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ARTICLE

Beauty, Nature, and the Virtuous Imitation

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Abstract

Classical philosophy listed art as a virtue perfecting the intellect's practical activity (*recta ratio factibilium*). As virtuous, human art or skill must follow a measure or mean of its activity. For classical thought, the natural order provided this measure. This is the origin of the dictum that 'art imitates nature'. Yet, the claim that the work of creative artists must imitate nature has not gone unchallenged in modernity. This essay claims that a retrieval of the robust notion beauty as integrity, proportion, and clarity not only provides an anchor to tether the work of the creative artist to the natural order but also liberates the artist's creative intuition from the isolation of mere *taste* and into the realm of the transcendent. For the creative artist, the integrity, proportion, and clarity of the natural world opens a window into a beauty that unites into one community all those who see it.

Keywords: art; beauty; imitation; intellectual virtue; St Thomas

In this essay, I offer a reflection on the importance of the notion of art as imitation of nature, the notion's philosophical foundation, its power to liberate the artist's creative imagination, and the dangers threatening the artist if this notion were abandoned. I provide a warning of the potential hazards that might befall the artist once she imagines her work to be untethered to the natural order. Further, I propose that the proportion and order of nature establish a horizon for the realty of the beautiful, providing context and meaning to beauty, a meaning without which the notion of beauty would float anchorless in the subjective realm of individual taste. This ambitious task, only summarily treated here, receives far greater and more detailed treatment in the book, *The Shape of the Artistic Mind*, published in 2023 by Pontifex University Press.[1]

1. Art as virtuous imitation

Lists differ among thinkers, but classical philosophers (from Aristotle and Cicero to Aquinas) number five virtues as seated in the intellect perfecting the mind in its proper

[1]Bradley T. Elliott, *The Shape of the Artistic Mind* (El Cerrito: Pontifex University Press, 2023).

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activity.[2] Three virtues perfect the speculative intellect in its operation of knowing the world: understanding, knowledge, and wisdom (knowing first principles; discursively drawing conclusions from those principles; and knowing the first causes of all things, respectively). But the last two virtues listed, prudence and art, do *not* perfect the intellect's speculative activity but its practical activity of applying reason to various things. The virtue of prudence perfects the intellect in applying right reason to human action, saturating practical action with a share of right reason. The virtue of art perfects the intellect in applying right reason, not to human action, but to things made, saturating external things made with a share of right reason.[3] As a result of this, prudence (φρόνησις, *phronesis*) is called *recta ratio agibilium*, right reason of things to be done. Art (τέχνη, *techne*) is called *recta ratio factibilium*, right reason of things to be made.[4] The human mind, then, engages the order of the cosmos through activity flowing in two directions. Speculative activity *reads*, so to speak, the ordered reason of the cosmos and brings that reason inside. Practical activity, then, in a sense, *applies* that reason back into the world by extending that ordered reason either directly into human action or into external things made.[5]

When philosophers labeled these five activities as 'virtues' (or claiming that these activities are perfected by virtue), they made a bold anthropological claim. The label implies that these activities come preloaded with a particular *ratio* shared with other virtuous action. As virtuous actions, each intellectual act must obey a type of rule or measure of its activity, a mean toward which the virtue directs the mental action toward its perfection. But I call this label a 'bold claim', not only because of what it positively affirms, but most of all, because of what it implicitly denies. It implies that the human mind is *not* the measure of its own activity as if the mind were its own creator, judge, or measure. Rather the human mind in all its activity must be measured by another, something outside of itself, or something *other* to which its action must conform. In other words, like all virtue, it must follow a certain mean.

[2]In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle lists, 'art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, and intuitive reason'. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001). Book VI, Ch. 3 1139b 16–17. The scholastic tradition, exemplified by St Thomas Aquinas, adopted these five virtues and modified them into the list most used today; art, prudence, understanding, science (knowledge), and wisdom. See St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*), Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), I^aII^{ae} Q57.

[3]'Art applies equally to the crafts as well as to the other arts, that is, to the useful arts as well as to the fine arts. Though they differ in their ends, the fine arts are not essentially distinct from the useful arts, because both require the same intellectual power and process as their principle. This is not the case of reducing art to the level of technical skill; it is rather a case of raising the useful arts in dignity by emphasizing that they, too, participate in that essentially human activity which we call art'. M. J. Charlesworth. *Aristotle on Art and Nature: Lecture in Philosophy Auckland University College* (Auckland: The Pilgrim Press, 1957), pp. 12–13.

[4]*ST*, I^aII^{ae} Q57,3 co. 'The virtue of the craftsman was not [in the eyes of Aristotle and St Thomas] strength of muscle and nimbleness of fingers, ... it was a virtue of the intellect, and endowed the humblest artisan with a certain perfection of the spirit'. Jacques Maritain. *Art and Scholasticism/ The Frontiers of Poetry* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 20.

[5]'Work is of two kinds, exterior and interior. Accordingly, the practical or active faculty, which is contrasted with the speculative faculty, is concerned with exterior work, to which the speculative habit is not ordained. Yet it is ordained to the interior act of the intellect which is to consider the truth'. *ST*, I^aII^{ae} Q57,1 ad 1.

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But what *thing* outside the mind could possibly measure, or provide a mean for, the mind's virtuous activity? Here, the same classical tradition does not leave us without an answer. Speculative reason is measured by the world that it knows, that is, the world of nature that it brings into itself.[6] Truth exists in the mind, as St Thomas famously teaches, when an *adequatio* or equality exists between mind and thing known.[7] If the likeness of a thing in the mind does not equate to that same thing in reality (i.e., in nature), no truth exists in the mind. The created world, then, is the measure of the mind's knowing. And if this is true for speculative reason, it was no great leap to assume the same for practical reason, as well. Although not as intuitive, practical reason must also obey a type of measure in the natural world.[8] The natural world becomes a model or archetype for right practical reason and holds that practical reason to account. Just as the natural world measures the mind's knowing, so also does the ordered and goal-directed pattern of the natural world measure human action.

Nature provides a pattern that speaks to the mind with a type of command, an *ought*, that thrusts human activity towards a good goal. This is the origin of the very idea of a natural law, an ordered teleology in nature imposing a measure upon practical reason giving meaning and order to its activity. The mind simply *sees* that certain goods ought to be pursued, and others avoided.[9] In other words, there is a goodness to the order of natural things impressing meaning upon the human mind's ordered practical activity.

And again, if this were true of reason applied to human action, *recta ratio agibilium*, it was again no great leap for philosophers to assume the same for human making, *recta ratio factibilium*, or art. Human artistic reason also has a measure in the natural world. The natural world becomes a model or archetype for practical reason's making; the ordered and goal-directed patterns of the natural world measure human *things to be made* just as it would measure human *things to be done*. This symmetry between art

[6]'The good of anything consists in its observing the mean, by conforming with a rule or measure in respect of which it may happen to be excessive or deficient. Now intellectual virtue, like moral virtue, is directed to the good. Hence, the good of an intellectual virtue consists in observing the mean, insofar as it is subject to a measure. Now the good of intellectual virtue is the true; in the case of contemplative virtue, it is the true taken absolutely; in the case of practical virtue, it is the true in conformity with a right appetite.... Now truth apprehended by our intellect, if we consider it absolutely, is measured by things; since things are the measure of our intellect; because there is truth in what we think or say, according as the thing is so or not. Accordingly, the good of speculative intellectual virtue consists in a certain mean, by way of conformity with things themselves, insofar as the intellect expresses them as being what they are, or as not being what they are not: and it is in this that the nature of truth consists'. *ST*, I^aII^{ae} Q64,3 co.

[7]In the first question of *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, St Thomas uses the words 'measure' and 'measured' to describe, first, the relationship between God's mind and creation, second, that between created things and the human intellect, and lastly, that between the human intellect and human art. It is clear that the word 'measured', since it is applied to an artifact in relation to the artist, carries a meaning similar to the notion of 'imitation'. He says, 'It is clear, therefore, that... natural things from which our intellect gets its scientific knowledge measure our intellect. Yet these things are themselves measured by the divine intellect, in which are all created things – just as all works of art find their origin in the intellect of an artist. The divine intellect, therefore, measures and is not measured; a natural thing both measures and is measured; but our intellect is measured, and measures only artifacts, not natural things'. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate.* (Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), Q1,2 co.

[8]'The truth of practical intellectual virtue, if we consider it in relation to things, is by way of that which is measured; so that both in practical and in speculative intellectual virtues, the mean consists in conformity with things'. *ST*, I^aII^{ae} Q64,3 co.

[9]*ST*, I^aII^{ae} Q94,2 co.

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and prudence provides the foundation of the classical notion that *art is an imitation of nature*. 'Skills imitate nature.' St Thomas explains,

> And this is because actions and effects are related as their sources are related to one another. But the source of things produced by skills is the human intellect, which is similarly derived from the divine intellect, and the divine intellect is the source of natural things. And so skillful actions necessarily imitate natural actions, and artifacts imitate things in nature.[10]

Nature's ordered patterns speak to the mind with a type of command, calling to be imitated, demanding to be imitated. And like a good teacher, the ordered patterns of nature direct human art toward its perfection and thrust human art towards a good goal. 'If any teacher of a skill were to produce skillful work', St Thomas explains again,

> the pupil learning the skill from him would need to pay attention to the teacher's activity, so that the pupil would also perform the task in the way he does. And so, the human intellect, which derives its intelligible light from the divine intellect, needs to be formed by examining the things produced by nature so as to act similarly regarding the things it produces.[11]

2. Modern objections and the reality of beauty

Yet despite the streamlined logic here, the notion of art as an imitation of nature has not gone unchallenged in the modern world. The challenge arises when one attempts to place the work of the *creative artist* within this schema. Perhaps a type of craft, skill, or art of utility – the making of useful goods – may be called an imitation of nature, some may say, but the arts of the beautiful (as Gilson calls them[12]), the fine arts, or arts for beauty's sake, these arts and the creativity they inspire, could never be tethered to a mere imitation of natural patterns. If the fine arts are to be mere imitations of nature, some may object, would this not reduce the artist to a flat replicator of things already given? Would the creative work of the artist not cheapen to the mere skill of photo realist reproduction and evacuate the artist's spontaneous imagination?[13] This is a valid concern, and it deserves to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, beneath the objection lies a false assumption about the very nature of artistic imitation, one that reduces *imitation* to a flat *duplication*. And with this false assumption in mind, it is natural for many modern thinkers to assume that an artist's imitation of any form of beauty other

[10]St Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics.* Kindle Edition. Translated by Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), Kindle Location, pp. 50–52.

[11]*ComPol.* Kindle Location, pp. 52–55.

[12]'The philosophy of art, if the arts of the beautiful are in question, has as its object human activity in the general order of making, whose proper end is to produce beautiful objects'. Etienne Gilson. *Forms and Substances in the Arts.* Translated by Salvator Attanasio (New York, NY: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), p. 3.

[13]Recognizing this challenge, Umberto Eco reminds us that 'Medieval thought, like classical thought, did not consider that art necessarily had to do with the production of beautiful things or the stimulation of aesthetic pleasure. Art signified the technique for constructing objects. If some of these objects appeared to be beautiful, that was a side issue'. Umberto Eco. *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 3.

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than that which emerges solely from her own creative intuition would necessarily be a limitation, not a liberation, of the scope of her activity.

But this assumption would be a mistake. To illustrate why, we need look no further than the classical notion of *beauty*, the very telos of the arts of the beautiful. And here, just as the tradition provides a rich notion of art situated within the schema of virtues, so also does it provide a rich notion of beauty within the cosmos as well.

Beautiful things are 'those which please when seen'.[14] Yet this pleasure response to the beautiful is far more than mere taste. Perceived beauty is a far richer reality. It comes pre-packaged with an integrity, proportion, and radiance all its own transcending one's personal response to it. This is because true 'beauty includes three conditions', St Thomas teaches; '*integrity* or *perfection*, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due *proportion* or *harmony*; and lastly, *brightness* or *clarity*'.[15] These three conditions – integrity, proportion, and clarity – imply that beauty itself is a type of *measure*. It is a content-rich reality to which other thing may be measured. Beauty possesses intrinsic qualities that resonate with those who see it and inspire in those who see it a sympathetic movement of pleasure and joy. Far from eliciting a reaction of approval for one's personal taste, these three conditions strike the observing mind as an authoritative witness to a reality that *ought* to be appreciated and enjoyed. These qualities, then, must be *given* in things themselves, never imposed onto things from outside. They are *given* through objects, not *imposed* by subjects. To be at all pleasing when seen, these qualities must summon the perceiver to an appreciation beyond mere opinion. These qualities of the beautiful must first *move* the perceiver to an enjoyment of them; it could never be the perceiver that first places within the thing perceived these qualities only antecedently enjoyed as pleasant.

If all this is true of the perception of beauty, even more so would it be true of the artist's creation of beauty. Beauty as a *given* reality must exists before the artist, it must transcend the artist, and it must be a reality greater than the artist's mind alone. The artist must *serve*, and *participate in*, a beauty beyond and more primordial than herself. The creative artist must be a *servant* of integrity, proportion, and clarity, not its *creator*. If the creative artist were to assume that her spontaneous imagination held the position of creator, *ex nihilo*, of a integrity, proportion, and clarity emerging solely from within herself and not given to her by something greater, not only would she place himself in a position of a solitary, isolated god but would also, by that very fact, insolate herself from all others capable of participating in, perceiving, and enjoying the same integrity.

In this way, beauty may be a transcendent good. It can never be a solitary good. Beauty is not only a type of spiritual good capable of enjoyment by many at once without diminution or depletion, but even more, it is a shared good – a type of spiritual good capable of uniting all those who do in fact *see* it and enjoy it within one community that participates in the same integrity, proportion, and radiance. Beauty may be a true common good, a good not only shareable by many, but a good that unites those who share it – a good with the power to create community by ordering all who enjoy it by the same integrity, proportion, and clarity. In other words, beauty is a common good, not because it is first shared in common (even shared taste could do that), but

[14] '*Pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*'. *ST*, I[a] Q5,4 ad 1.
[15] *ST*, I[a] Q39,8 co.

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because it has the power to unite into one, into one community, those who see it, share it, and are pleased by it.

3. The spiritual vocation of the creative artist

Due to this deeper reality of beauty, Christian thinkers (inspired by the classical Greek tradition) recognized the creative artist as possessing a type of *vocation*; a calling to be of service to a reality greater than himself. The creative artist, then, possesses a great responsibility. He could never be accountable to nothing other than his own creative intuition. Rather, he is accountable to another – another Who Is Beauty Himself, another Whose Own Beauty is infinitely shareable without depletion. Thus, before the creative artist learns to *create* beauty, she must first learn to *read* beauty. She must receive it. The artist must first learn to *see* before she can *make*.

But this leads to the question: From where might the artist learn to read a beauty greater than herself, existing before herself, and common to all? The answer is simple. The whole of created nature itself, first coming from the mind of God, provides a pattern, ratio, or model of integrity, proportion, and clarity, that speaks of a divine beauty. Nature speaks of a *divine order*, ever ancient ever new, connecting the artist's mind to a beauty in which all creatures participate. Nature is like a proxy for an ordered reason calling all who read it beyond themselves to a unified and *unifying* good with the power to unite all. Only art as an imitation of nature possesses the power to connect the mind of the artist to a transcendent beauty, a beauty in which all may share, and most of all, a beauty that grounds the creative intuition of the artist within a horizon shared by others.

Yet we must give the above-mentioned objection credit where credit is due. It would certainly be a mistake to envision an artistic imitation of nature's order as a simple *replication* or *representation* of a nature already given. It would be a mistake to suppose artistic imitation of nature to be no more than a photo realist replica of nature's flat, horizontal, material parts. Far from it. Instead of a mere replica, the artist's imitation is an elevation of nature. The artistic act must enhance the beauty *given* by nature and then highlight the hidden aspects of that integrity, proportion, and clarity.[16]

Like a prophetic vocation, the artist must first read the manifold aspects of ordered beauty in the cosmos and then augment as explicit those aspects of proportion and clarity only implicitly present within nature. The artist must amplify the form, proportion, and order within nature to bring others to an experience of beauty they could otherwise not see. Thus, the artist, rather than a creator of beauty *ex nihilo* through her own creative intuition, is instead like a messenger of beauty bringing its meaning to those who need it. And given the Christian understanding of a *fallen nature*, a nature wounded by sin, this vocation becomes all the more prophetic. The creative artist must interpret the patterns and order of nature (as well as its visual appearance) and ask, not 'What is it,' but rather, 'What ought it to be?' 'What is the message of the divine mind to

[16]'A point of similarity and contact between these concepts [nature and art] lies in the fact that both are works of intelligence; nature, the result of the activity of a divine mind, a book containing divine Ideas; art, the product of the human mind, the result of influences brought to bear upon nature by the possessor of a human mind, so that in a sense art is nature re-made by man'. Leonard Callahan. *A Theory of Esthetic According to the Principles of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, Inc., 1947), p. 79.

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which nature's patterns point as a telos?' Such a vocation requires tremendous imagination; it requires great inventive intuition. Far from stifling creativity, this calling liberates the artist's spontaneous intuition by grounding it in the mind of the divine artist and teacher. This also requires tremendous skill; it requires disciplined training. Just as all students must learn by imitating their master's work, so must the creative artist learn in the school of the natural order and hone her skill in the workshop of the divine exemplar.

Yet, once the artist breaks from this cosmological view, that is, once the artist severs her work's connection to the *given* integrity, proportion, and clarity in the natural world, then her work becomes a mere display of her own personal taste, that is, a personal preference disconnected from the minds of others. In such a case, the artist's work becomes, at best, solipsistic, isolating, and self-absorbed – it expresses nothing greater or more transcendent than her own individual intuition. And at worst, in such a case, the artist's work may descend to a decomposition of beauty – a corruption of integrity, proportion and order – only capable of arresting the attention of another through its ability to shock or disturb. This sad condition would not be an expression of the artist's virtue; and it would certainly not be an expression of the artist's true vocation. And even worse, it would amount to a destruction of the image of God in the artist.

But retrieving the notion of art as imitation of nature allows us to recover an understanding of art as a participation in God's good governance of the world. Creation itself is the ordered, intentional, and free act of God, the master craftsman, Who expresses His creativity in a planned, purposeful, and deliberate way. Creation expresses God's good governance and providence. The human person, as a rational creature, participates in divine providence in a preeminent way, not only by *being provided for*, but also by *providing for others*, that is, by investing the created world with a greater share of that ordered reason.[17] In other words, the human person participates in God's governance of the world through the virtuous activity of *recta ratio factibilium*. As intellectual soul and material body, the human artist acts as a high priest of created beauty. First, through the speculative virtues, the artist must *read* within nature the mind of the Creator; and second, through the practical virtue of art, the artist must reinvest the material world with an ever-greater share of that beauty and order. By imitating the natural order, the creative artist participates in, and expresses, this primal beauty – a beauty hidden in nature itself, patiently waiting for the liberating virtue of the artist to reveal it. In this way, the human artist acts like an ambassador of the beauty of God for all creatures. This is the true vocation of the creative artist, and retrieving art as imitation of nature provides it.

[17] 'The rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident *both for itself and for others* (emphasis mine). Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end'. *ST*, $I^{a}II^{ae}$ Q91,2 co.

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