

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Concept of Beauty in Saint Augustine

¹NOBRE, José Aguiar, ²RUFINO, Chaybom Anttone

¹Postdoctoral in Philosophy (UFPR); Postdoctoral in Education (PUC-Campinas). Doctor in Systematic-Pastoral Theology, by the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (2017). Doctorate in Philosophy (UFPR), Brazil.

²PhD student in Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná; Master in Theology from the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (2020), Brazil.

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Corresponding Author: RUFINO, Chaybom Anttone, PhD student in Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná; Master in Theology from the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (2020), Brazil.

Abstract

St. Augustine shows through the idea of beauty as known to God. With a negative theology, he shows what a lack of nice to get the real essence of beauty: in the absence of metaphysical beauty, he explains that beauty is not the minimum graduation from God, in the absence of good morals, it shows that beauty comes not from sin, but of grace, in the absence of physical beauty, he argues that human diseases are caused by the sin of morals, as the sin stains the soul, and when the soul is tarnished, its dirt is reflected in the body. St. Augustine comes to the conclusion that beauty that he tried both, do not really think was inside it, with the divine order, or the presence of spark of God within him, that creates the beauty short.

Keywords: Absence, beauty, Search.

1. Introduction

How do you know what is beautiful? How can one arrive at this sublime grace? Saint Augustine shows that through negative theology it is possible to prove, starting from what God is not in order to arrive at what he is. A little of the life of Saint Augustine will be seen, which is the principle of beauty for him, the principle of negative theology: the antithesis of beauty; the absence of metaphysical beauty, the absence of moral beauty and the absence of physical beauty. And the true beauty, sought by St. Augustine throughout his life, found by him in the premises of what beauty is and where the beauty of Divine originality is really found

2. The Idea of Beauty

For Saint Augustine, as well as Plato, the beautiful is the pure manifestation of the good. According to him, only beauty, among all perfect substances, had the privilege of being the most evident and the most lovable. For this reason, in beauty and in the love it arouses, man finds the starting point for

remembering or contemplating the original source of idea substances; God. The Good or the divine ideal essence of the beautiful, says Saint Augustine, God is the supreme good, He is the original source of all beings, and of all beauty, it is He who gives beauty to all things, so that the beautiful in its purity is Summum Bonum itself, and all other beauties are acquired, mixed and not primitive; for they come from God.

For Saint Augustine, creation is linked to beauty (and God saw that it was good...), for which he was able to present a reference that for many is still valid today.

According to Saint Augustine, all prayer comes from God, who is the Supreme Good, being the greatest good, he is also the Supreme Beauty; similar to the question of Augustinian evil is the absence of good, it is also the “absence of beauty”. St. Augustine found in Plotinus’ Neoplatonism a way to resolve the question: the absence of beauty (Evil) is not a specific being, but deficiency and a privation of being. The absence of beauty, whose origin, Saint Augustine, was incessantly seeking is not really a substance or

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something palpable, because if it were a substance or something palpable, it would be incorruptible. And without a shadow of a doubt it would be beautiful or it would be a corrupted substantial form and therefore a beautiful that otherwise could never be subject to the corruption of the “absence of the beautiful”, and he claims that God is good because he made all things from the beginning of creation, and everything is so good and beautiful. Saint Augustine goes even deeper into what beauty is as good, showing in its negative form the absence of beauty; like evil. He examines this problem from three gradual prisms: 1) The Absence of Metaphysical Beauty, 2) The Absence of Moral Beauty, 3) The Absence of Physical Beauty. Which will be analyzed further on.

2.1 The Absence of the Beautiful Metaphysical

For Saint Augustine, there is no absence of beauty in divine creation, since everything that God made is good in itself, but there are only lower degrees of beauty in relevance to God, which depends on the finitude of created things and on the different levels of this finitude.

Do you therefore have room in heaven and earth, since you fill them with your presence? Or, filling them, is there still some part of you left, because they don't contain you? Where do you spread what's left of you, after heaven and earth have been filled? Or do you not need to be contained in something, you who contain everything, since the things you fill, occupy them by containing them? It is not, then, the vessels filled with you that become stable because, even if they break, it is not you who lower yourself, but those who are raised to you; you don't dismiss yourself, but you collect us.¹

Since, for St. Augustine, God is the content of all beauty, the one from which such grace proceeds and fills, no, since God contains the need to be contained in something, he is already contained in himself. For he, as the source and origin of what is beautiful, cannot submit to it, thus making the beautiful subject to him, for God cannot humble himself or lower himself to us, but we must elevate ourselves to it (beauty). to get to what is beautiful. For Saint Augustine, even that which appears or even is considered superficial, which has defects (therefore, it could not be contained in beauty) in reality in the divine optics of the universe

1 AUGUSTINE, St. Confessiones (Confessions) [trans. Maria LJ Amarante]. São Paulo: PAULUS, 1997. Pág. 21.

in a conjunction tends to disappear.

But you who fill everything, do it with your whole being. And since the whole universe cannot contain your whole being, will it only contain a part? And will all beings contain the same part, or will each contain one, the greater beings and greater part, the lesser the lesser? But are there in you greater parts and lesser parts? Or are you whole everywhere, and there is nothing that contains you entirely?²

At the moment, according to Saint Augustine, when God fills everything, and makes everything part of his being, he affirms that what is imperfect, imprecise, inappropriate tends to disappear giving way to what is perfect, precise and appropriate, that is, the beautiful.

However, thanks be given to you, Lord, creator and orderer of the universe, even if I was destined to be just a child. Well, even then I existed, I lived, I used my senses, I took care of my conservation, image of your mysterious unity, source of my being; even then I watched with the inner sense, for the preservation of all my senses, and even in my modest reflections on small things, I was glad to find the truth.³

Saint Augustine shows that the search for truth, for what is good, is to search for what is beautiful. He asserts that thanks must be given to the creator at all times for the great creation wrought by the works of his hands.

I saw clearly that corruptible things are good. It could not be corrupted if they were extremely good, or if they were not good. If they were absolutely good, they would not be corruptible. And if they weren't good, there would be nothing to corrupt. Corruption is indeed an evil, but it would not be harmful if it did not diminish a real good. Therefore, either corruption is not an evil, which is impossible, or – and this is certain – everything that becomes corrupt suffers a diminution of good. But deprived of all good, it would entirely cease to exist.⁴

By citing that; all that is good comes from God, and

2 IBID. page 21.

3 IBID. Page 45.

4 IBID. Page 191.

if they exist from God, he asserts that insubstantial evil is presented by lower degrees of what being is. The absence of the beautiful is the most ignoble and low, while the beautiful is the most sublime and supreme; the absence of beauty is finite, not having within itself the capacity for harmony. When we judge the existence of certain harmful animals to be bad, in reality we measure them with our standards, according to our vision of utility and the advantages that such an animal can bring us, the same is given in what is the absence of beauty. We see something that for our “Taste” is useless, and when we judge the work of creation, starting from our limited optics, we are wrong in making such a judgment. We must examine according to the divine mold, with the whole “metre”, even that which seems insignificant to us,

2.2 The Absence of Beautiful Morals

For Saint Augustine, the absence of beauty, in the moral sense, is sin itself, sin as a moral work is dependent on the will or its absence; for him, ill will has no efficient cause, but a deficient cause.

By experience I understood that it is not surprising if bread, which is so pleasant to the healthy man’s palate, seems so detestable to the sick person, and that light, so dear to clear eyes, is unpleasant to irritated eyes. Your justice displeases evil men, and even more so the vipers and worms that you created good and according to the inferior part of creation..This part also the wicked are in agreement, and the more so when they differ more from you. On the other hand, the righteous are the more they become like you.⁵

It is natural and inherent in every man to will, and it should tend to a supreme good. But, as varied “goods” created and finite, the will, in itself, tends to them, thus subverting the hierarchical order, man being able to prefer what is an immanent beauty; to the beautiful that is transcendent; preferring “inferior goods” to the superior good. Soon the absence of beauty is derived from the fact that there is not a unique beauty conceivable by human nature; but rather several “beauties” envisioned by men, often a small divergence from the other, transforming good into evil through divergence, and vice versa. Consisting of an incorrect choice between these human goods.

The eyes love beauty and the variety of

5 IBID. page 194.

shapes, the brilliance and luminosity of colors. I hope such attractions don’t chain my soul. May it only be possessed by the God who created these “so good” things. Only he is my highest good, not them, every day while I’m awake, they annoy me without giving me rest, as do the voices that sing and others that flood everything we see, they reach me in a thousand ways, wherever I am, during the day, and it caresses me even when I am busy with other things and I am distracted from her. It insinuates itself with such vigor that, if I am suddenly absent, I look for it with anxiety, and if it remains absent for a long time, my soul is saddened.⁶

The gaze, for St. Augustine, is how the contemplation of God’s work is salutary, but like idolatry, not seeing God’s hand in them (the works of creation) is an aversion to what is beautiful, transforming what is beautiful into damn you. It is converting to the creature forgetting its creator, God. For him, no one should look for the causes of bad will, because, to look for what is beautiful with bad will, it does not become efficient, but deficient, being an unhealthy and unproductive force. Moving away from God (the most beautiful) who is the perfection of being, unlimited and supreme, to approach what is imperfect, limited and submissive - because it has a degree inferior to God - thus meaning a distance from what is beautiful (good).

Indeed, we see the enlargement of the universe, heaven, earth and all that they contain; and from the beauty and grandeur of the world we pass on the inestimable grandeur and beauty of the creator, which though we do not see it, yet we love it. Indeed, God who as yet cannot be beheld by the purity of our heart, sets before our eyes his works so that, seeing what we can see, we may love him whom we cannot behold, and so, because of his own love, we may one day be able to get your vision. However, we must also look for the spiritual sense in every word.⁷

For Saint Augustine, bad will is only in an individual because he wanted it that way, because on the contrary

6 IBID. Page 309.

7 AUGUSTINE, St. Enarrationes in Psalmos (Commentary on the Psalms): Psalms 101-150 [transl. Benedictine nuns; monastery Mary Mother of Christ]. São Paulo: PAULUS, 1998. Pág. 79.

things would be very different, for him, punishment is only given to defects of a voluntary order and not to defects of a natural order, because it is understood that what is natural is involuntary to being, and the volunteer would arbitrate by his own choice, to do them or not. The will tends to be good, it does not become bad because it turns to things that are bad, but because it turns bad, therefore, against the divine order or order of nature, leaving aside that beauty that is related to being. supreme to join so a beautiful of a lower graduation (or even the absence thereof).

If no good could result from evil, God would not form the human being from the adulterous union. Therefore, just as the culpable evil of adultery from which a human being is born cannot be imputed to God, who in the bad action of man performs a good deed, so everything that is shameful in the disobedience of the members (Adam and Eve), of which they were ashamed after the sin covering themselves with fig leaves (Gn 3,7), is not imputed to the marriage.[...] And the man, without a doubt, should not be ashamed of the work of God. Otherwise, it would be a cause of shame for the creator being what seemed worthy to God. So neither God nor man was offended by that natural nakedness, because there was nothing shameful, since there was nothing before that deserved punishment.⁸

For him, the fact of having received the gift of God's free will is a great (beautiful) good. Evil is the bad use of this great gift that God gives us in the way that has been mentioned before, that is why the moral beauty is the divine work, the gift of free will generated by God in each human being; and the absence of this beautiful moral is in every human being the misuse of the will and the devaluation of the divine work in each "persona" through the sin generated by man.

2.3 The Absence of Physical Beauty

For Saint Augustine, the absence of physical beauty, as well as illnesses, deficiencies, suffering, torture, torments of the spirit and death have a very broad significance within his thinking. For both illnesses, deficiencies, sufferings, torments are consequences of original sin, that is, it is a consequence of moral evil, as has been said before.

8 AUGUSTINE, St. De Natura et Gratia (The Grace) [transl. Friar Agostinho Belmonte, OAR.]. São Paulo: PAULUS, 1999. Pág. 305.

Do you live without sin?, in fact it does not concern me the subject in which the question develops. But what he says: "the fact that one does not live without sin, is attributed rather to the negligence of each one", is really true. Deign, however, to ask God not to be overcome by this sinful negligence. A certain person prayed to God, when he said: "guide my steps according to your word, and that no evil dominate me", avoiding trusting in his effort as in his own strength, which would prevent him from achieving true justice both in this world as in the other, where she is wanted and expected to be mayor.⁹

For him, human beings can choose what they want, but must accept the consequences of their corrupt and negligent actions. By denying these consequences, says Saint Augustine, what generates the corporeal corruption that weighs more and more on the "anima" is not the cause, but the penalty of the denial of the consequences of corruptible acts; it is not the human nature or its flesh that makes the "anima" sinful, but the sinful "anima" that makes the flesh corruptible, however, it must be analyzed all this in the history of salvation, because, what is corruptible (the absence beauty) must give way to what is incorruptible, thus generating a positive side.

3. The Real Beauty

For Saint Augustine, in God is found the root of the one, of being and of beauty. When an image adequately matches that of which it is an image, it achieves perfect correspondence, symmetry, equality, and resemblance. Between the mold and its image, no difference, therefore no disagreement and no inequality; the copy corresponds point for point and identically to the original; hence, its beauty and the title of form that is attributed to it. Such original beauty founded on resemblance is rediscovered in all participating beauties. The more beautiful a body is the more it is made up of parts that are more similar to each other. Therefore, ordering, proportionality, harmony, it is worth mentioning, the uniqueness produced by the similarity of the great beauty of the creator.

Late have I loved you, O beauty so ancient and so new! Too late I loved you! Behold, you dwelt within me and I was looking for you outside! I, deformed, threw myself on

9 IBID. page 123.

the beautiful forms of your creatures. You were with me, but I wasn't with you. Your creatures kept me far from you, which did not exist if they did not exist in you.¹⁰

St. Augustine tried to seek the essence of beauty in various ways; in seeking the metaphysical beauty, he did not actually find beauty in itself, but its antithesis. Showing what beauty is not. He (the beautiful) is not of low graduation, because if he were of low graduation he would not be perfect, and not being perfect he would not be beautiful, because, for St. form. The late search for the essence of beauty by him, made him not see it as it really is, but the adverse form of it. Saint Augustine sought the beauty of creation outside of God, in what was apparently appreciable to the human taste and sight, but he found nothing, because he only found what was most inferior in the search for what is superior; in seeking the beautiful that was of a moral order, Augustine only found what was not the moral beauty: sin. The total absence of God's presence, for him, where there is no God present, no beauty can be recognized, because where sin exists, and when one chooses to do so, one chooses not to see the beauty of the divine work, however, according to St. Augustine, from sin can come what is good, and from sin can come what is beautiful. Sin is the bad choice, but a bad choice can become something healthy. If evil could not generate good, God would annihilate what is evil, transforming men into angels, but depriving them of free choice. And the consequence of this sin, for Saint Augustine, is the absence of physical beauty: it is the consequence of our sins, when we move away from God, when we do not seek the work of creation, we are faced with the opposite of physical beauty, the diseases of the body caused by the disease of the soul. For him, the negligence of sin causes more and more human illnesses, making man incessantly seek to remedy the body's ills, abandoning what is beautiful to adhere to what can be pleasurable.

You called me, and your cry broke my deafness. You shone and shone your light, chased away my blindness. You sprinkled your fragrance and, breathing it, I sighed for you. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and now I am burning with the desire for your peace.¹¹

However, the divine voice, the sacred scripture,

10 AUGUSTINE, St. Confessiones (Confessions) [trans. Maria LJ Amarante]. São Paulo: PAULUS, 1997. Pág. 299.

11 IBID. page 299.

breaks this human deficiency, making one seek not the antonym of beauty, but its first causality. Knowing that what is distant from God is imperfect, evil, lacking in attractive beauty, Saint Augustine deduces, with a negative theology, what beauty really is: it is metaphysical in nature; to be ever closer to God, is to live finitude dreaming of infinity, to seek what comprises man within himself, the source and origin of all grace and creation. It is abandoning what is inferior and low, to adhere to what is sublime and lofty. It is abandoning what is the moral absence of beauty, sin, in order to adhere to reconciliation with the divine work.

By assimilating with the supreme beauty, we will taste what God really is, and we will hunger and thirst for God more and more, according to St. Augustine, and we will become more and more desirous of his present beauty in us. For he was looking for it outside himself, but in the end he found it within himself, showing that beauty is in every human being, as a creature of the divine artificer.

4. Final Considerations

St. Augustine, tries by means of a revolutionary method for his time, that the beautiful can be tasted. Using negative theology showing what the beautiful (good) is not to deduce what it can be. By launching the premise that beauty is not the smallest degree of divine existence, he states that everything beautiful is super close to the reality of what God is; being the beautiful and the good intrinsically linked to the divine nature. By launching the premise that beauty is not sin, he states that; sin is distancing from God, and equally distancing from what is beautiful. He says that: when one is in sin, one is not in God, and that the beautiful is the total approximation of God, God being the supreme beauty. By launching the premise that the beautiful is not the diseases, he affirms that God, as creator, does not want his creatures to suffer, or to get sick. But by original sin we are coated with what can be evil. Man is good and free by nature; and for choosing what one wants, says St. Augustine, he must bear the consequences of his actions. God is not in the disease, but in the patient.

By intuiting that beauty is not, we finally arrive at what it really is: beauty is the total and omniscient presence of God. It is being close to the creator. It's choosing what's good and leaving what's bad aside. It is abandoning yourself to God, leaving sin outside. It is to live always remembering that within every living thing there is a divine spark that must be respected;

By respecting the part of God that is in each person, one worships what is truly beautiful. Abandoning what is evil, and adhering to what is really good; God.

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