BEAUTY AND BEING IN VON HILDEBRAND AND THE ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION

MARK K. SPENCER

THOUGH NOT A WORK IN METAPHYSICS, Dietrich von Hildebrand’s Aesthetics, which has recently been translated into English, makes significant metaphysical claims. Although primarily working in the phenomenological and personalist traditions, von Hildebrand makes his metaphysical claims in the context of and in response to the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition in Catholic philosophy. It is worthwhile to draw his metaphysical claims out of his Aesthetics because they show an important way in which scholastic metaphysics can be developed. Von Hildebrand is motivated by a desire to perceive and respond to the value of each phenomenon for itself, and this yields a radically nonreductionistic metaphysics. Even if one ultimately disagrees with von Hildebrand’s metaphysical claims, it is worthwhile to draw them out of his Aesthetics because this antireductionism allows us to see some ways in which scholastic metaphysics is open to development, and thereby better understand that metaphysical tradition. His metaphysics especially helps us to see what a metaphysics looks like that is radically nonreductionistic about anything that shows up in our experience as if it is a being. Aristotelian and scholastic metaphysics are meant to explain what appears to us by causally reasoning from appearing effects to underlying principles. Von Hildebrand furthers this line of reasoning by drawing our attention to appearances that he thinks are not adequately explained by that tradition but can be explained by expanding, rather than abandoning, that tradition’s principles.

Correspondence to: University of St. Thomas, Department of Philosophy, JRC 241, 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105.


One of von Hildebrand’s metaphysical claims, by which he makes an important contribution to the Catholic philosophical tradition’s account of the categories and principles of being, comes in his distinction between ontological individuals, such as substances, and aesthetic individuals, such as landscapes. A landscape is a composition of elements of nature, such as the trees, mountains, and buildings in a particular place. (Von Hildebrand’s favorite examples is the Gulf of Spezia in Italy.) A landscape is not a mere juxtaposition of beautiful natural things, but presents itself as a unified, beautiful object, in which all the constituents “harmonize” with one another, much like the notes in a melody, to build up this new unity, which has its own character or “atmosphere” over and above the natures and properties of its constituents. This introduces a new category of being, aesthetic entities. I here work out how this category relates to the traditionally enumerated categories. Although von Hildebrand makes numerous significant metaphysical claims, he rarely works out how these claims systematically cohere; to see how his work is a contribution to the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition, we must systematize his metaphysical remarks, and that is what I do here with regard to aesthetic entities.

Working this out will allow us to better understand von Hildebrand’s account of the principles and properties of beings. Various scholastics posited essence, existence, and the principle of individuation as principles of being and the transcendental as properties of being. Some Catholic personalists added to these the principle of value. In addition to these principles and properties, in his Aesthetics, von Hildebrand introduces the “appearance” or “face” of a

---

3 By “principle” of being, I mean what Aristotle means by an arche of being: a source of being, that by which something is in some way, and that which explains why a being is in some way. I use “principle” rather than “cause” since the former is generally taken to be broader in extension than the former; “cause” is generally taken to connote distinction in being from the effect, but “principle” does not always connote this. Metaphysics considers not only what being is but also its properties, categories, and principles; see Aristotle, Metaphysics 4.1–2. Citations of Aristotle are from The Complete Works of Aristotle, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). Considering this new category of being that von Hildebrand introduces, and the implications of this introduction, helps us better understand all aspects of von Hildebrand’s metaphysics.
being or a value, the “atmosphere” that a being or value radiates, and the “overall beauty” (Gesamtschönheit) of a being as properties or principles of being, in a way to be worked out in this paper. The positing of these principles not as accidents of beings but as belonging to beings as such may seem to be at odds with any traditional account. But I argue here that von Hildebrand’s phenomenologically motivated metaphysics actually helps us better to understand and recover some aesthetic and metaphysical ideas in the Aristotelian tradition, such as Aristotle’s notions of kalon and energeia. The principles and properties of being that von Hildebrand posits also help motivate a more plausible account of the transcendentality of beauty than many others that are often given.

I

The Category of Aesthetic Entities. Von Hildebrand posits entities with “aesthetic” individuation and unity, especially in his account of the beauties of nature; these apparent entities, including landscapes and other scenes in nature, show up in experience entirely as unified by their beauty. That they are real entities is shown from the fact that value is concretely realized in them.

A “value” is a property of a being in virtue of which it has some kind of importance in itself. For example, beauty is an aesthetic value in virtue of which beautiful things are worth admiring for their own sake, and justice is a moral value in virtue of which just acts are worth choosing for their own sake. Values in themselves present themselves as having ideal being—that is, when I grasp what beauty is in itself and

---

7 They are explicitly referred to as “entities” at Aesthetics 1:312, though at 315 he says that they do not have the “constant appearance of a real entity”—this is not to say that they are not entities, but that they do not appear in the manner of a real entity, by which he means a substance.
8 Von Hildebrand, Aesthetics 1:293–346.
what kind of response it calls for, I grasp a content that can be
considered in itself, apart from any real beautiful thing. But while values
can be considered in themselves and in their essential content, apart
from real beings, the content of values is grounded in other, nonvalue
content—that is, the content of a value intelligibly presupposes some
other, nonvalue content. For example, the value of aesthetic beauty can
be grounded in the arrangement of colors or tones in a beautiful object;
that is, the content of that sort of aesthetic beauty presupposes the
arrangement of colors or tones, and the former is unintelligible without
the latter. “Grounding” is a relation between two intelligible contents;
one can consider this grounding relation between beauty and its
ontological ground even without knowing whether any object exists
that has that arrangement of color or tones. But values are also
concretely “realized” in real beings—that is, they come to be actually
present in actually existing beings such that that value actually exists as
a property of that being and calls for a due response to its importance.
If value is experientially presented, concretely “realized” in some
apparently existing thing, then that thing actually exists; the general
metaphysical claim here is that only real beings can realize values. In
general, we distinguish things in part based on whether they present
themselves as having some importance in themselves. That which
realizes a value does not have ideal existence, like values or essences,
such that they would need to be realized in concrete beings; rather, they
are concrete, actually existing things.\footnote{On ideal existence, see von Hildebrand, \textit{What Is Philosophy}? 168–71. Beings with ideal existence, though they are indeed beings in the sense that they exist and are intelligible (see, for example, \textit{Ethics}, 139–40), are more like principles of categorical being than categorical beings in their own right; in comparison to traditional philosophy, an essence or value considered in its ideal, realizable existence, corresponds to the Aristotelian \textit{to ti en einai} or the Thomistic “nature absolutely considered,” which are neither mental (like universals or divine ideas) nor real (like natures in substances), but are the content common to both. See Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics} 7.6 and Aquinas, \textit{De ente et essentia}, c. 2. All citations from Aquinas can be found at www.corpusthomisticum.org. On the grounding–realization distinction, see von Hildebrand, \textit{Nature of Love}, 80–81. Values also exist ideally apart from their realization; that value is realized in something is a sufficient condition for knowing that that thing exists, but it is not a necessary condition for the existence of the value as such. On the real realization of value in aesthetic entities like landscapes, see von Hildebrand, \textit{Aesthetics} 1:70, 152–53, 257, 335.}

Aesthetic entities, like landscapes, are bearers of aesthetic values,
like beauty—that is, in some cases, it is the landscape as a whole that is
beautiful, not its constituent entities considered on their own. Beauty is realized in the landscape as a whole, and so the landscape is a new entity in its own right, over and above its constituents. Furthermore, these entities act. First, they give themselves to and “fecundate” perception—that is, in coming to perceive unities like landscapes, I am given new knowledge, rather than just reorganizing or remembering knowledge I already had, for example, about the parts of a landscape. Second, aesthetic entities like landscapes bestow an “atmosphere” on their surroundings and observers; that is, each landscape has a certain feel or character or style, something that it is like to be in or to observe that landscape, which is conferred on its constituents, even if, perceived by themselves, they would lack this experienced character. For example, some mountainous landscapes exude an atmosphere of grandeur and others have an atmosphere of harshness. This atmosphere, as an overall feel or style, must be grasped through perception; no description of it will be adequate to it.\footnote{10} The perception of an atmosphere is not, von Hildebrand contends, phenomenologically anything like projecting a mood of the subject into reality. That is certainly something that can be done, but it is not what is being done here. Rather, landscapes really present themselves as exuding a certain feel to those open to receiving it, which is observable regardless of one’s mood. If the traditional scholastic principle “action follows being” is true, then, since they act, these are real beings.

Let us consider five kinds of aesthetic entities. First, there are nonsubstantial “elements” of nature like the sky, sunlight, and times of day and seasons of the year.\footnote{11} These are not presented experientially as accidents belonging to individual substances, but as background features in any observation of nature. They are bearers of beauty and also of properties that normally are found in persons. For example, the clear, blue sky expresses joyfulness, again not as a projection of the observer’s mood, but in itself,\footnote{12} and the time of dawn expresses wakefulness, which gives itself as an atmosphere influencing how all

\footnote{10} On this account of perception’s fecundating role, see von Hildebrand, \textit{What Is Philosophy?} 225–26. On the activity of aesthetic entities, see von Hildebrand, \textit{Aesthetics}, 1:38, 113, 254, 335–36.

\footnote{11} Von Hildebrand, \textit{Aesthetics} 1:296–303.

\footnote{12} Von Hildebrand, \textit{Aesthetics} 1:181–85, 207, 277, 298, 451. One can see this joy even when one is in a foul mood.
things seem at dawn. Second, there are “regions” like the French Riviera. Some regions or large areas of land present themselves as wholes. The whole of such a region presents itself as unified by some aesthetic value that belongs to the region as a whole. The substances and elements of nature present in that region, colored by the region’s natural and human history, join together such that they exude a distinct “atmosphere.” Third, there are the already described “landscapes,” such as particular bays or valleys, either within a beautiful region or not, that present themselves experientially as compositions of substances, harmonized like a melody and organically organized from within. Fourth, there are “pictures,” scenes that must be seen from a particular vantage point, like a view of a valley from a scenic overlook. One can move about in a landscape and observe its composition from many points of view. But a scene only gives itself as unified and as a bearer of beauty and of some “atmosphere” from a particular point of view. Finally, there are “poetic phenomena.” Von Hildebrand’s example of such a phenomenon is a pastoral scene, a view of a village with flocks of sheep on the surrounding hills on a spring evening. There is a distinct “poetry” or charm to such a view. In poetic phenomena, features of the scene pertaining not only to sight, but also to hearing and smell, combine to build up a beautiful unity. This is the case although these sensory constituents of the scene have no causal connections, and no other real connections like the dependence relation between substance and accident.

We will see why these aesthetic entities are members of their own category of being by contrasting them to the members of other

---

13 Ibid. 1:300. These personal properties in turn display the “metaphysical beauty” that belongs to beings in virtue of their kinds; see Aesthetics 1:305. It should be noted that the degree of aesthetic value of a thing is not tied directly to its metaphysical rank or the metaphysical beauty that it has in virtue of its natural kind. The beauty of the cheerfulness of the sky belongs to cheerfulness, not to the sky according to its scientifically discoverable nature; the aesthetic beauty of a mountain far outstrips the beauty of a blade of grass, although the latter is, since it is alive, metaphysically much greater and more beautiful than the former.


15 Ibid. 1:297, 308–21.

16 Ibid. 1:316, 321.

17 Ibid. 1:253–59. On the notion of a “beautiful world” built up by the “atmosphere” of an aesthetic entity, see ibid. 1:336–38.
categories, both those categories of being posited by scholastics and those also posited by von Hildebrand. A category is a highest-order genus of beings, and “being” is said in at least as many senses as there are categories; to posit a new category is to posit a new, irreducible way in which something can be.

First, aesthetic entities are not substances, such as a rock, an organism, or a person. Substances have “ontological individuality,” that is, they exist independently of and sharply demarcated from others, are unified around a formal principle, and are causally or spiritually active beings. Some substances, such as persons, present themselves as having a necessary essence—that is, the content of what they are can be grasped in a single act of intellectual intuition, and all members of that kind necessarily share the same content in terms of what they are. Other substances, such as organisms, present themselves not as having an intuitively graspable essence but as having an essence that must be scientifically or empirically discovered, and as having a typical unified appearance or “face” of that structure. For example, what it is to be a horse cannot be grasped intuitively, but rather what it is to be a horse must be empirically grasped; not all horses have the exact same scientific structure (whereas what it is to be a person as such is unvarying from person to person), but there is a typical appearance of the horse, and this is the “face” of the horse’s structure.

Some substances also have an “aesthetic essence,” a deeply meaningful, intuitively perceivable, but often inexpressible unity of qualities. For example, the aesthetic essence of being a lion can be.

---

18 Ibid. 1:310–14. See Crosby, “Bonum,” 297. All contingent substances are also composed of act and potency, and of essence and existence; see von Hildebrand, Ethics, 48. “Form” in “formal principle” is not understood in exactly the same way as “form” in scholastic philosophy. In the latter, the form is an immaterial, unchanging principle that bestows kindhood on a substance, and is qualitatively identical in all members of a given kind, but is grasped only by abstraction. “Form” in von Hildebrand’s sense likewise has to do with the kind of a substance, but it also includes visible features, like the visible structure of a certain kind of organism, and it can be realized more or less even in substances of the same kind. Furthermore, an “essence” on von Hildebrand’s view is anything with necessary content graspable by intuition; there can thus be visible essences (for example, aesthetic essences), as well as intelligible essences. The extension of “essence” here includes but also exceeds the extension of “essence” on scholastic philosophy, where it refers to that which is captured in a definition of a certain kind.
grasped in a lion but also in a man who is like a lion. Both appearances and aesthetic essences are divine inventions: they do not flow from the scientific structure in a way intelligible to us but are like artistic compositions by God, based on that structure and an organizing, formal principle. We cannot grasp why a particular appearance goes with a particular underlying scientific structure.  
19

Like substances, aesthetic entities have an appearance or “face,” and some are formally composed divine “inventions”—that is, there is something mysterious and unintuitive about the way all the constituents of, say, a landscape fit together to build up the beautiful scene.  
20
But aesthetic entities are not sharply demarcated from their surroundings. And, while real, they would not exist if there were no perceivers. (This will be explained in more detail below.) For these reasons, they are not substances. They are, as it were, all appearance or face, without a scientific structure, apart from that of their constituent substances, to which they are irreducible. Although they present themselves as composed with a sort of necessity to their composition—that is, all the parts of an aesthetic essence fit together, like the parts of a good artwork—they do not have a genuinely necessary, definable essence, like that of a substance like a person or a mathematic entity like a triangle.

Second, aesthetic entities are not “moral substances” or “quasi-substances,” a category that includes communities, artworks, and other artifacts. No scholastics understood this to be a distinct category of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{19}}\text{ Von Hildebrand, } \textit{What Is Philosophy?} 156–63, 183; \textit{Aesthetics} 1:144–45, 196–201, 263–67. The aesthetic essence is closely related to the qualitative analogy (for example, when we call Christ a light, or speak of the glow of love), a unique relation among things in nature, which underlies many poetic metaphors, which on von Hildebrand’s view are not merely linguistic, but grounded in this kind of real unity; see von Hildebrand, \textit{Aesthetics} 1:164–69, 185, 205–06.
\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\text{ The notion of “fit” recalls the notion of } \textit{convenientia} \textit{in scholastic philosophy: it is a fundamental feature of the world that things and principles are proportioned to one another, or come together such that they form meaningful wholes. Von Hildebrand shares this view in his philosophy: things are grasped as meaningfully fitting together. See Aquinas, } \textit{Sentencia libri De anima} \textit{I, lect. 8, n. 130; Summa theologiae} III, q. 1, a. 1; Gilbert Narcisse, } \textit{Les Raisons de Dieu} (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1997).
\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\text{ Von Hildebrand, } \textit{Aesthetics} 1:314–20.\]
being. Rather, they understood these by analogy to substances.\textsuperscript{22} Von Hildebrand, by contrast, seems to hold that this is a distinct category of being, since like substances, these are self-unified and demarcated from their surroundings and are organized around a formal principle. But, unlike substances, moral substances are the result of human activity. Moral substances are “spiritual” entities, existing only through the meaning instantiated in them, though they are founded upon a physical base, such as the paint and canvas of paintings or the members in a community.

Many moral substances are organized by human acts through the unifying power (\textit{virtus unitiva}) of a value, through which other entities, such as substances or qualities like colors or tones, are unified; for example, tones are unified by a musician through the power of an aesthetic value into the single form of a melody.\textsuperscript{23} Aesthetic entities likewise are unities composed of other entities such as substances and qualities, and a landscape formally unifies its parts much as a melody unifies tones. Again, both a melody and a landscape are composed with a certain necessity: they present themselves such that it appears that they “ought” to be as they are, for everything in them “fits” together.\textsuperscript{24} Aesthetic entities are not the result of human action. But human action can influence them; for example, a well-placed beautiful building can unify a landscape, and cities and festivals can be poetic phenomena. But unlike artworks, which are moral substances, an aesthetic entity of the sort under consideration here is not deliberately and directly composed by human action, but rather arises spontaneously from the confluence of the appearances of its constituents.\textsuperscript{25} Though aesthetic entities are in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24}Ibid. 1:189–90, 204–05, 308–12.
\item \textsuperscript{25}Ibid. 1:311; \textit{Aesthetics}, vol. 2, chap. 12. On poetic phenomena including things like festivals and bullfights, and on how the poetry arises from the
some ways more real than moral substances, since they are largely composed of natural things, they lack the solidity and permanence of the moral substance. A painting is a demarcated, persisting, physically rooted, causally interconnected object; a landscape seems to float over its constituents, being unified through the power of the value of beauty, and imparting a certain atmosphere or style to its constituents, but not conferring the physical or causal connections that make a substance, moral or real, exist as such.  

Third, aesthetic entities are distinct from qualities belonging to what von Hildebrand calls the human aspect of the world. These qualities include all sensible properties of substances, such as colors or tones. The human aspect is a meaningful, spiritual layer of the world, the way it ought to appear to perceivers; these properties exist only for perceivers, and they are not part of the scientifically discovered layer of physical things, but they do present themselves as existing in things, rather than purely in the senses or the mind of observers. Aesthetic entities are dependent on these qualities, and, like them, belong to the human aspect of the world. But aesthetic entities unify these qualities and also include other entities, such as substances, as constituents, and so are something more than substances. They can further be bearers of and can be unified by much higher aesthetic values than those that belong to mere qualities like color and tone, such as the value of the poetic and the sublime beauty of the second power. The poetic, as felt in a pastoral scene at evening, is a value that gives to its bearers a harmonious, delicate, charming, enchanting, lovely unity and confluence of many factors, including the grace and character of the people involved, rather than by deliberate human construction, see *Aesthetics* 1:352–53. It should be noted that von Hildebrand’s denial of the claim that baseball games have poetry, and his odd claim that baseball is attractive just because of the tension created by seeing who will win or by bets placed, just show that he does not understand baseball at all. Truly, there are few more poetic phenomena than watching a good game on a warm summer night! See David Bentley Hart, “A Perfect Game: The Metaphysical Meaning of Baseball,” *First Things* (August 2010).  

28 Von Hildebrand, *Aesthetics* 1:195. Indeed, even qualities of the human aspect that are not strictly speaking bearers of beauty, like fragrances of flowers, can contribute to the beauty and poetry of an aesthetic entity; see *Aesthetics* 1:126.  
29 Ibid. 1:152–53.
BEAUTY AND BEING

atmosphere, a “hovering and fragrant” character, an intimation of the eternal but also an earthly sublimity. The beauty of the second power is a very lofty beauty, perceived in the most sublime of symphonies or of landscapes. We experience this beauty of the second power when we perceive a beauty that seems incomparably greater than its physical base. When we perceive this beauty, we are amazed that something so ontologically poor as sounds or rocks and trees could bear such a lofty, enrapturing beauty. This beauty does not so much belong to its bearer as appear “on” it, as a statue appears on its pedestal. It is a quasi-sacramental beauty that far outstrips ordinary audible or visible beauty; every part of the human aspect can appear as a message from God, but the beauty of the second power speaks of God in a much higher way. This idea of some beings and values being a “message from God” will be developed and explored at key points throughout the rest of the paper.

For these reasons, aesthetic entities are also not accidents of their constituent substances. Aquinas, following Aristotle, divided the categories of being into substance and nine accidental categories—that is, into being that exists in itself and being that is apt to exist in substance, whether as intrinsically modifying that substance (quantity and quality), orienting that substance toward another (relation), or applying extrinsic modifications to a substance (the six minor categories). Aquinas makes this distinction on the basis of distinct modes of predication: each way a term can be predicated of a subject picks out a distinct category of being. But aesthetic entities appear as hovering or floating over the substances that constitute them, not as belonging to any particular substance as its attribute or as predicable of any substantial subject.

31 Ibid. 1:211–14. The strangeness of this beauty, the vast discrepancy between its bearer and the beauty, is aptly if irreverently expressed by Benedick in Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing (act 2, scene 3): “Now, divine air! now is his soul ravished! Is it not strange that sheeps’ guts should hale souls out of men’s bodies?”
32 Von Hildebrand gives his account of the accidental at, for example, What Is Philosophy? 138, 153–55, 173, 183.
For phenomena that include many substances, scholasticism had the notion of “unity of order.” This named not a distinct category of being but rather a set of relations arising when many substances are in one place and oriented to a single end (as in the unity among the substances that constitute a house), or where there are relations of priority and posteriority among them and they are oriented to a single end (as in the unity between king and subjects in a monarchical state). Unities of order, furthermore, are entirely explanatorily reducible to their member substances. But an aesthetic entity presents itself as a single unity, irreducible to its constituents, and as there for the sake of its own beauty, not for the sake of any end beyond itself. Although there are aspects of aesthetic entities that are more prominent than others, the other constituents are not ordered to them such that they are prior to those other entities. An aesthetic entity, then, lacks the conditions for being a unity of order.

If aesthetic entities are not unities of order, then a fortiori they are not chaotic or accidental unities, or mere heaps or aggregates; von Hildebrand treats these at What Is Philosophy? 153–55, and for a scholastic treatment, see Aquinas, Summa theologiae III, q. 2, a. 1. The times of day and seasons that are aesthetic entities are not mere accidental unities as the temporal continuum is. In showing this, von Hildebrand also makes a contribution to our understanding of the Aristotelian categories of ubi and quando. A substance has accidents in the category ubi insofar as it is bounded by a certain place, and in the category quando insofar as it is at some time. But on scholastic category theory, there is no category for particular places or times as genuine unities of a unique sort. In this, scholastic category theory fell far short of what scholastic theology realized, with its notions of liturgical times and seasons, and the importance of certain places such as places of pilgrimage. Von Hildebrand fills this gap in scholastic metaphysics with his category of
the traditionally established categories, and given that they are in fact real beings, for the reasons already given, I conclude that aesthetic entities are a distinct kind of entity that does not fit into any other category and so are members of their own distinct category.

II

Aesthetic Entities and the Principles and Properties of Being. Examining the principles and properties of the members of this category allows us to see better how von Hildebrand understands the principles and properties of beings in general. It is instructive to compare von Hildebrand’s account of this to a general scholastic account, on which created beings have principles of essence, existence, and the principle of individuation.\(^\text{36}\) Just by having these, a being participates in transcendental properties (and thereby in God, in whom these properties are subsistent) such as being, unity, intelligibility (or truth), appetibility (or goodness), and, on some accounts, beauty. Created substances are actualized by accidents, which include their appearances, and through these accidents participate further in goodness and beauty. These values of goodness and beauty are, on most scholastic views, always really identical to a substantial or accidental being: they are that being considered insofar as it is a certain degree of participation in the relevant transcendental value (and in God).\(^\text{37}\)

---

\(^{36}\) Granted, there is really no such thing as a “general” scholastic view, but there are real commonalities, and the particularities of movements such as Thomism or Scotism are not what is at issue here. Essence–existence composition can be understood as real (on Thomism), formal (on Scotism) or a matter of conceptual focusing (on Suárezianism); the principle of individuation can be understood as material (on Thomism), formal (on Scotism), or entitative (on Suárezianism). There are, of course, other views too, and variations of each of these. What is important for my purposes here are not these differences but the agreement that essence, existence, and the principle of individuation must be understood as principles of each being insofar as it is a being.

\(^{37}\) On these transcendentals, see, for example, Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 1, a. 1; *Summa theologiae* I, q. 5.
Von Hildebrand agrees that beings’ principles include essence, existence, and the principle of individuation. But, on his view, values are not identical to the beings in which they are realized but are a distinct principle of being, which exerts a new form of causality on that being. They bestow not content (as a formal cause does) but importance on a being, such that it ought (or ought not) to be in some way, and such that it is not merely the object of appetite but is worth responding to for its own sake. It is this additional, experientially presented element of rendering the being such that it ought to be or ought not to be that founds von Hildebrand’s view that value is an additional principle of being, distinct from the being itself. Value can be grounded in beings’ existence (the formal value of being as such), essence (the value of being something and metaphysical value), or accidents (some qualitative values). On the scholastic view, accidents augment their substance’s value without altering that underlying value essentially. For example, regardless of the additional value or disvalue added to a person by his acts, the person as such always retains the same value or goodness, since that goodness is really identical to the being. But on von Hildebrand’s view, some acts completely transform their substance’s value and others eliminate it, such that that substance ought not to have existed, as when a person performs a particularly heinous, irreversible act. On his view, then, some acts are not merely accidental, that is, not merely additional actualities over and above substantial actuality. For these same reasons, not every being is actually good or beautiful.

But von Hildebrand’s account suggests a new view of the transcendentality of beauty in that every being is meant to have this value. (A parallel view regarding goodness is supported by von Hildebrand’s texts, though I focus on beauty here, since the subject of this paper is aesthetic entities.) Every value has its own beauty, and

---

38 Von Hildebrand, *Nature of Love*, 79–82; *Ethics*, 20, 29–57, 87–90. See Crosby, “*Bonum*,” 296–98. “Cause” here is being used in its broader, Aristotelian sense, rather than its narrower Hildebrandian sense, where it is used in contrast to meaningful spiritual activity and motivation (see *What Is Philosophy?* 269).


every being, even if just insofar as it has being, is supposed to have value, so every being is supposed to have beauty. To be beautiful is not merely to be pleasing when seen or known, as Aquinas defines it, even though it can be rightly experienced as a message from God to created persons, and is directed to seeing and knowing. Rather, for some being to be beautiful, on von Hildebrand’s view, is for it to have a value in itself by which it offers something like the personal gesture of love. We have already seen that von Hildebrand contends, on phenomenological grounds, that the clear blue sky presents the personal attribute of joy, although it is a nonpersonal being. In the beauty of being, there is not just the self-revelation or givenness (the “it gives”) of being, but the lovingness (the “it loves”) of being. Von Hildebrand does not analyze this claim, but love for him is a value-response involving a striving for union with the beloved (intentio unionis) and for benefiting the beloved (intentio benevolentiae). To say of the beautiful that “it loves” is to see in it a transfiguring splendor that draws us to union with it and confers benefits on us—not only a love for us but a love, a “song of praise,” for God. To say that beauty is a transcendental is to say that each concrete being ought to love in this way.

45 Aquinas, Summa theologiae I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.
46 Other phenomenologists, such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Marion, have emphasized that, fundamentally, phenomena give themselves; see Jean-Luc Marion, Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998).
47 Von Hildebrand, Aesthetics 1:451.
48 Von Hildebrand, Nature of Love, 50.
49 The idea of beauty as something intrinsic to a being, not something by which being is related to human appetite and cognition, is found in certain scholastic views prior to Aquinas. For example, Albert the Great holds that while the transcendental “good” means being attractive to desire, the transcendental “beautiful” means the splendor of the form in itself, or in its relation to matter. Beauty is thus a value in beings that can be apprehended and responded to, but that does not exist entirely in its relation to human powers. See Jan Aertsen, Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 165–66.
50 Von Hildebrand, Aesthetics 1:345.
51 I say “concrete being” here since von Hildebrand includes ideal existents among beings, and so includes disvalues among beings, which neither have nor ought to have beauty—though there seems to be a sort of seductive splendor to many disvalues (as in the “glamor of sin” or the negative sort of sexual charm, with its “apparent poetry,” mentioned at Aesthetics 1:147, 354). But on the traditional account of the transcendentals, they belong to concrete
This loving beauty, by the *virtus unitiva* it has as a value, unifies aesthetic entities. These entities do not entirely supervene on or arise, by bottom-up causality, from their constituent entities; rather, the value of beauty or the poetic descends upon those constituents and unifies them. The poetry or beauty of aesthetic entities appear like a personal presence in nature (the “it loves” of nature), and this, von Hildebrand plausibly says, is the experiential basis for the personification of values in stories of mythological gods.\(^{52}\) Sometimes, as in beauty of the second beings, not necessarily to the principles of being—prime matter as such, for example, on Aquinas’s view, is not in itself actually good or intelligible. And ideal existents, although beings in a sense, should, I think, be understood as principles of concrete beings (see n. 9 above). It is not an obstacle to the transcendentality of beauty, understood in this way, to observe that some ideal beings lack it.

\(^{52}\) Von Hildebrand, *Aesthetics* 1:302. Consider the value-experience that underlies Virgil’s *Aeneid* 8.349–54: “Iam tum religio pauidos terrebat agrestis / dira loci, iam tum siluam saxumque tremebant. / ‘Hoc nemus, hunc’ inquit ‘frondoso uertice collem / (quis deus incertum est) habitat deus; Arcades ipsum / credunt se uidisse Iouem, cum saepe nigrantem / aegida concuteret dextra nimbosque cieret.” Or in Dryden’s translation: “A reverent fear (such superstition reigns / Among the rude ev’n then possess’d the swains. / Some god, they knew—what god, they could not tell—/ Did there amidst the sacred horror dwell. / Th’ Arcadians thought him Jove; and said they saw / The mighty Thund’rer with majestic awe, / Who took his shield, and dealt his bolds around, / And scatter’d tempest on the teeming ground.” Von Hildebrand gives phenomenological grounding for the recovery of a quasi–mythological view of these presences in nature, as described for example in C. S. Lewis’s *Space Trilogy*, without lapsing into anything the outright pagan interpretation of these appearances of transcendence in nature, as found, for example, in Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, *All Things Shining* (New York: Free Press, 2011). It is, however, entirely consistent with von Hildebrand’s view to hold that the presence of the poetic or certain forms of beauty are the work of created spirits such as angels, as on the view of Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputate de potentia Dei*, q. 5, a. 8. It is also consistent with a merely allegorical interpretation of all these claims. In making these claims, however, and in finding beauty as a divine value intrinsically in things, not merely existing in relation to our pleasure and cognition, von Hildebrand leaves open the possibility, though he never explicitly suggests it or develops it, of an aesthetics that considers such things as the terror and peril that one can feel in the presence of some beauty. Consider the notion of “unmanageable beauty” in Plato’s *Republic* 509a, of “perilous beauty” in Tennyson’s poem “The Temple,” or the description of Galadriel in Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* as “beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful.” While von Hildebrand certainly holds that beauty can inspire “awe” (*Aesthetics* 1:280) and he frequently refer to it as a *mirandum* (for example, at *Aesthetics* 1:208) and as “enchanting” us rather than just causing pleasure (for example, at *Aesthetics* 1:376–79), he does not
power, this value is experienced entirely as a word from God, and so we can say that God creates this value and thereby unifies the aesthetic entity. But elsewhere, as in poetic phenomena, the value is experienced not as a word from God but as something more distantly related to him, a mere breath of the eternal, and also as an earthly value. The value seems to come both from above and below, arising out of the confluence of the appearances of its constituents without being reducible to them.

Understanding how this confluence of appearance occurs, and understanding how this can constitute a new being, requires understanding better what an “appearance” is on von Hildebrand’s view. As with his view of the categories, von Hildebrand does not give a systematic metaphysics of appearances, yet he uses the notion of appearance in a systematic way; his metaphysics of appearances must be synthesized from his disparate comments on it. We have already seen that all kinds of beings have an appearance, which arises from its underlying structure as a divine “invention.” Values too have a face. In each case, the face or appearance is that in virtue of which there is something that it is like for them to present to an observer.

This appearance or face is, in a sense, a principle of being: it arises out of other principles of the being, such as its scientifically discoverable layer, and confers upon the being a certain way of being and seeming in the world. Hence, it is a principle in virtue of which the being is the way that it is. But in another sense, it is a property of being as such: it is not a something accidental, a contingent actuality added to the actuality of the being, but a display of the actuality of the being as such, the way it ought to look to an observer. We feel the “fit” between the appearance and the being as a whole, and it is in order to explain this “fit” that von Hildebrand calls the appearance a divine invention;

consider in any detail this notion of the peril of beauty, of the inability of frail humanity to bear some beauties. There is a real difference between the experience of the peril of some beauties and their enchantment and the experience of the sursum corda in lofty, liberating, divine beauties (Aesthetics 1:278)—and neither of these is the same as the seductive splendor of disvalue mentioned in n. 51 above. Unbearable or dangerous beauty is still presented as something positive, a revelation from and of God, whereas the seductive splendor of disvalue is entirely negative and worldly, not intimating anything about God. For a phenomenological account of the “unbearability” of beauty see Jean-Luc Marion, Being Given, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Von Hildebrand, Aesthetics 1:255.
since nothing in the being as a whole requires this appearance, it is to be explained as a meaningful idea descending “from above” into the being.\(^\text{54}\)

Indeed, the appearance or face of a being can present the being in its overall beauty and so present it as intuitively perceivable—that is, capable of being grasped as a whole. Von Hildebrand develops this notion of “overall beauty” especially in the context of his phenomenological exploration of the motivations for love, but it also appears in his account of aesthetic entities. Many loves, especially romantic love, for another are awakened by perceiving the other’s overall beauty, which appears intuitively to one as a whole, as making the other loveable for his own sake and not merely for the sake of some aspect of the person or some consequence of loving that person. This is why we cannot give a definitive reason why we love another: no partial, expressible reason explains the love; rather, what explains our love is our perception of and response to the person’s complete beauty, perceived holistically. Aesthetic entities like landscapes also display an overall beauty, which we grasp as a whole, over and above their individual constituents and their beauty. The overall beauty of a being is the beauty uniquely and unrepeatably embodied in an individual being. To see the overall beauty of a being is to see the reflection of the divine idea or “invention” concretized in that being—that is, it is to grasp the being as a whole and as beautiful but also as a reflection of an eternal meaning or “invention,” in the sense given above. But the overall beauty is also a beauty that arises from all the appearances and values present in that being; just as any appearance is, it is in some ways a principle and in other ways a property of being.\(^\text{55}\) Overall beauty is given both as coming from God, for even if this beauty does not always raise our minds to him, we still experience it as descending upon the being and unifying it rather than being entirely reducible to its parts, and as coming from creatures. As in the beauty that unifies aesthetic entities, it seems both to arise from those entities and to descend upon them, and this is explained by positing that it is both a principle of being (descending “from above” and being explanatorily prior to the being)

\(^{54}\) See n. 20 above on the link between this notion of “fit” and the scholastic concept of *convenientia*.

\(^{55}\) See n. 68 below for more on how something can be both a principle and a property of being.
and a property of being (arising “from the being” and from its principles).\textsuperscript{56}

III

\textit{Von Hildebrand and the Aristotelian Tradition on Beauty and Principles of Being.} In holding that the face and overall beauty are principles and properties of being, not accidents, von Hildebrand seems to go beyond anything allowed by or anticipated in the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition. But, in fact, these claims allow a recovery of a facet of the tradition that is often overlooked and that has been overshadowed by contemporary scholastic discussions of transcendent beauty. Aristotle uses the notion of the \textit{kalon}\textsuperscript{57} to express the beauty of the individual in itself. Much like von Hildebrand’s notion of overall beauty, the \textit{kalon} appears to perception.\textsuperscript{58} As the manifestation of the actuality of a thing, it is something divine.\textsuperscript{59} It cannot be defined but must be perceived. As on von Hildebrand’s notion of beauty, it is to be sought for its own sake and not for the sake of any benefit that it confers. For example, in acting virtuously, one does not just follow moral rules or perform acts for their benefit to one’s nature; one performs them for the sake of their particular beauty.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{56} Von Hildebrand, \textit{Aesthetics} 1:85–86, 140–48, 278, 324; \textit{Nature of Love}, 22–24, 66–67, 73–78, 298–99, 302–03, 358. The overall beauty of a being, which can include the unique poetry of that being, is unlike the beauty of the second power, which appears on, but does not properly belong to, its bearer.


\textsuperscript{58} Aristotel, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 10.4.1174b15–35.

\textsuperscript{59} Aristotel, \textit{Physics} 1.9.192a17–24; \textit{Generation of Animals} 2.1.731b26.

\textsuperscript{60} Aristotel, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 4.1.1120a23–30; \textit{Eudemian Ethics} 8.3.1249a12–17. Von Hildebrand (at \textit{Aesthetics} 1:83) recognizes the notion of the “beautiful and the good” (\textit{kalokagathon}) used by Aristotle in these passages, but he draws it from Plato and Plotinus, and equates it only with
of a being is both a principle (arche) of that being, in virtue of which a being is ordered and definite, and the manifestation of its particular complete actuality (energeia), in virtue of which it is seen as sharing in divine activity and is worthwhile for its own sake. Von Hildebrand’s phenomenologically founded metaphysics, far from opposing the tradition, allows a development of this account of beauty as both principle and property of being, which is found already at least implicitly in Aristotle, at the very root of that tradition.

For Aristotle, beauty is a principle of being and a value belonging to the individual being in itself. Von Hildebrand develops this implicit metaphysics of beauty much further, and this is seen especially in his account of aesthetic entities. On his view, it is possible for the face or appearance of a being to act and enter into relations with other beings, even when the scientific or ontological essence of that being does not

---


62 For the linking of these notions see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a23–1073a12; *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.4.1174b15–35. Some, such as Aryeh Kosman, “Beauty and the Good: Situating the Kalon,” in *Virtues of Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014) present the kalon as a mere appearance of the intrinsic goodness of a thing, that is, the appearance of goodness to our subjective awareness. But the link that Aristotle draws between kalon and energeia, which is what each being most is, counts against this interpretation. The kalon is an appearance, but not a mere or accidental appearance; rather, it is intrinsic to the energeia and so to the being; it is a principle of being, or an aspect of a principle of being in its own right. It is not just the appearance of the good but is that in virtue of which a being is ordered and worthwhile for its own sake.

63 In commenting on Aristotle, Aquinas goes beyond what he says elsewhere about beauty; in *Summa theologiae*, for example, he mostly focuses on how beauty is being insofar as it is pleasing when known. Aquinas gives kalon as pulchrum, which he then equates to the honestum (*Sententia libri Ethicorum* [hereafter *In NE*], VI, lect. 10; compare *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 145, a. 2). The honestum is the good that is sought for its own sake and not for the sake of the seeker’s advantage or pleasure. Beauty, for Aquinas, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *NE*, arises out of a being’s actuality, as a further completing perfection over and above that actuality, just as pleasure is a further completing perfection on an act. Beauty, here, is something in the being itself, the appearance of the form of the being (*In X NE*, lects. 3 and 6). This beauty—just as with von Hildebrand’s overall beauty—can attract us to another for the other’s sake: he says that love for a woman, for example, is always first awakened by enjoyment of her beauty (*In IX NE*, lect. 5).
so act. For example, one being or value, in its face, can relate as an “antiphon” to another. Liturgically, an antiphon announces and prepares for a psalm, and is a sort of background for that psalm but stands outside it. On von Hildebrand’s view, one value can be an antiphon to another; for example, a moral value in a beloved person can announce and convey one’s attention to his overall beauty. A substance can be an antiphon to an aesthetic entity; for example, a tree of a certain kind can announce and prepare one to see a landscape, as when one sees that tree of a certain kind while approaching a landscape, but one is not yet in the midst of the beautiful landscape. The antiphon does not relate to the other as participating in it in the way that something participates in its formal or exemplary cause, for the antiphon is not an instance of what it announces, nor is the antiphon efficiently caused or teleologically ordered to the other.

Rather, it conveys something of, and so participates in, the atmosphere of the other. Beings and values appear, irradiate themselves, or give off a fragrance of themselves, and this self-revelation is, like all appearances, both a gift from or invention of God and something that arises from the being itself.

---

64 Von Hildebrand describes many such relationships; see n. 19 above on the qualitative analogy that objectively obtains among many appearances and underlies poetic metaphors. He here helps us understand how the poet, who sees these appearances, is, as Plato says, a genuine seer, revealing to us aspects of and relations in reality we might otherwise miss. This also helps us see the metaphysical grounding for how Aquinas can be right when he says that metaphor can help us better understand God; see Summa theologiae I, q. 1, a. 9.

65 Von Hildebrand, Nature of Love, 45, 302–05. The “antiphon” relation in von Hildebrand has something in common with the notion of horizon in Husserl and Heidegger: each thing is seen or known against a background, a “horizon,” which also prepares for and colors one’s perception of the thing. But an antiphon is not just a background; rather, the announcement relation is in the forefront of the experience here, and the relation is often between two substances or two values, whereas a horizon is a general field of phenomena, not a substance or value in its own right.

66 Von Hildebrand, Aesthetics 1:306, 317–18

67 Ibid. 1:85.

68 The structure of the reception of appearance (such that it is a principle) and appearance arising out of the being here seems similar to the structure of the act of existence (esse) on some Thomistic views, on which existence is both received from God and exercised and constituted by the other principles of the being—and so is in one way a principle of a being and in another way a property of that being. This way of understanding esse is worked out by John Capreolus,
appearances that directly characterize a being, beings can give rise to an “atmosphere.” which, as we have already seen, is a felt intimation of their style of acting and appearing, as in the overall feel of a culture or region. Like the appearance, this atmosphere arises out of the constituents of the being but also goes beyond them. The appearance and atmosphere of beings can join and act together, such that they constitute a new being, an aesthetic entity, which is made only of appearances and atmospheres, and so experientially seems, as von Hildebrand evocatively puts it, to “float” over its constituents—that is, over those features of beings that are more fundamental than their face and atmosphere. No particular act by those constituents brings the higher-order being into existence. Rather, this occurs through the confluence of many appearances and atmospheres, under the unifying power of a value, such as overall beauty.

Such a confluence requires that the appearances of aesthetic entities’ constituents be able to act such that they join together into a new individual, without those constituents ceasing to be the individuals that they are, and without those whole constituents becoming parts of the resulting aesthetic entity. It is just the appearances of the parts of a landscape that compose the landscape. This joining together happens under the unifying power of a value, many of which, as we have seen, are irradiations or messages from God. Values and beings reflect God in various ways, but the perception of values is not a natural perception of God in himself; rather, to say that something is a message from God is to say that it is as God wills it to be, and that it reflects him. This is similar to Aquinas’s account of creatures reflecting God. But von Hildebrand’s account of aesthetic entities shows us further aspects of how God is reflected and at work in the world; aesthetic entities do not just reflect some divine idea but can be themselves unified by values, which are appearances or irradiations of God.

We can better explain how appearances can come together to compose a new entity and how values, appearances, and irradiations descending from God unify those entities if we draw on another strand of the Aristotelian tradition, that of Greek Fathers like Gregory Palamas.
On this view, all beings as such have an essence in virtue of which they are what they fundamentally are, and activities (energeiai), which are the self-manifestation or beauty of that being. Two beings’ activities can join together (sun-energeia) such that each one shares in the activities of the other and even performs the activities of the other. For example, in being divinized, our activities join with God’s so that we perform one shared activity. The energeiai of a being (including of God) can be present and active in another being. This does not make the underlying essence of a being directly present to that other, and this does not entail that the energeiai are beings distinct from the being that is their source. One can also perceive the energeiai of a being without perceiving the being that is their source.\textsuperscript{72} Essence and energeiai are, following what should be now a familiar pattern, both principles of a being, explaining its fundamental structure, and properties of a being as such, belonging to it and characterizing it.

Some values, such as moral values and those beauties that are messages from God, can be understood as divine energeiai, God’s activities in the world, which are then taken up by, and (in accord with Thomism) imitated by creatures, but also (in accord with Palamas\textsuperscript{73}) acted through by creatures. Here the descending activity is more prominent than the activity of creatures. Creaturely energeiai can join with divine energeiai such that the former is more prominent, as in the phenomenon of the poetic. Appearances and atmospheres should be understood as different kinds of energeiai, which manifest their being to a greater or lesser extent.\textsuperscript{74} These can join with one another and be participated in by others (as on the antiphon relation), including under


\textsuperscript{73} Von Hildebrand provides us with phenomenological grounds for joining together aspects of the metaphysics of Aquinas and of Palamas, which have often been seen as at odds with one another, and thus this phenomenology may have ecumenical benefits as well.

\textsuperscript{74} Also included among energeiai of created substances on this metaphysical interpretation of von Hildebrand would be creaturely acts, creaturely works (including moral substances) of creatures, and those values that are grounded only in creatures, not in God, such as the values of elegance or of the comical. See von Hildebrand, Aesthetics 1:399–400, 405a.
the influence of divine *energeiai* (such as aesthetic values) and so constitute a new, aesthetic entity, like a landscape.

Intuiting the value of beauty or the poetic in these entities is not, as von Hildebrand says, a natural intuition of God, though it is a natural intimation of God, and so is an experience of God. But one can experience this intimation in itself, without consciously connecting it to God or seeing God in it, as those did who personified this message as a god present in a place. This is possible because of the basic structure of being through which one can experience the *energeia* of a being without directly experiencing that being. This account of the basic structure of being on which to be is to have *energeia* that can radiate beyond oneself and be joined in by others, which is perhaps most easily seen in aesthetic entities, is, finally, an excellent analysis of the “it loves” structure of beauty. To be beautiful is to perform activities whereby one draws others into union with those activities and thereby confers benefits on others; to take on disvalues that destroy one’s beauty is to be closed off from others, to cease to be able to perform unitive and benevolent *energeia*.

It is in considering aesthetic entities like landscapes and beautiful times of day that we come to see an important way in which von Hildebrand contributes to the scholastic and Aristotelian metaphysical tradition of working out the categories, principles, and properties of being. If von Hildebrand is right—and it has been beyond the scope of this interpretive paper to fully argue that he indeed is—then there are more ways that being is irreducible and more irreducible features of each being than many scholastics realized, although the Aristotelian tradition contains resources to make von Hildebrand’s contribution more understandable. Joining von Hildebrand’s account to that of the Aristotelian tradition allows us to see much better how his vision of beauty reveals both new kinds of being and myriad ways in which being is structured and bestows itself.

*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota*