from the well of Scripture—and found herself able to read Scripture.

My wife’s discipleship technique has precedent in the psychological literature. The wonder of art consists, in part, in its peculiar ability to *re-narrate* our lives. Art therapy is used to give language to the pains and fragmentations trauma leaves on the soul, gathering up the fragments into an artistic image, thus bringing a kind of internal coherence (Malchiodi 2005, pp. 35–36). In art, one finds the possibility of a “*Gestalt*” or organizing form through which they might re-imagine and re-narrate their own past (Rhyne 1973). For instance, I might find in van Gogh’s *Starry Night* a kind of “language” in which I feel my own sense of wonder in the world portrayed in a visceral way. The painting gives expression to an emotion deep inside that may have been previously unexpressed. I might find in the turbulent brush strokes an externalization of turmoil in my own soul—and thereby come to understand, through an external image, something of my own emotional state. Art, through the gift of image, gives the imagination more tools by which we might understand the movements of our own souls.

The medicine of beauty is also delivered through the beauty of music. Music therapy has given language to AIDS patients, cancer patients, and countless others (Malchiodi 2005, pp. 46–67). In one particularly poignant account, an AIDS patient felt as though he could *communicate* his experience of suffering, fear, and beauty through the language of music alone (Lee 1996, p. 78). The creation of music “puts things into perspective” and “reminds [him] of an ability of the soul” (Ibid., p. 138). Music functions as a kind of narration. Charles Taylor writes,

“The Mozart G Minor Quintet gives us a powerful sense of being moved by something profound and archetypical, not trivial and passing, which is both immensely sad, but also beautiful, moving, and arresting. We could imagine being moved in some analogous kind of way by some beautiful story of star-crossed love, of loss or parting. But the story isn’t there. We have something like the essence of the response, without the story”. (Taylor 2018, p. 355)

The beauty inscribed in Mozart’s Quintet shines also in the story of star-crossed lovers. This is, I believe, why we enjoy movies with fitting musical scores. Ludwig Goransson’s score “Can you Hear the Music” in *Oppenheimer* enhances the movie by expressing

the story of the film—and the intricate beauty of Oppenheimer’s perception of physical reality—in grand, longing, and awful (awe-full) music.

Beauty’s healing power, it seems to me, lies in the latent power of beauty to narrate the wonder of a life. Our sense of selfhood is largely constituted by the narrative we imagine ourselves to be inhabiting (Somers 1994; Polkinghorne 1996; Laceulle 2018). Hence, if some incredible illness or trauma casts its shadow over my world, I start to see sunlight’s hues dimmed by the shadow. My life is lived in the horizon constrained by the trauma. Whenever someone undergoes some extreme trauma, it threatens to say that the world is like *this*. It is ugly, brutal, dark, cold, and hopeless. Beauty, however, comes like a herald of good news in a world in traumatic exile. The laughter of a child cues us towards believing that the world, despite its ugliness and horror, is perhaps embedded in a narrative in which beauty bursts to break through. The beauty of a fairy story, for instance, lies in its capacity to deliver what J.R.R. Tolkien famously called a “eucatastrophe”: the best fairy stories are fleeting glimpses of a “Joy beyond the walls of the world, as poignant as grief” (Sayers 1981, p. 81). This is why, I believe, fairy stories and discussions of beauty so often go together—the latter is a narrative vehicle of the former, which similarly bespeaks of some joy beyond the walls of the world. In so doing, the darkness of trauma can be put into a new frame—like the discord of Melkor being swept up and incorporated into the larger theme of Eru Illuvatar’s symphony (Tolkien 2022).

Beauty is a healing herald, then, in part by heralding the good news of *hope*. Francis Pieper rightly argues that true hope exists in the tension between magnanimity—the aspiration towards greatness—and humility (Pieper 1986). True hope (rather than sheer wishful thinking or optimism) springs from the sight of wondrous possibilities within the humble recognition of one’s own finitude and their condition in the world. Hope—true hope and not vain fantasy—flows from the imagination’s vision of some beautiful sight that is realizable in the world. It is an orientation towards a future that glows with trustworthy promise.

Consider the fifth and sixth stanzas of his “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”,³ in which Shelley writes,

*While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;
I was not heard—I saw them not—
When musing deeply on the lot
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
All vital things that wake to bring
News of birds and blossoming
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy
I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours
Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers
Of studious zeal or love’s delight
Outwatched with me the envious night—
They know that never joy illumined my brow*

Unliked with hope that thou wouldst free

This world from its dark slavery,

That thou—O awful loveliness

Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express. (Shelley 1993, pp. 3–4)

The poet, having failed to connect with the spirit of the dead, awakens to beauty via the first stirrings of spring. When “news of birds and blossoming” arrives, the “shadow” of pure beauty falls on him and induces sheer ecstasy. He then dedicates his life to the proclamation of beauty “with hope that [beauty] wouldst free this world from its dark slavery”. The vision of a world under the shadow of beauty’s pure light animates the poet’s entire life’s pursuits. Beauty, then, gives us a glimpse into a world that might be in the midst of the world that is. Beauty inspires and fuels hope (see also Diessner et al. 2006).

Why does beauty heal us, often by heralding hope? On my account, this is because beauty is the appearing of the *one for whom we were made*—the triune God—in created things. Through the history of Christian thought, deification simply denoted the fact that human beings were meant to, in some way, partake of the divine nature. That is, humanity was meant for union with God, in which human nature is transfigured to reflect the light of God’s own glory (see Russell 2004; Blackwell 2016; Christensen and Wittung 2007). Just as Moses’s face was transfigured by his encounter with God, so human beings were meant to reflect the radiance of the divine being in their own natures (without ceasing to be human). This eschatological destiny seems to find some hint in the experience of beauty. For when we see beauty, we find ourselves changed by its radiant glow. CS Lewis writes,

“We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. . . . We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*”. (Lewis 2015, p. 33)

Beauty calls us to itself and elevates us (O’Donohue 2005, pp. 11–31). It draws us to our unitive end—towards union with Goodness, per Plotinus, Aristotle, Ficino, Edwards, and von Hildebrand. This would fit if beauty were the visible impression of excellencies of the triune life—the *gravitas amoris*—drawing us to our unitive end. Beauty’s appearance inspires hope by providing a vision of the end for which all people were made: union with divine love in a bond of holy love.

4.2.5. Beauty’s Union with Goodness

In the history of philosophy and theology, beauty and goodness seem inseparably united—even if the precise nature of that union is disputed. Plato believed that love sought to beget goodness in the beautiful as its context, whereas Plotinus believed that beauty was the “porch” of the Good whereby Goodness draws things to itself. Aristotle, of course, seemed to identify beauty and goodness to a large extent. Augustine, Aquinas, Ficino, Edwards, and von Hildebrand all see beauty as, in one way or another, an aspect or visible appearing of the Divine Being. For Aristotle and Jonathan Edwards, moral goodness just *was* beauty applied to the domain of ethics.

Were these thinkers correct? There are several reasons to think they were. Beauty seems important to *moral education*. That is, cultivating a sense of beauty is connected to cultivating a sense of virtue (Diessner et al. 2006; Winston 2006; See also Bruner 2017; Bealeau 2020; Gardner 2011). One comes to pursue the good life precisely because there is something that draws them to it. As Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

“Beauty. . . dances as an uncontained splendor around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. . . she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that

whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not – can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love”. (Balthasar 1982)

Beauty is, to use his phrase, the “self-evidence” for why goodness should be carried out. This is why those who ignore beauty will end up severing themselves from truth and goodness—her “two sisters”. If there were no draw to the good life, one would not think to pursue it. As such, the goodness of the good life has a draw, and this “draw” is beauty.

The connection between beauty and goodness shows itself most clearly when we think about beautiful action. If Timmy were to punch Johnny in the face, no one would say “well that action was wrong but beautiful”. Similarly, I do not know of anyone who would speak of kindness as an “ugly but good thing”. In other words, as Balthasar argues, beauty dances around goodness such that to lose one is to lose the other. This is why aesthetic perceptions of action can be horribly wrong. For instance, if someone said, “well I think torture is wrong, but it’s so beautiful” and wept tears of joy every time they saw a child tortured, we would rightly think there was something horribly wrong with this individual. On the other hand, if someone found an act of self-sacrificial service—a father dying for their son—beautiful and lovely, we would commend that perception as true. Beauty, then, is a kind of indication of goodness. This connection, as we have seen, is something observed by classical thinkers through the centuries.

What accounts for this unity? If beauty is the impression of triune love that draws the soul to itself, then goodness and beauty are one precisely because they are one in God, that is, beauty is the appearing of the Ultimate Good in time (which is why Aquinas appropriates “beauty” uniquely to the Son, who is the visible appearing of the triune God in our midst) (Sevier 2015, p. 115). If beauty is the flowering forth of goodness, as Ficino argues, then beauty is the flowering forth of the Ultimate Good who is triune love in our midst.

Furthermore, the connection between goodness, beauty, and *love* is best anchored in the Trinity. Scripture teaches that all virtue is summed up in love (Edwards 1969, pp. 1–37). For St. Paul, love is the greatest of all commands precisely because it comprehends all commands (Harrington and Keenan 2010, pp. 77–82). Consider Romans 13:8–10:

“Μηδενι μηδεν οφειλετε ει μη το αλληλους αγαπᾶν· ο γαρ αγαπων τον ετερον νομον πεπληρωκεν. 9 το γαρ ου μοιχευσεις, ου φονευσεις, ου κλεψεις, ου κεπιθ υμησεις, και ει τις ετερα εντολη, εν τῷ λογω τουτου ανακεφαλαιοῦται εν τῷ· αγαπησεις τον πλησιον σου ως σεαυτον”

“Never owe anything to anyone except to love one another. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For ‘you shall not commit adultery, you shall not lie, you shall not steal, you shall not lust’ and whatever other command, in this word is summed up: love your neighbor as yourself”.

ἀνακεφαλαιοῦται means “summed up completely” (Harvey 2019, p. 328; Thielman 2018, p. 613). This is why the one who loves has fulfilled (πεπλήρωκεν) the law. Paul finds the particular commands as expressions of love, which is why they can be summed up in love. On an account of beauty as the *gravitas amoris*, we have a ready explanation for why various thinkers have said goodness is the object of love (Plato, Aristotle, and potentially Plotinus) and why beauty is the object of love: beauty is the appearance of goodness in space and time. Further still, love is the appropriate correlate to goodness because love is engendered by the draw of the good: beauty. And this highlights our final striking feature of beauty that fits with our account.

4.2.6. Beauty Engenders Love

As noted above, Plato believed that love begets goodness in the beautiful. That is, beauty is the proper context in which love stives after goodness. I have registered my concerns with this objection. Nevertheless, there is something to this: beauty is often the context in which goodness thrives. This is why lovers kiss with a sunset on the horizon,

or star-gazing opens up new horizons of feeling in the interior life of the soul. Love, as Plotinus, Ficino, Edwards, and von Hildebrand have argued, is elicited by beauty.

Why is this? If beauty is the *gravitas amoris*, and if beauty impresses itself onto the soul (per its generativity), then this fits in a world in which the triune life of love stamps itself onto the soul *in* the beautiful. That is, the experience of beauty on the soul *is delighted love*. As beauty draws the soul into its final end, the soul participates in the life of love at the heart of all reality and takes on the glow of that very life. The dynamics of the triune life are replicated in the lives of those who behold beauty as they find themselves experiencing the weighty, delighted draw of triune love in the beautiful.

This also accounts for why features like “harmony” or “proportion” have been identified with beauty: these are, analogically, features of love, as Jonathan Edwards has argued. That is, love involves a kind of harmony between the lovers, and a desire for a mutually life-giving union (Stump 2006). Dante famously viewed the harmony of the stars and heavenly bodies as the effect of the “love that moves the sun and stars”. (Pattison 2021, pp. 21–33). Beauty has struck many thinkers, both ancient and modern, as a kind of testament of beauty in which love is set forth before us (Pattison 2021, pp. 231–34). On my account, it is precisely because the love that is at the deepest layer of reality—triune love—shines forth in the beautiful, enticing the soul unto joining the eternal three-in-one dance. It is in this sense, then, that beauty is the gravity of love.

5. Answering Objections and the Transcendental Reframing

There are several objections one might raise to the account offered here. First, one might argue that, given Ficino and others have correlated beauty with the Trinity (e.g., Baddorf 2017), and so my argument adds nothing. Second, one might argue that my account is implausible. For who thinks of the Trinity in particular when they encounter beauty? Why think that the Trinitarian life is what is impressing itself on the soul in aesthetic experience when people do not seem to contemplate the triune life when experiencing beauty? And finally, one might say, with Aquinas, that since beauty is most fitted to the Son, it does not make sense to predicate beauty to the triune life of love as such.

First, my argument has not merely been that we should correlate beauty with the Trinity. Rather, my claim is that in the beautiful, one experiences the delightful draw of the triune life of love. They see, in other words, the excellencies of that triune life displayed and are drawn to ache for union with that life of love. The beauty of the triune life displayed—the *gravitas amoris*—is experienced as a delightful draw mediated in and through the beautiful object. But this raises the closely related second objection: if the loveliness of the triune life is what draws the beholder in delight, then why is the contemplation of the trinitarian life not more intuitive in the experiences of the beautiful? Here, I find Junius Johnson’s employment of the concept of “contuition” illuminating. Contuition is the act of seeing two things in one simple act of seeing, such that (applied to God and the creature) God is seen *in* seeing the creature (Johnson 2020, p. 56). But most people only ever engage what Johnson calls *implicit* contuition, whereby they begin to see something of God but refuse (or simply fail) to go where the beauty they see leads: into a full remembrance of God (Johnson 2020, pp. 57–59). Beauty, for him, is that which reminds us of God—even if faintly and implicitly (Johnson 2020, pp. 29–33). My claim is similar, with one important development: beauty is that which reminds us, even if implicitly, of the excellencies of God’s triune life lived in dynamic shape of self-giving love. If we were to fully press into, then, that which makes a beautiful experience lovely, we would find some feature of God’s own triune life at the root.

Finally, one might argue that beauty is most fitted to a particular triune person (the Son or the Spirit, depending on the writer) rather than the triune life as such. What makes my account more accurate? I argue that what appears in the contact with any divine person *is* the triune life mediated in that divine person owing to the doctrine of perichoresis (see Vidu 2021; T. J. White 2022, pp. 505–15). Thus, when the Son appears in time, one encounters the Father in the Son by the Holy Spirit who mediates the encounter. When one encounters the

Spirit, one encounters the Father and Son in the Spirit. Hence, the life that visibly unfolds before our eyes in the sight of any divine person is the *triune life* disclosed in that particular person. Furthermore, given the correlation between beauty and love, I argue that beauty is most fittingly identified with God *as* love, rather than any individual person to whom love is appropriated.

This analysis suggests a way to correlate the transcendentals. At the root of all reality is the Triune God, who is Goodness subsisting in itself. Love is thus the supreme virtue—the supreme embodiment of goodness in the moral life—as a reflection of Ultimate Goodness, which is Triune Love. Beauty is the impression of this Triune Life and its draw of all things towards participation in this life and is experienced as blissful delight engendering the affection of love. Truth, then, is the disclosure of the specific contours of the triune life. Hence, the transcendentals have the same referent and differ only in sense: they are all describing the triune life of Love as it subsists in itself (Goodness), draws all things to itself by the weighty impression of its excellencies (Beauty), and is reality’s deepest meaning as the referent towards which all things point (Truth).⁴ The Triune God is Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, and that means, therefore, that the greatest of all things is Living Love.

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Notes

- ¹ For a critical examination of this view, see (Zizioulas 2017).
- ² For a longer defense, see (Scruton 2011).
- ³ One might wonder why Shelley writes to “intellectual” beauty. In the philosophical tradition of Neo-Platonism, “intellectual beauty” was the highest and purest form of beauty—seen by the intellect—in which all other beautiful things participate. All beauty ultimately derives from and leads to intellectual beauty. See (Plotinus 2018) V.8.
- ⁴ See the sense-referent distinction in (Kripke 1980).

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