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ARTICLE

Physical Defects and Divine Order: Augustine, Aquinas, and Approximative Goodness

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Abstract

This article argues for a possible route by which Thomism might affirm the goodness of physical deformity as an aid to abstraction. Recent scholarship has shown how Aquinas can speak positively of bodily diversity as part of God's providential order, without treating physical defect as a loss of dignity. I extend this line by asking whether Aquinas can also give physical deformity an intrinsic epistemic role. For Augustine, the cosmos is an intelligible whole ordered by eternal Forms in the Word, mediated by *rationes seminales*, so that even physical defects remain diminished likenesses of their exemplars and can serve the good of the whole. Aquinas rejects this strong Platonic imaging: he retains divine ideas as extrinsic measures determined by God's will, treats cosmic unity as an *ordo communis* under providence, and identifies goodness with the actualisation of natural potency. I therefore locate physical deformity as a mixed case of David Oderberg's notion of 'goodness by approximation'. The paper states conditions under which a mixed case can clarify a ratio and sharpen the universal: intelligible species are *entia rationis* grounded in substantial similarity, and atypical cases can remove misleading accompaniments so that what belongs per se becomes more evident.

Keywords: abstraction; Aquinas; Augustine; disability; exemplarism; goodness; neoplatonism; Platonism

In *City of God,* Augustine treats reports of physically deformed humans as a test of judgement as well as piety. Apparent deformity does not lessen worth or challenge providence; it exposes the limits of a merely local standard that judges parts in isolation, and it presses the mind to consider how each part belongs within a larger order whose goodness exceeds the narrow human gaze.[1]

Recent scholarship has increasingly turned to Aquinas as a resource for speaking positively about physical disability. A representative example is Miguel Romero. On Romero's reading, Aquinas does not treat *corporales infirmitates* as straightforward negations of human worth. Irregular bodies are understood as compatible with, and expressive of, the dignity of the human being as *imago Dei*, since God's ordering of creation includes a diversity of bodily shapes and capacities that would have existed

[1] *Civ. Dei*, 16.8.

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before the fall.[2] Because the human being is ordered to the beatific vision, no bodily limitation can, by itself, remove the creaturely dignity that flows from rational nature and its final end. Yet this argument is primarily theological, laying out a *space* for goodness on Aquinas's account of providence, grace, and beatitude.[3] It does not show in detail *how* any particular physical irregularity, now manifesting as a defect, could be a positive good on Aquinas' Aristotelian natural philosophy. This is the gap I will explore below.

Section one draws out an argument implicit in Augustine's creation theology. The cosmos is intelligible because Platonic Forms as stable reasons of creatures (*rationes aeternae*) are in the Divine Word, while their temporal unfolding is governed through created causal principles (*rationes seminales*). This allows a distinctively epistemic reading of deformity: irregular instances can block hasty generalisations about what belongs to a nature, and redirect attention to the more universal reason in which that nature is grounded. Aquinas too affirms trinitarian vestiges in all creatures and the *imago Dei* in every human being in virtue of rational nature rather than bodily configuration, but because his exemplarism is extrinsic and he rejects Augustine's intrinsic participatory mediation through *rationes seminales*, physical deformity has no obvious role as a ladder of Plotinian epistemic ascent. Only forms of individual substances act as exemplars, and goodness is the actualisation of native potency in space and time. Cosmic unity is thus chiefly *ordo communis* under providence rather than an imaging of the Divine essence.

Section two turns to David Oderberg's account of approximation. Alongside dynamic, teleological goodness (actualising native powers), Aquinas can accommodate a non-dynamic mode: a thing is good when it serves as a good instance of an *abstractum* (an intelligible species). Oderberg treats approximation for single forms; I extend this with two Thomistic theses. First, being and goodness are convertible; therefore, an intelligible species, as an *ens rationis cum fundamento in re*, is itself good as the object by which the mind understands. The particular is good extrinsically by disclosing the species it mirrors; the species is good extrinsically by enabling that resemblance.

The Aristotelian–Thomistic model, once supplied with convertibility and virtual containment, can match this outcome without separate Forms: it grounds the same unity within the particular itself, through similarity to intelligible species housed in the agent intellect.

1. Augustine and Aquinas on divine exemplars and the unity of the cosmos

'For God, the Creator of all knows where and when each thing ought to be, or to have been created, because He sees the similarities and diversities which can contribute to the beauty of the whole. But He who cannot see the whole is offended by the deformity of the part, because he is blind to that which balances it, and to which it belongs. We know that men are born with more than four fingers on their hands or toes on their feet: this is a smaller matter; but far from us be the folly of supposing that the Creator mistook the number of a man's fingers, though we cannot account for the difference.

[2]Miguel J. Romero, 'Aquinas on Disability, Deification, and Beatitude', *The Thomist*, 88 (2024), 433-434.
[3]*Ibid.*, pp. 406–408.

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And so in cases where the divergence from the rule is greater. He whose works no man justly finds fault with, knows what He has done'.[4]

Augustine frames deformity within a part-whole argument: God surveys the whole and knows where each thing belongs; we see only parts and misjudge. Anomalies, like polydactyly, depart from a local standard yet can serve the good of the whole. The point is as much epistemic as moral: limited vision misreads the part, whereas the Creator's comprehensive view discloses a unity and goodness not undone by local irregularities. What appears ugly or out of place in isolation may enrich the overall pattern when seen together with everything else.

Augustine's thinking draws heavily on Plotinus. His doctrine of the Divine ideas is framed self-consciously within the Neoplatonic view of Forms, participation, and graded likeness. Forms are in Intellect (*Nous*), not the first principle; the One, Intellect, Soul, and Nature stand in a productive hierarchy. Plotinus' causality is imaging causality: the producer's internal act remains itself, while its external act appears 'in another' as a likeness, hence the lower is dependent and inferior by reception, not by any loss in the source. Each level begets a lower by *logos*; the lower is an *eikōn* of the higher, dependent and resembling it, through an 'external activity' that leaves the source undiminished.[5]

Plotinus assigns intelligible organising power to intelligible Forms (*ideai*) and rational structures (*logoi*). The crucial feature of Plotinus' system lies in his doctrine of Intellect (*Nous*), the second hypostasis of an emanative hierarchy. In Intellect, the Forms are a *hen-polla* ('one-many').[6] They are many as intelligible contents, while World-Soul articulates them into *logoi* suited to production; the sensible order is thereby the image of the One. Plotinus uses the term *logos spermatikos* to stress that these latter principles are causally generative, while rejecting the Stoic claim that they are immanent.[7] *Logoi spermatikoi* are strictly intelligible powers that act upon matter. Thus, Socrates' being snub-nosed and two-footed is the outcome of a personal set of *logoi*, derived from an *idea* in Intellect, that soul arranges in matter while itself remaining immaterial.

Augustine preserves the Plotinian insight while Christianising its ontology. The One is the Father; Intellect is the *Verbum*; and there is no World-Soul, since creation proceeds by God's free decree. The Forms are *rationes aeternae*,[8] the simple Divine Wisdom, appropriated to the Word, the consubstantial likeness of the Father and exemplar of all creatures.[9] Hence, the paradigms are not hypostatised beneath God but are the Divine

[4] *Civ. Dei*, 16.8. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Aquinas are from the *Opera omnia* at Aquinas.cc <https://aquinas.cc/>; translations of Augustine's *City of God* and *De Trinitate* are from New Advent <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm>; and the translation of Augustine's *De vera religione* is Augustine, *Of True Religion* (*De vera religione*), trans. By John H. S. Burleigh (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959).

[5] *Enn*., 3.6.7; 5.3.8; 6.7.9–10.

[6] *Enn*., 6.7.9–10.

[7] *Enn*., 5.9.6.

[8] *Div. quaest. 46*, 2: 'For the Ideas are certain primary forms [*formae*] or patterns of things [*rationes rerum*], stable and unchangeable. They are not themselves formed and so are eternal and always the same, contained in the Divine intellect. And although they neither arise nor perish, everything that can arise and perish, and everything that does arise and perishes, is said to be formed according to them' (my trans. from Latin).

[9] *De vera rel.*, 43.81: 'It has not one quality here and other there, or one now and another afterwards; for it is supremely the unique Father of Truth and Father of Wisdom, which is like the Father in all respects.

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Wisdom itself. The Word is the Form or reason-principle, in whom and according to whom all things are made.[10] The result is that the paradigms are not hypostatised entities below God, but the Divine wisdom as such, one essence containing 'all the invisible and unchangeable reasons of visible things', so that 'what it contains, it also is', and the Son, as Wisdom, is the very 'form' in whose likeness all things are made.[11] Augustine's exegetical key is *in principio*[12]*:* it names not a temporal starting point, but the ontological foundation of all things, the *Verbum*.[13]

This account bears directly on cosmic unity. Augustine can speak of two ways the cosmos is unified. First, it is an *ordo communis*: the whole is a coordination of parts to a common good, historically unfolded as the *rationes seminales*[14] guide natures 'from within' towards their *telē*, thus specifying the order-to-end of mutable creation without compromising *creatio ex nihilo* or Divine transcendence.[15] Second, precisely because all ideas are exemplars in the Word and are refracted through created *rationes*, Augustine may also characterise the cosmos as an imaging whole: the temporal totality constitutes a single, layered image of the Divine wisdom. This is genuinely Platonic for it preserves graded likeness, different orders and species resembling their paradigms to different degrees, while identifying Forms with the simple Divine wisdom, preventing the hypostatic emanationism of Plotinus.[16] Imaging and participation are effected through *logos*; the Forms are a one-many unity by their identity with the Divine essence and their distinction as *rationes aeternae* in the Word. The natural order, meanwhile, reflects, in its interconnected structures, the unity of the intelligibles. The cosmic pattern is *exitus-reditus*: procession by free decree and return by providential governance. All creatures bear the *vestigia Trinitatis*, measure, number, and weight, so that

Hence it is called his similitude and image because it comes from him. It is rightly called also the Son, and from him other things proceed. But before him is the universal form perfectly identical with the unity from which it springs, so that all other things, so far as they have being and resemble unity, are made according to that form'; cf. *De Trin.*, 15.7; 15.14–17.

[10]*Gen. litt.*, 2.8.17: 'For angels do not, like cattle, perceive these sensible things by bodily sense alone. Rather, if they make use of any such sense, they recognise them in terms of what they already know more perfectly within, in the very Word of God, by whom they are enlightened to live wisely, (...) Accordingly, just as the rational pattern by which a creature is made is prior in the Word of God to the creature that is made, so too knowledge of that same pattern comes first in an intellectual creature not darkened by sin, and only afterwards the creature's own making' (my trans. from Latin).

[11]Theodore Kondoleon, 'Divine Exemplarism in Augustine', *Augustinian Studies,* 1 (1970), 186–189; pp. 188–191.

[12]*De vera rel.*, 36.66: 'If material things deceive us in so far as they fall short of the unity which they demonstrably imitate, we naturally approve them; for that is the principle from which all unity derives, and to resemble which all things strive. We equally disapprove all that departs from unity and tends towards its opposite. We can understand that there is something so resembling the sole unity and principle of all unity that it coincides with it and is identical with it. This is truth, the Word that was in the beginning [*in principio*], the divine Word that was with God'.

[13]Laela Zwollo, *St. Augustine and Plotinus: The Human Mind as Image of the Divine* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 146–148.

[14]*Rationes seminales* are Augustine's analogue of *logoi spermatikoi*, also called *rationes causales*. For example, *Gen. litt.*, 9.18.34: 'Therefore, even all those things which were done to signify this grace, not by the natural course of events, but in a marvellous way, had their hidden causes in God as well' (my trans. From Latin).

[15]Gerald P. Boersma, 'The Rationes Seminales in Augustine's Theology of Creation', *Nova et Vetera* 18 (2020), 433–436; pp. 414–416.

[16]Kondoleon, 'Divine Exemplarism', pp. 186-189; pp. 192–193.

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creation is a temporally extended mirror of God's eternal being.[17] The result, as Theodore Kondoleon puts it,[18] is that for Augustine the entire created cosmos is the image of God.[19] If the uncreated ideas are identical with the one Divine Wisdom, and if creatures are made in the likeness of those ideas through created seminal reasons, then the whole, as the harmonised many of such likenesses, amounts to a single, ordered *vestigium* of the one Divine essence,[20] not by composition in God but by multiform imitation in creatures.[21]

Against this background, Aquinas functions as a foil because he combines (i) a doctrine of trinitarian vestiges, (ii) localisation of the *imago Dei* in the rational powers, and (iii) an Aristotelian account of forms that resists Augustine's intrinsic imaging metaphysics. Aquinas rejects separate Forms in favour of immanent forms in hylomorphic substances: individualised universal principles of sameness, always existing joined with matter in a hylomorphic substance.[22] He affirms *vestigiae* of the Trinity in every creature as an effect bears the mark of its cause,[23] and he locates the image of God in the human mind,[24] so physical deformity does not diminish dignity.

The result is that for Aquinas, there is no such thing as a universal, *qua* universal, directly causing a particular. As Gregory T. Doolan argues, Aquinas does grant that God, like a human artisan, can make things as imitations of exemplar ideas in His intellect,[25]

[17] *Gen. litt.*, 4.4.8: 'For measure, number, and weight can be noticed and thought about not only in stones, wood, and such masses, and in any bodily things, whether earthly or heavenly. Measure is a limit on action, so that it does not run on without check or restraint. Number belongs both to the mind's feelings and to its virtues, by which it is gathered from the misshapen state of folly into the shape and beauty of wisdom. Weight belongs to will and love: it shows how much each thing counts when we desire or avoid, prefer or put off. Yet these, measure, number, and weight in souls and minds, are held in by another measure, shaped by another number, and drawn by another weight. That measure is measure without measure: what comes from it is made equal to it, and it is not from elsewhere. That number is number without number: all things are formed by it, and it is not itself formed. That weight is weight without weight: by it things are brought back to rest…'.

[18] Kondoleon, 'Divine Exemplarism', p. 193: 'All created things are made in light of this intelligible form which is the first and perfect likeness of God'; cf. Augustine, *De vera rel.*, 36.66: 'that is, the form of all things that have being, which is the supreme likeness of the principle'; and *Gen. litt.*, 16.57: '…it is the first likeness, and by sharing in it things are alike…'.

[19] Augustine reserves *imago* for the rational soul. *Gen. litt.*, 3.20.30: '… in that man was made in the image [*imago*] of God (…) not in the features of the body, but in a certain intelligible form of the enlightened mind' (my trans. from Latin). By contrast, *vestigium* names the looser image of the Creator found in all creatures. *De Trin.*, 6.10.12: 'When therefore we regard the Creator, who is understood by the things that are made we must needs understand the Trinity of whom there appear traces [*vestigia*] in the creature, as is fitting'.

[20] *Civ. Dei*, 11.10: 'For neither are there many wisdoms, but one, in which are untold and infinite treasures of things intellectual, wherein are all invisible and unchangeable reasons of things visible and changeable which were created by it. For God made nothing unwittingly; not even a human workman can be said to do so. But if He knew all that He made, He made only those things which He had known. Whence flows a very striking but true conclusion, that this world could not be known to us unless it existed, but could not have existed unless it had been known to God'.

[21] Kondoleon, 'Divine Exemplarism', pp. 192–193.

[22] *QDSC.*, a. 3: 'But this position [i.e., Platonism], according to the true principles of philosophy which Aristotle considered, is an impossible one (…) the individual instance of substance would not be one in an unqualified sense, but in a qualified sense, like 'white man'.

[23] *ST I.*, q. 45, a. 7.

[24] *ST I.*, q. 93, a. 6.

[25] *ST I.*, q. 44, a. 3.

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but these Divine exemplars differ significantly from Platonic Forms. Thomistic Divine exemplars can only be ideas of individual substances, not pure universals.[26] On this view, since only individuals exist, and since only those things that *can* exist are able to proceed from God's will, it follows that God can only use as exemplars those ideas that can create individuals.[27]

Aquinas therefore retains Divine ideas and their measuring role, but he construes 'exemplar' strictly as an idea practically ordered by will to produce an effect; not all ideas are exemplars, only the actually productive ones.[28] The exemplar is an extrinsic formal cause, a form *ad quam*, sharply distinguished from the agent's intrinsic form (*a quo*) and the effect's intrinsic form (*secundum quam*), so that the idea measures the effect according to the order of form without entering it as a constituent.[29] Providence and exemplarism are related but distinct: the idea measures the species absolutely, whereas providence measures order to end[30]; the world's unity is therefore an order executed by primary and secondary causes under a common rule, not a single intrinsic image of the Divine essence.[31] Even when Aquinas likens a Divine exemplar to a *forma totius* to explain its reach over the whole composite,[32] he insists on its extrinsicality, extending the rule to form and matter without making God a formal cause *intra rem*.[33]

Set against Augustine, Thomistic teleology uses Divine exemplars as extrinsic measures and dispenses with created *rationes seminales*. Species-level rules are external; intrinsic limitation and perfection lie in forms received and actualised in matter.[34] Goodness is the actualisation of natural potency, act is perfection, and creatures are composites ordered to further actualisation.[35] Natural inclination (*appetitus naturalis*) determines operations to proportionate ends and explains uniform regularities.[36] Act is exclusive, since although one abstract capacity can be in potency to contraries,

[26]This point on universals will be addressed below.

[27]Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), pp. 145–146.

[28]*Ibid.,* pp. 158–160.

[29]*De ver*., q. 3, a. 1: 'First, it can mean that "from which" a thing gets its form, as when we say that the informing of an effect proceeds from the form of the agent. Now, an action does not necessarily result in effects that attain the complete character of the form of the agent, for effects often fall short of this, especially in the case of equivocal causes. Consequently, the form "from which" something gets its form is not said to be its idea or form. Second, the form of a thing can mean that "by which" a thing is informed, as when we say that the soul is the form of man, and the shape of a statue is the form of the bronze'.

[30]*De ver.*, q. 5, a. 1 ad 1.

[31]Doolan, *Aquinas on Divine Ideas*, pp. 159–161; pp. 188–189.

[32]*Ibid.,* pp. 164-165.

[33]*ST I.*, q. 15, a. 3: 'So far as the idea is the principle of the making of things, it may be called an "exemplar" and belongs to practical knowledge. But so far as it is a principle of knowledge, it is properly called a "type" and may belong to speculative knowledge also. As an exemplar, therefore, it has respect to everything made by God in any period of time; whereas as a principle of knowledge it has respect to all things known by God, even though they never come to be in time'; cf. *In de Div. nom*., 5, lect. 3.

[34]*ST I.*, q. 65, a. 4: 'Corporeal forms, therefore, are caused, not as emanations from some immaterial form, but by matter being brought from potentiality into act by some composite agent'.

[35]David S. Oderberg, *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 11–12.

[36]*De mal*., q. 6: 'It is fitting, because just as in natural things there is a form, which is the source of activity, and an inclination that follows on that form, called natural appetite, from which activity results' (my trans. from Latin); cf. *In Phys. II*., lect. 14.

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contrary determinations cannot simultaneously actualise the same potency.[37] Aquinas resolves the appearance of co-present contraries by distributing them across distinct powers individuated by their proper objects, themselves set by the form.[38] Thus, 'touch' comprises several specific senses with different contraries as objects (like hot-cold or wet-dry), so the skin can register heat and hardness at once, but not through a single sense-power.[39] This inclination furnishes determinacy. An inclination is intelligible only relative to its end; the end is virtually present in the agent through the inclination, which is why final causality remains foundational. Hence, occur the regularities of nature, for since inclinations derive from fixed forms, natural agents act uniformly.[40]

Aquinas says, like Augustine, that every creature bears vestiges of the Trinity insofar as it reflects its triune Creator as an effect. Creatures display a trinitarian trace in their measure, species, and order, which can ground limited reasoning about God by way of causal dependence and appropriation. The deeper difference is that while a Thomistic vestige gives an inferential route from effects to a first cause, nevertheless, lacking strong Divine exemplarism, it does not disclose the inner trinitarian processions and relations in a way that could ground a Plotinian-style ascent from multiplicity to unity.[41]

To summarise, Augustine's cosmology aligns with Neoplatonism: all ideas in the Word, including pure universals, are exemplars. Ideas are first one in the simple Divine wisdom and are expressed as many in the *Verbum*, then mediated intrinsically into nature through *rationes seminales* that carry the triad of measure (*mensura*), number (*numerus*), and weight (*pondus*) and unfold kinds across time[42]; participation is thus a graded hierarchy of likeness from the Word through these created reasons into particulars, so the cosmos is both an ordered whole and an imaged whole of the Divine essence.[43] By contrast, for Aquinas, the exemplar that specifies the *ratio formae* is an extrinsic formal measure (*ad quam*) practically determined by God's will, not a Platonic participatory model,[44] so cosmic unity is an *ordo communis* under providence rather than a unified image of the Divine essence.[45] As a result, goodness for Aquinas is the actualisation of natural potency, with form conferring power and a natural inclination

[37] *In Metaph. IX*., lect. 10: 'Thus it is evident that a thing can be in potency to contrary determinations, although contrary determinations cannot be actual at the same time'.

[38] *ST I*., q. 77, a. 3: 'I answer that, A power as such is directed to an act. Wherefore we seek to know the nature of a power from the act to which it is directed, and consequently the nature of a power is diversified, as the nature of the act is diversified. Now the nature of an act is diversified according to the various natures of the objects. For every act is either of an active power or of a passive power. Now, the object is to the act of a passive power, as the principle and moving cause: for color is the principle of vision, inasmuch as it moves the sight. (...) Therefore, the powers are of necessity distinguished by their acts and objects'.

[39] *ST I*., q. 78, a. 3, ad 3.

[40] *ST I-II*., q. 1, a. 2: 'For if the agent were not determinate to some particular effect, it would not do one thing rather than another: consequently, in order that it produce a determinate effect, it must, of necessity, be determined to some certain one, which has the nature of an end'.

[41] *ST I*., q. 45, a. 7.

[42] *De Trin*., 3.16.

[43] Kondoleon, 'Divine Exemplarism', pp. 186–189.

[44] *ST I*., q. 15, a. 3.

[45] Doolan, *Aquinas on Divine Ideas*, pp. 159–161.

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that determines operations to proportionate ends, which explains uniform natural regularities and the primacy of final causality.

Consequently, while Aquinas can commend a physically deformed individual as located *within* order, he cannot obviously, on his extrinsic exemplarism, commend it as a stepping stone towards knowledge. Aquinas affirms creatures as vestiges, but he treats these more as causal signatures in effects than as formal participations in intelligible unity; they can support limited inference to a first cause, but they do not yield a Plotinian-style epistemic ascent in which cognition rises to ever greater unity. Augustine can do both, because the same individual, however impaired, still images the one Divine essence by a diminished yet real participation in the exemplar ideas refracted through creation.[46]

2. Approximative Aristotelian goodness

To open this section, I introduce a second, non-dynamic Aristotelian notion of goodness, what David Oderberg calls *instantiation* or *approximation*, which is entailed by Aristotelian ontology.[47] Here, goodness does not lie in a thing's self-movement to an end, but in how closely it matches an abstract pattern understood as a formal *ratio*. Since a thing is good when its natural powers are actualised, and the capacity to instantiate an *abstractum* is itself a natural power, such instantiation counts as goodness. Thus, a knot of wood may be good as an instance of triangularity insofar as its outline approaches the triangular idea, or a polished steel ball is praised for near-sphericity, though neither reaches the limit case. Crucially, approximation must trade on powers the substances themselves possess: wood can weather into straighter edges; steel can be ground rounder. Many scientific idealisations do not meet this test. For instance, treating a particle as a dimensionless point aids calculation but describes nothing the particle could become; the pattern exists only as a concept abstracted from real cases. Approximation applies only where degrees make sense (e.g., more or less spherical), not where intermediates are impossible (such as a dimensionless point). The evaluation here is descriptive: it posits no inner drive towards the pattern, and falling short is merely the absence of an additional merit, not a defect.

We can clarify Oderberg's Aristotelian approximative goodness as follows:

A particular, x, is good as an Aristotelian approximation of universal type A when (i) x's natural potencies make it an instance of A; (ii) A is not x's substantial form; (iii) x's traits heighten the salience of the accidents it has *qua* instance of A, so that x is an especially apt case for teaching or discerning what A is.

At first, this does not appear an improvement over the previous dynamic goodness for dealing with our problem. Oderberg describes a situation where a particular object approximates a universal object with various degrees of success or failure. The universal object is a single standard or measure, which the particular object succeeds or fails to approximate along a spectrum. *Prima facie*, cases of ambiguous or partial approximation turn out sub-optimal. If the standard of excellence is whether something is a good example of an *abstractum*, then an ambiguous or partial approximation can only be a

[46]Kondoleon, 'Divine Exemplarism', pp. 192–194.
[47]Oderberg, *Metaphysics*, pp. 57–60.

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bad example. For instance, a shape halfway between a circle and square is a sub-optimal example of both a circle and a square.

However, the picture changes once we see the specifically Thomistic principles which underly the approximation model of goodness. These are three: universal abstract objects as beings of reason (*entia rationis*), the convertibility of being and goodness, and the way that such convertibility affects abstract objects.

On Aquinas's account, the abstract pattern a particular approximates is an intelligible species, an *ens rationis* grounded in real likenesses abstracted from extra-mental things.[48] Belonging to the order of *esse intentionale*, the species subsists only as an intellectual act or content, arising by abstraction, negation, or related compositional operations, yet its formal content is the same as the form organising the extra-mental substance: the universal exists *in intellectu*, abstracted from a real common nature that exists *in re* only as individuated by matter.[49] Degrees of approximation therefore mark how fully a singular manifests that common formal *ratio* under material conditions, not how far it participates in a separate Form. In this respect, Aquinas differs from Augustine, whereas Augustine treats universals as exemplars *ante rem* in the *Verbum* and posits *rationes seminales* as intrinsic mediations, Aquinas recognises no such intrinsic mediations, the Divine exemplar is extrinsic, and the immanent ground for approximation is the *natura communis* present in singulars and intentionally captured in the species.[50]

Within *esse intentionale*, some *entia rationis* (*e.g.*, privations) serve only logical predication, whereas intelligible species are instrumental: they enable the intellect to know the thing itself, not a mere image. On Aquinas's internal-similarity realism, many individuals possess numerically distinct yet specifically the same nature; the sameness at issue is given by the *notae* included in a kind's *ratio*: thus, humans and horses each instantiate the common set of animal-notes (nutrition, growth, sensation, local motion), even though humanity and equinity are numerically distinct. This common similarity *in re* explains why a single intelligible species, existing *in intellectu*, can be the likeness of many and ground stable predication. The resulting intentional tie is remotely grounded in universal knowability, proximately in the nature present as object-being.[51]

Given this intentional likeness of one common nature in many, Aquinas distinguishes first and second intentions of *entia rationis*.[52] From an individual (e.g.,

[48]Gyula Klima, 'The Changing Role of "Entia Rationis" in Mediaeval Semantics and Ontology: A Comparative Study with a Reconstruction', *Synthese* 96 (1993), 33–34.

[49]*De ent.*, c. 3: 'The nature considered in this way, however, has a double existence. On the one hand, it exists in singulars, and, on the other hand, it exists in the soul, and from each of these the nature acquires certain accidents. In singulars, furthermore, the essence has a multiple existence according to the multiplicity of singulars. Nevertheless, if we consider the essence in the first, or absolute, sense, none of these pertain to the essence. For it is false to say that the essence of man, considered absolutely, has existence in this singular, because if existence in this singular pertained to man insofar as he is man, man would never exist outside this singular'.

[50]See above, n. 25.

[51]Fabrizio Amerini, 'Thomas Aquinas and Hervaeus Natalis on First and Second Intentionality', *Topoi* 41 (2022), 160–163.

[52]*De pot.*, q. 7, a. 9: 'I answer that the relation to God is something real in the creature. To make this clear we must observe that, as the Commentator says on *Metaphysics* 11, because of all the categories relation has the feeblest existence, some have thought that it should be reckoned among the second things

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Socrates), the mind forms a first intention (the concept 'Socrates')[53]; then, by comparing concepts with their instances and with one another, it posits second intentions. Against this background, second intentions are those conceptual structures (like genus and species) that the mind forges when, having grasped several first intentions, it considers their formal content indeterminately and orders them for predication and inference. Their characteristic marks are being predicable of many and belonging to the intentional order: they are features of concepts as concepts.

Second intentions, of which *genera* are an example, derive their legitimacy from a *fundamentum in re*: where many individuals share one and the same formal content in kind, numerically multiplied in each. The intellect may frame a logical item that is predicable of many and that ranges over opposed specific determinations as alternative terminations of that shared content. The genus, for instance, is a second intention signifying some form indeterminately in all the species under it, by which it has a unified essence.[54] Thus, because humans and horses really share animal powers, the genus *animal* reflects a common nature whose form in reality is compatible with either rational or non-rational completion. The genus's logical features (like being predicable of many) express, at the level of thought, this real commonality and compatibility. This anchoring avoids Platonism, since no *ante rem* universal subsists apart from particulars (the containment pertains to the concept only), and it avoids nominalism or conceptualism, since what is contained conceptually answers to a genuine sameness of immanent form across individuals rather than to mere mental shorthand.

Finally, being and goodness are convertible for Aquinas. All being is good, yet according to the mode of its perfection.[55] *Entia intelligibilia*, like first and second intentions, have a derivative goodness proportioned to their cognitive role. A categorical judgement is true by *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, the content intentionally present in the mind matches that in the particular or group of particulars,[56] and because the species' formal content is identical with that of extra-mental beings, we can, by *compositio* and *divisio*, predicate it of them. *Entia rationis*, like second intentions, are good insofar as they enable truth and gather many first intentions under one concept; an approximation is instrumentally good when a case discloses that second intention more clearly.[57]

Hence a Thomistic analysis of approximation divides its goodness into two. First, there is the goodness of the thing itself (*ens reale*) insofar as its features, proceeding

understood. For first things understood are the realities outside the soul, into the understanding of which the intellect is first carried. But the second things understood are called the "intentions" consequent on our mode of understanding…'.

[53] *De pot.*, q. 8, a. 1.

[54] *De ent.*, 31; 39.

[55] *ST I.*, q. 5, a. 5: 'I answer that, everything is said to be good so far as it is perfect; for in that way only is it desirable (as shown above 1, 3). Now a thing is said to be perfect if it lacks nothing according to the mode of its perfection. But since everything is what it is by its form (…) in order for a thing to be perfect and good it must have a form, together with all that precedes and follows upon that form. Now the form presupposes determination or commensuration of its principles, whether material or efficient, and this is signified by the mode: hence it is said that the measure marks the mode'.

[56] *ST I.*, q. 16, a. 1: '… so, since the true is in the intellect in so far as it is conformed to the object understood, the aspect of the true must needs pass from the intellect to the object understood, so that also the thing understood is said to be true in so far as it has some relation to the intellect'.

[57] *ST I–II.*, q. 3, a. 8.

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from its own form and potencies, allow the intellect to abstract a likeness-bearing species; this is a relational goodness ordered to cognition, but it is anchored in the actualisation of the thing's natural potencies, so presupposes its ontological goodness (convertibility of being, truth, and goodness).[58] Secondly, there is the goodness of the intentional object (*ens intelligibile*), the intelligible species and the concept (first intention) together with second intentions (e.g., *genus, universal*). This is goodness of the intentional order, as successful cognitive instrumentality rather than as a natural form in things, insofar as these beings perfect the intellect by enabling *adaequatio intellectus et rei* and by ordering many first intentions under logical notes such as predictability.[59] Thus, a single case of approximation always carries a dual evaluation: (a) how well the particular exhibits the *notae* of the *ratio* so as to enable a stable abstraction; and (b) how well the resulting *ratio* and its second-intention structures work as rules for true predication and inference (instrumental goodness *in intellectu*).[60]

Aquinas often uses the term *resolutio* to mean abstraction as resolving a perceived substance into form and matter and resolving the universal from the particular by removing individuating conditions,[61] so that what is first confused in experience becomes distinct in intellection.[62] Aristotelian induction on this interpretation is the moment when *epagōgē* culminates in *nous*: the universal is grasped *in the singular* when its decisive notes are jointly and stably present to perception and thus available to intellect at once.[63] Drawing on Jakob Ziguras, we can explain how the two sorts of goodness interact in approximation. This is not a mere summation of instances but a non-discursive seeing of the invariant within appearances, by isolating a 'pure phenomenon' whose stability across variations renders the universal legible.

The mechanism is straightforward. Where a specimen's accidents conspicuously align with the *notae* of, say, 'triangle', the intellect abstracts a likeness with minimal comparison; it then reaches *adaequatio intellectus et rei* in fewer steps. The priority is the antecedent fit *in rebus*: a case is pedagogically useful because it is already a good example, a point that rejects counterfactual analyses and ties didactic utility to prior approximation to the *ratio*. Ziguras sharpens this by showing why some cases compress the route from sensible presentation to formed *ratio*. Disciplined variation and selection yield a presentation in which the defining features are sufficiently salient and stable for the universal to be seen rather than inferred.[64]

However, when we induce from several unambiguous cases, we can easily treat what usually accompanies a species as if it belonged to the species as such. For example, suppose that we have only ever encountered men, so wrongly conclude that, 'all humans

[58]Gaven Kerr, 'Goodness and Being, Transcendentals, Participation', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 95–99.

[59]Therese Scarpelli Cory, 'The Nature of Cognition and Knowledge', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 164–169.

[60]*Ibid*., pp. 164–169.

[61]*ST I*., q. 12, a. 4, ad 3; *In Phys.* I, lect. 1.

[62]Eileen C. Sweeney, 'Three Notions of Analysis (*Resolutio*) and the Structure of Reasoning in Aquinas', *The Thomist,* 58 (1994), 214–215.

[63]Jakob Ziguras, 'Goethe and Intuitive Induction', in *Shifting the Paradigm: Alternative Perspectives on Induction,* eds. Paolo C. Biondi and Louis F. Groarke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 392-398.

[64]*Ibid*., pp. 405–409.

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are bearded'. We then see a woman, and we realise beardedness is a non-essential accident of humans. By comparing two such unambiguous cases, one can indeed learn that beardedness is not essential to humans and clarify the essence of the species. Even comparison of clear cases can leave a coarse universal in place, because the mind still bundles merely typical accompaniments with what belongs *per se*.[65]

Here ambiguous cases can be uniquely clarifying, because they offer a minimal contrast *locus* that forces separation of *per se* from *per accidens* features. For example, Aristotle writes that ascidians inhabit the border between plants and animals. He says that, although they resemble plants by never moving, their 'flesh-like substance' indicates 'some degree of sensibility'.[66] Aristotle recognises 'merely living animals' whose life is confined largely to nutritive activity, and that sponges and ascidians occupy the threshold where touch is present only in the most rudimentary way, precisely the kind of case that distinguishes life from animal life. So, an ascent to a higher universal happens by a controlled breakdown of ordinary correlations.[67] The borderline case of ascidians shows that growth and nutrition are not distinctive of animals, while simultaneously forcing Aristotle to identify what is distinctive of animals, sensation, anchored at the minimal level by touch.

Physical defects can serve the same epistemic function within a species. For example, Aristotle notes that some men, due to congenital deformity, are sterile from birth because the parts 'useful for union' are imperfect, so they do not grow a beard but remain like eunuchs.[68] This is a case in which the individual is generated within humankind yet lacks a trait easily (but wrongly) treated as if it belonged to humanity as such. The result is a forced re-sorting of predicates: beard-growth cannot be a strict property of the human species and is at best a for-the-most-part outcome dependent on material and developmental conditions. Aristotle generalises this by his doctrine of generative movements, where the failure of more particular movements yields a fallback to what is more general, until what remains is what is common to the kind.[69] The value here is that multiple features are held fixed, so the absent or ambiguous trait is isolated and shown to be non-essential, higher-level, or defeasible. In that way, physical deformity can function as a 'pure phenomenon' in Ziguras' sense, and provide the resolution Aquinas associates with successful induction, by directing attention to what remains stable, namely, the core powers and activities by which the species lives and acts.

Set out thus, Oderberg's claim integrates well with Aquinas's intentional framework. Antecedent fit explains pedagogical usefulness, not *vice versa*.[70] For first intentions (e.g., triangle), a wood-knot, for instance, is good when its accidents make the *notae* conspicuous, facilitating species-formation and truth.[71] For second intentions

[65] *An.Po.*, 1.9, 75b40–76a3.
[66] *PA.*, 4.5, 681a27–28.
[67] Refik Güremen, 'Merely Living Animals in Aristotle', *Apeiron,* 48 2 (2015), 120: 'It follows, therefore, that, more than growing attached and being stationary, it is the borderline character of their perceptive natures that makes them merely living animals, occupying the plant-animal boundary by living a nutritive sort of life'.
[68] *GA.*, 2.7, 746b20-24.
[69] *GA.*, 4.3, 768a15-b8.
[70] David S. Oderberg, 'Being and Goodness', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2014), 348–349.
[71] Cory, 'The Nature of Cognition', pp. 164–169.

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(e.g., the genus 'animal'), a specimen is good when it renders common content and notes evident.

When we say, for example, that a particular, *x*, is a good example of triangularity, we are making a double evaluation: (a) *in re, x* possesses formal features that closely match the notes of the *ratio*; (b) *in intentione*, the *ratio* (and any over-arching second intention that organises it) is functioning well as a cognitive instrument in this case, because *x* makes those notes especially salient, thereby facilitating *adaequatio*.[72] The result is that an atypical particular can be a good approximation in Oderberg's pedagogical sense if it isolates what remains stable when usual accompaniments drop out, thereby bringing a universal close to sense, and making the *ratio* easier to abstract and the modality of predicates easier to sort. We can now formulate a fourth condition for approximative goodness to the previous three: (iv) where *x* is an inadequate instance of A, *x* is approximatively good if its configuration removes or weakens features that normally confuse the *ratio*, so that the *notae* belonging to A *per se* are more readily abstracted.

3. Conclusion

Returning to our opening question, whether Aquinas can vindicate the epistemic goodness of physically deformed individuals without Augustine's Platonic imaging, we can answer by clarifying a worry that now might be raised. Following Oderberg, final goodness is the goodness a thing has in fulfilling, or at least expressing, what its nature is ordered to be; contributory goodness is the goodness a thing has by enabling or clarifying some further good beyond itself. The worry is that Augustine's Neoplatonism can treat physical deformity as finally good through an imaging relation grounded in *rationes aeternae* and *seminales*, while Thomistic approximation can grant it only a contributory role in sharpening our concepts, and so to risk reducing it to mere instrumentality for cognition. The risk is that we have purchased epistemic value for physical deformity at the cost of it being merely an instrumental value for cognition.

This worry is misplaced once we distinguish kinds of contribution. On a Thomistic reading, what flows from a thing's nature belongs to its final goodness rather than demoting it to a merely instrumental status.[73] For example, a bee flourishing according to its nature contributes to the goodness of its hive, and it may contribute to the goodness of the human honey industry. The former adds to the goodness of the hives, which is distinct from the bee. However, because it flows directly from its bee nature, it counts as final goodness. Irregular cases can disrupt spurious correlations that hold only for the most part, and they can force the resolution of a confused universal into a clearer one, improving abstraction and predication. This contributory good perfects the knower, but it presupposes the individual's final goodness, since only features rooted in the subject can ground the relevant intelligible content.

Applied to approximation, the point whether physical deformity can have intrinsic epistemic value. A physically disabled individual can be good *as a path to knowledge* when the salient features that clarify a genus or species arise from the individual's own human nature. On Aquinas's ontology, accidents and operations that flow from a subject's substantial form are expressions of that form's potencies: a bodily

[72]Oderberg, 'Being and Goodness', pp. 349–352.
[73]Oderberg, *Metaphysics*, pp. 42–44.

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deviation is indeed a privation relative to a species-standard, yet the resulting configuration remains a real manifestation of human animal life under limiting conditions. When such a case makes the *ratio* of a genus or species especially evident, by isolating what is stable amid unusual or diminished traits, it facilitates abstraction and correct predication, moving the intellect towards *adaequatio*. Although this epistemic benefit perfects the knower, it is not merely external or instrumental. The goodness is contributory because it targets the perfection of the knower; but it presupposes the specimen's final goodness, since only features rooted in the subject's nature can properly ground the relevant second intentions.

The conditions (i) to (iv) set out in section two secure the point: approximation is neither a merit detached from a thing's nature nor a mere pedagogical aid, because its epistemic usefulness depends on traits that proceed from the subject's own form and potencies. The same traits can count both towards *x*'s final good (as expressions of its form) and towards the contributory good of cognition.

With these resources, Aquinas can meet the challenge posed in section one. He cannot say, with Augustine, that bodily irregularity images the Divine essence by graded participation in separate Forms; but he can say that (i) every such individual is finally good as an ordered, form-bearing substance within providence's *ordo communis*, and (ii) many such individuals are contributorily good as approximations that disclose genus or species content with unusual clarity. Together these claims sustain the evaluative verdict defended in the introduction: apparent deformities neither diminish worth nor unsettle providence. Aquinas reaches that verdict without an intrinsic cosmic imaging metaphysics, by combining the convertibility of being and goodness with a carefully delimited account of approximative, final, and contributory goods.

The paper's argument has been that Augustine can treat deformity as intelligible within a providential whole through the eternal reasons in the Word, and while Aquinas can secure its dignity by *imago* and *vestigia* without adopting an intrinsic cosmic imaging metaphysics, the most plausible Thomistic way to give physical deformity a positive *epistemic* role is through an Aristotelian account of resolution, where atypical cases aid the clarification of universals. Hence, Aquinas can secure what Augustine secures, epistemic goodness for atypical cases, without separate Forms or a cosmic imaging ontology: each individual is finally good as an ordered, form-bearing substance, and many are also finally good by making their kind's content more evident.

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