

**Christopher Scott Sevier.** *Aquinas on Beauty*. Lexington Books 2015. 242 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780739184240); \$44.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781498512541).

Of the several books on Aquinas's aesthetics published in recent decades, Sevier's is perhaps the boldest attempt to approach beauty by way of Aquinas's psychology and ethics rather than his epistemology and metaphysics. In other words, rather than focusing on whether beauty exists in things and whether we can have certain knowledge of it, Sevier presumes with Aquinas that indeed it does, and indeed we can, before he moves on to Aquinas's theories of perception, desire, and pleasure to explain what happens when we experience beauty. Beauty, Sevier argues, because of its connection to desire, pleasure, and 'the good,' is a privileged way of discerning moral character. The advantage of Sevier's approach is that it brings to the fore the consistency of Aquinas's teaching on beauty with the rest of his philosophy and highlights the contribution his aesthetics makes to philosophy today.

Relying heavily on primary texts, Sevier compares his project to Umberto Eco's, who sought 'to explain and clarify every term and every concept in the original texts in the light of the historical circumstances to which they belonged' (2). Yet Sevier's treatment ends up more philosophical than historical even though he analyzes Aquinas's texts with no less rigor than Eco.

The harmony of the top-down and bottom-up approaches is perhaps the feature of Aquinas's aesthetics that Sevier admires most. Unlike many authors, he acknowledges the priority of the top-down approach in Aquinas's worldview which begins with God, descends to creatures, and ends with the return of creatures to God. However, Sevier overemphasizes the distinction between the 'objective' and 'subjective' features of Aquinas's theory of beauty in a way that most post-Kantian philosophers do. This could have been resolved through an excursus into Aquinas's metaphysics and epistemology, but in the end what is most compelling is Sevier's tour de force through Aquinas's psychology and ethics and their relationship to his aesthetics.

That tour de force basically looks like this. Aquinas holds that there is a structure to passion, desire, virtue, and goodness. We desire only what is good even in cases where the good is 'apparent' rather than 'real'. In order to desire what is really good, virtues must be acquired by training and education. The cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude are necessary for human flourishing insofar as the human appetite is perfected through them. So, presuming we know which objects are good, we can distinguish between a virtuous and vicious character if we know what a person desires. In other words, a person's desires reveal her character. Because the pleasures associated with the life of virtue are the highest to be had, the happiest person is not necessarily the one who acts virtuously, but the one who takes pleasure in acting virtuously. And since the perception of beauty is a kind of pleasure, the ability to take pleasure in authentic beauty should be a reliable barometer of moral excellence.

This last point is important because pleasure is the lynchpin of Aquinas's definition of beauty: 'we call those things beautiful which please when seen' (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1). Therefore, even if the desires of others are opaque to us, their pleasures, argues Sevier, are not. If we can see what an agent takes pleasure in, we can know what she finds beautiful.

So the advantage of beauty is that, unlike desire and pleasure, what a person finds beautiful is much more accessible to us. Morally vicious individuals, writes Sevier, 'may be able to deceive others regarding the moral status of their desires, and certainly of their actions (since these are often ambiguous), but perhaps they are less reticent about hiding their pleasures. Since most people do not consider their pleasures to be particularly telling, they may be less cautious about concealing them. For most people... pleasures are conceived to be largely out of one's own control. It is not uncommon for people to think of all pleasures as simply natural and even inevitable' (186).

Although Sevier's conclusion neatly brings together various elements of Aquinas's psychological, ethical, and aesthetic theories, it is not incontrovertible. Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophers generally consider *action*, not pleasure, to be the greatest window onto human character. Vicious characters act viciously and virtuous characters act virtuously. You know a person's character by his or her actions. This is not to deny that aesthetic tastes can tell us something about character, but Sevier's movement from desire to pleasure to beauty might not be as seamless as it seems. Some villains have impeccable artistic tastes and some saints have highly dubious tastes in music. We ascertain these characters more readily from what they do than from what museums they visit or what concerts they attend. Again, one cannot deny that there is some connection between artistic taste and moral character, but allowance must also be made for aesthetic taste as a kind of 'disinterested interest' (to use Roger Scruton's formulation of Kant's concept), something Sevier spends insufficient time discussing. It is risky to assert that 'pleasures...provide a less guarded peek into one's character,' and that 'evaluating my own moral status may even be more easily achieved by considering my pleasures, since human beings are particularly adept at hiding our desires even from ourselves' (186), without proposing criteria with which to discriminate between good and bad aesthetic tastes.

So while Sevier is to be commended for not obsessing over whether beauty should be numbered among the transcendentals or not (insofar as beauty is interconvertible with the good, Sevier thinks it's a moot point), he places excessive emphasis on the distinguishing characteristic of pleasure in beauty and its usefulness in ascertaining moral character. Aquinas seems to suggest that the kind of pleasure concomitant to the perception of beauty connects it with the intellect and distinguishes it as a special kind of good. In short, beauty is just as much, if not more, of an intellectual good as a moral good. And it is this detachment from everyday practical concerns that give beauty its enduring allure.

My criticism of Sevier's approach should take nothing away from its originality. Particularly compelling is the way he connects the passions with Aquinas's theory of beauty. This is a line of research that needs to be deepened, and Sevier has provided an extremely fine resource for doing so. The book is therefore best read alongside other books that stress the metaphysical and epistemological import of Aquinas's aesthetics, such as Francis J. Kovach's *Philosophy of Beauty* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012) and *Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective* by Alice M. Ramos (The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

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