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The first level of St. Bonaventure's transcendent Aesthetics: Contemplating God as the pure, primary Being

Abstract. St. Bonaventure asserts that man can ascend contemplatively to God through three phases. The first one is to contemplate God outside us by appreciating the corporeal things as vestiges of the deity: this is the “immanent” phase of Bonaventure’s Aesthetics, framed by the first and second stages of contemplation of God. The second phase consists of entering into our soul, as a spiritual image of God: this intermediate phase, in which we can contemplate God inside ourselves by his image in our soul, constitutes the Seraphic’s “introspective” Aesthetics, with the third and fourth stages of contemplation of God. In the third phase, man, transcending the vestiges in objects and the image of the deity in his soul, elevates himself to God, contemplating him as the spiritual and eternal First Principle: that third phase constitutes the Bonaventure’s “transcendent” Aesthetics, in which man can contemplate God considering his essential attributes (fifth stage) and his personal properties (sixth stage). The current article aims to highlight this fifth stage of Bonaventure’s Aesthetics. To achieve this goal, we analyze step by step the reasoning that, to prove his thesis, our author exposes in Chapter 5 of his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*.

Keywords: St. Bonaventure; Aesthetics; human soul; being; God.

Introduction

St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221–1274) produced a copious series of theological, exegetical, homiletic, ascetic, and mystical writings, for which he was recognized with the title of “Seraphic Doctor” (*Doctor Seraphicus*). His abundant theological and spiritual production has generated for more than seven centuries a large set of studies of specialists in the various disciplinary fields explored by the Seraphic.¹ Étienne Gilson considers the Seraphic as the genuine founder

¹ On the bibliography on St. Bonaventure, see *Obras de San Buenaventura. Edición bilingüe*, vol. I, 43–70; P. Maranesi, *Opere di Bonaventura*, 25–46; and I. León Sanz, *El arte creador*.

and protagonist of the Franciscan Scholastic (of Platonic-Augustinian root), in relative confrontation with the Dominican Scholastic,² whose leader is St. Thomas Aquinas.³

Now, within the dense production of philosophical writings of Bonaventure devoted to specific themes of theodicy, metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology, and ethics, it is important to highlight those related to Aesthetics, of which this philosopher proposes a relative systematization. This aesthetic system of the Seraphic, ignored by some historians of Aesthetics, such as B. Bosanquet⁴, R. Bayer,⁵ and S. Givone,⁶ has been studied to a greater or lesser extent by authors, such as É. Gilson,⁷ E. De Bruyne,⁸ W. Tatarkiewicz⁹, and J. Plazaola.¹⁰ A monographic treatment of the Aesthetics of St. Bonaventure has been undertaken by E. J. M. Spargo¹¹ and by I. León Sanz.¹²

1. Preface to the Aesthetics of St. Bonaventure

It is worth mentioning in passing –without stopping now to explain or substantiate them– four ontological-theological presuppositions that our author establishes as an essential foundation of his Philosophy in general and of his Aesthetics in particular. These presuppositions are:

² On the relative differences and the great similarities among the philosophic systems of St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas, see, for example, *La notion d'analogie*: S. Vanni-Rovighi, *La visión du monde*, 667–678); É. Gilson, *La philosophie de Saint Bonaventure*; J.A. Sequeira, *Vestigium and imago*; and R. J. Wozniak, *An Emerging Theology*, 415–434.

³ On the philosophical and theological doctrine of St. Tomas Aquinas, see, among others, B. Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford 1993; J.-P. Torrell, *Initiation à Saint Thomas d'Aquin*; E. Gilson, *Le Thomisme*; and P. Roszak & J. Vijgen (eds.), *Reading Sacred Scripture*.

⁴ B. Bosanquet, *Historia de la Estética*.

⁵ R. Bayer, *Historia de la Estética*.

⁶ S. Givone, *Historia de la Estética*.

⁷ É. Gilson, *La filosofía en la Edad Media*, 432–443.

⁸ E. De Bruyne, *L'Esthétique du Moyen Âge*, 101–109; y *Estudios de Estética medieval*. Vol. III. 201–240.

⁹ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia de la estética*. II, 244–252.

¹⁰ J. Plazaola, *Historia de la Estética*, 53.

¹¹ E.J.M. Spargo, *The Category of the Aesthetic*.

¹² I. León Sanz, *El arte creador*.

- 1) God created from nothingness the world and all existing beings, giving them being from non-being (nothingness).
- 2) Thus, the creatures of the world somehow reflect their Creator.
- 3) Therefore, creatures, each according to its nature –the purely material, the purely spiritual, and those that integrate the material and the spiritual– allow the man to access God's contemplation.
- 4) Philosophy is not independent of Theology but is essentially linked to it. The human mind fails to reach the truth without the enlightenment of God, the eternal Truth: human reason can function correctly and fully only when it relies on faith, on divine revelation.

Such presuppositions explain and support many theses on which our author sustains his Aesthetics. It is necessary to point out that Bonaventure scattered many aesthetic concepts and theories in numerous reflections left in some philosophical, theological, and ascetic writings, among them *Comentarii in quatuor libri Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*,¹³ and *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*.¹⁴ Now, he shaped his Aesthetics more methodically in *Breviloquium (ante 1257)*¹⁵ and, especially, in *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259).¹⁶ With all these ideas, the Seraphic builds a systematic Aesthetics, which, far from having a fully autonomous, self-sufficient validity, manifests itself as an effective way to ascend to God in a contemplative way.

Bonaventure structures his Aesthetics according to a scale in three progressive phases, based on another in a pyramid-shaped distribution. In his view, man can ascend contemplatively to God through a process of three consecutive steps –each subdivided into two successive stages– scilicet, through the material things, through the human soul, and through the First Principle. According to our author, even if all worldly beings are an adequate scale to ascend to God, each one facilitates this ascent in a very different way: material things are cor-

¹³ *Comentarii in quatuor libri Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (1250–1252). *Opera Omnia* (edita studio et cura PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura, Ad Claras Aquas, Quaracchi), 1882–1889, vol. I–IV.

¹⁴ *Collationes in Hexaëmeron sive Illuminationes Ecclesiae*. In *Obras de San Buenaventura*, Vol. III, 174–584.

¹⁵ *Breviloquium (ante 1257)*. In *Obras de San Buenaventura*, Vol. I, 156–458.

¹⁶ *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. In *Obras de San Buenaventura*, Vol. I, 474–534. In the following footnotes of this article we will quote this work with the abbreviation *Itin*, followed by the Chapter in Roman numeral, the heading in Arabic numeral, and the page of the aforementioned book *Obras de San Buenaventura* in which the quotation is published.

poreal and temporary *vestiges* of God, existing *outside* man; human souls are spiritual and everlasting *images* of God, living *inside* ourselves.¹⁷ Therefore, the ascent to God from the material world must be accomplished in three steps. The first one is to contemplate God *outside* us by appreciating the corporeal, temporary, and external beings as *vestiges* of the deity.¹⁸ This is the “material” or “immanent” phase of the Aesthetics of St. Bonaventure, framed by the first and second stages of contemplation of God. The second step consists –starting from the material, temporary and external vestiges– of entering into our soul, as a spiritual, “eviternal,” and inner *image* of God, to access the divine truth. This intermediate phase, in which we can contemplate God *inside* ourselves, by his *image* in our soul, as a mirror of the divine Trinity, constitutes the “introspective” phase of the Seraphic’s Aesthetics, with the third and fourth stage of contemplation of God.¹⁹ The third and conclusive phase consists of transcending the vestiges in the external objects and the image of the deity in our soul to elevate ourselves to God himself, contemplating him, knowing him, and revering him as the extremely spiritual, eternal, and superior *First Principle* of everything created and rejoicing to know God and to revere his divine Majesty.²⁰ This third phase constitutes the Bonaventurian “transcendent” Aesthetics, in which we can contemplate God directly considering his essential attributes (fifth step) and his personal properties (sixth step). Our author still imagines a seventh step or stage (the “ecstatic” phase), in which man reaches “mental excesses” through contemplative ecstasy before God.

It is quite impossible to explain in a short article all the many complex ideas and arguments that underlie the complex Bonaventurian Aesthetics. So in this article, we will restrict ourselves to study only the first stage of the third phase of this Aesthetics, the one we can call Bonaventure’s “transcendent” Aesthetics: it is about the fifth of the six steps set by the Seraphic to contemplatively ascend to God, that he sets forth in Chapter 5 of his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*.

¹⁷ *Itin*, I, 2: 480.

¹⁸ *Itin.*, I, 2: 480.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

2. The first step of Bonaventure's transcendent Aesthetics

The Seraphic starts from the assumption that we can contemplate God not only *outside* us, by considering things as his vestiges, and *inside* us when considering his image in our soul, but that we can also contemplate him *over* ourselves, through the light of eternal Truth imprinted in our mind,²¹ as our mind is informed immediately by that eternal Truth.²² Taking advantage of a poetic analogy with Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, our author says that those who performed the first way entered the temple's *atrium* before the tabernacle, and those who fulfilled the second mode entered the *sanctuary*; on the other hand, those who develop the third way enter with the High Priest (Christ) in the *Sancta Sanctorum*,²³ where they find two ways or stages of contemplating the invisible, eternal divine perfections that deal with God: the first way considers God's essential attributes. In contrast, the second considers his personal properties.²⁴

It is precisely this third and most perfect form of contemplation of God that Bonaventure develops in Chapters 5 and 6 of his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, according to a sequence corresponding to the fifth and sixth stage of the contemplative ascent of the soul to God. In Chapter 5, in which he exposes this fifth stage of the ascent to God speculating the divine unity through the primary being, the Seraphic states that, when entering to contemplate God upon ourselves in the light of eternal Truth, we can do so in two different, although successive and complementary ways: according to the first one our soul fixes foremost the aspect of being as such, affirming that *the one that is* –the *being (esse)* in itself and by itself²⁵– is the first name of God; in the second way our soul fixes the aspect in good,²⁶ affirming that *good* is God's first name.²⁷

²¹ On the concept "mind" in St. Bonaventure, see E. Cuttini, *Ritorno a Dio.*, and E. Mirri, *Mens*, 556–558.

²² *Itin*, V, 1: 516–517.

²³ *Ibidem*: 517.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ On the concept "being" (*esse*) in St. Bonaventure, see G. Santinello, *La nozione dell'essere*, 69–80, and O. Todisco, *Esse. Essentia*, 345–356.

²⁶ On the concept "good" in Bonaventure, see O. Todisco, *Bonum*, 221–227.

²⁷ *Itin*, V, 2: 517.

Hence the author deduces that whoever wants to contemplate God's invisible qualities concerning the unity of his essence must first fix the aspect in the absolute *being*: so he can realize that this absolute or pure being is in itself so true that it is impossible to think of its absence since the *purest being* only manifests itself as the complete absence of *non-being* (*nothingness*), just as *nothingness* only manifests itself as the absolute absence of *being*.²⁸ Expanding his metaphysical arguments, the Seraphic asserts that, just as nothingness completely lacks being and its properties, so also being has nothing of not-being, neither in act nor in potentiality.²⁹ As not-being is pure deprivation of being, it can only be conceived by the understanding through being. In contrast, being is not conceived by another being because everything that is understood can be understood only in three ways: as *not-being* (*non ens*), or as *potential being* (*ens in potentia*), or as *actual being* (*ens in actu*).³⁰ The author concludes that, if *not-being* can only be understood by *being* (*ens*), and *potential being* can only be understood by *actual being*; and, if *being* (*esse*) means the pure actuality itself of an existing (*ipsum purum actum entis*), it follows that *being* (*esse*) is the first thing that mind understands, and this *being* is *pure actuality* (*purus actus*).³¹ Bonaventure adds that this pure being which is apprehended as the first is not a particular *being*, which is a limited one for being mixed with potentiality, nor is it an analogous being, which completely lacks actuality, since it does not exist in any way. Then this pure and primordial being is the divine being.³²

Therefore, Bonaventure is surprised that someone could be so blind as not to consider the primordial being, without which it is impossible to know anything, something like when the eye, absorbed in differentiating colors, does not realize the light that allows seeing colors; the same happens when our mind, distracted in capturing the particular and universal beings, does not notice the primordial being, which is above all beings, even if it is the first to offer itself to the mind and what allows us to understand other beings.³³ According to the author, this is because the eye of our mind, accustomed to the darkness and ghosts of sensitive things, thinks it sees nothing where it is seeing the light of the Supreme Being

²⁸ *Itin*, V, 3: 518.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 518–519.

³² *Ibidem*, 519.

³³ *Itin*, V, 4: 519.

itself, without understanding that the same darkness that does not allow him to see the light is the supreme illumination (coming from God)³⁴ of our mind,³⁵ as when the eye that sees the pure light thinks it does not see anything.³⁶

Therefore, Bonaventure recommends looking closely at that very pure being, and then one will realize that this pure being cannot be conceived as received from another being, whence he will conceive it as absolutely first, since it cannot exist as coming from nothingness or another being, as it exists by itself.³⁷ Moreover, the author states that this primordial and pure *being* exists for itself and by itself, so it will manifest itself as completely devoid of *not-being*, and therefore as a being that never begins or never ends, for being eternal.³⁸ That pure being – the author goes further – will also manifest itself as a being whose essence consists in *being itself*, and, therefore, as a being not composed, but straightforward;³⁹ it will be shown as a being without potentiality – since every potentiality implies somehow *not-being*, in the sense of the potentiality of obtaining something that one does not have (not being) –, and therefore an extremely actual being, in the sense of being the pure actuality of being (pure being in actuality);⁴⁰ it will also be evidenced as a being devoid of any possible defect, and therefore as a perfect one, and as a being not susceptible of being pluralized in many beings, and therefore as an absolutely unique being.⁴¹ So the Seraphic concludes that “being, which is pure being, being simply (*simpliciter*) and absolute being, is a primary, eternal, very simple, very actual, very perfect and extremely unique being.”⁴²

Convinced that these perfections of the purest and primordial being are so true that whoever knows this being can no longer think anything contrary

³⁴ In his theory of the intellectual illumination of man by God, St. Bonaventure takes up the thesis of St. Augustine, Hugues of Saint-Victor and Alexander of Halles.

³⁵ On the subject of the illumination of the soul by God according to St. Bonaventure, see E. Bettoni, *La dottrina bonaventuriana* 139–158), M. Hurley, *Illumination According to St. Bonaventure*, 388–404), U. Uribe Escobar, *La iluminación según S. Buenaventura*, 24–57), and F. Gambetti, *Illuminatio*, 474–481.

³⁶ *Itin*, V, 4: 519–520.

³⁷ *Itin*, V, 5: 520.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

to any of them, as each perfection implies all others,⁴³ Bonaventure justifies through several sentences the essential attributes of this pure primordial being. In his opinion, as this pure being is simply *being*, so it is simply the first one; and because it is simply the first, it does not come from another being or from itself, so it is eternal.⁴⁴ And, “for being the first and eternal, it is not constituted of other elements, and so it is very simple; and, since it is the first, eternal and very simple, there is nothing in it of possibility or potentiality mixed with actuality, so it is the most actual.”⁴⁵ Hence the author infers that this very pure and primordial being,

since it is the first, eternal, very simple and the most actual, that is why it is very perfect, in such a way that it does not lack anything and nothing can be added to it; and for being the first, eternal, very simple, the most actual and perfect, so it is extremely unique.⁴⁶

Then he points out that what is affirmed by absolute overabundance must be affirmed over all other perfections, and what is absolutely affirmed by overabundance can only be suitable for an absolutely unique being.⁴⁷ Therefore, for the author, it is clear that “if God means and is designated as the primary, eternal, very simple, very actual and perfect being, it is impossible not only to conceive it as non-existent but also not to be a unique being.”⁴⁸ Bonaventure adds that, if the man considers all these ideas with a simple mind, he will somehow be flooded by the illumination of eternal light,⁴⁹ or, in other words, by the divine eternal Truth, God.

According to Seraphic’s reasoning, man will be amazed to perceive that this purest being in itself is at the same time the first and the absolutely last (*novissimum*), eternal and, at the same time, totally present, very simple and as large as possible (*maximum*), perfect and immense, absolutely unique and yet omnimode.⁵⁰ It is also clear to our author that,

⁴³ Ibidem, V, 6: 520–521.

⁴⁴ Ibidem: 521.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ *Itin*, V, 7: 521.

if one admires all these things with a pure mind, one will flood with greater light, seeing also that [this very pure being] is the absolutely ultimate being (*novissimum*), for being the first; and, as he is the first, he produces all things for his own sake; and, therefore, it is necessary that this first being be the last end, the beginning and the consummation, *the alpha and the omega*.⁵¹

That is why Bonaventure goes on saying that this pure and first being “is completely present because it is eternal; and, because it is eternal, it does not come from another being, nor does it cease to exist on its own, nor does it change from one state to another, so it has neither past nor future but is only present.”⁵² So, “it is the greatest possible being (*maximum*) because it is very simple; and, being very simple in essence, it must be maximum in its power, because the more united the power is, the more infinite it is.”⁵³ Consequently, this very pure and primordial being is entirely immutable because it is the most actual, and, as it is the most actual, it is a pure actuality, devoid of possibility, and so it does not acquire anything new or lose anything it has, and therefore it cannot change or evolve.⁵⁴ “Therefore it is immense, because it is the most perfect, and since it is the most perfect, one can not think of anything better, nobler, or more dignified, or, therefore, greater than it, and so such a being is immense.”⁵⁵ Thence it follows that it is omnimode because it is absolutely unique, and, so, as it is the absolutely unique being, it is the universal principle that produces all the multitude and diversity of beings, and, therefore, it is the universal, efficient cause, the exemplary cause and the final cause of everything, for its condition of being “the cause of existence, the reason for understanding and the order of living.”⁵⁶ Based on these reasonings, the Seraphic infers that this first and purest being

is omnimode, not as if it were the essence of all beings, but as the most excellent, the most universal and the most sufficient cause of all essences, a cause whose

⁵¹ Ibidem, 522.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, V, 7: 522.

power, being utterly united in essence, is hugely infinite and entirely multiple in its effectiveness.⁵⁷

Partially recapitulating his previous statements, Bonaventure concludes that “this very pure and absolute *being*, whose essence is simply *being*, is the first and the last one, so it is the origin of all beings and the end that consumes them.”⁵⁸ Using then a suggestive geometrical analogy, the Seraphic argues by saying that this purest and first being,

since it is eternal and completely present, contains and penetrates all durations, as if it were both its center and its circumference. And, because it is the simplest and maximum, it stands as a whole within all things, and as a whole outside all of them, so “it is the intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”⁵⁹

Then playing with a series of antithesis, to underline with greater emphasis the special nature of this first and purest being that God is, Bonaventure goes on saying that this being,

as it is very actual and completely immutable, “gives movement to all beings remaining itself stable”; and since it is very perfect and immense, it is within all beings, without being included in them, and it is also outside all beings, without being excluded from them, and it is above all beings, without being lifted, and it is below all beings, without being prostrated.⁶⁰

Not pleased with this first series of antinomies, the Seraphic then ventures with another set of eloquent antitheses for trying to reveal the ontological side of God as the Supreme Being, by asserting that this first and purest being that the human soul can contemplate upon entering into itself,

since it is entirely unique and omnimode, is “*all in all beings*,” even if these are many, and itself is but the unique being; and this, because, thanks to its simplicity, its serene truth and its sincerity, all virtue, all exemplariness, and all communicability

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 522–523.

⁵⁸ *Itin*, V, 8: 523.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

are found in it; and so "*all beings come from it and are for it, and exist in it,*" for being omnipotent, omniscient and absolutely good, and the one who can see it perfectly is a happy being.⁶¹

Conclusion

From the explanation of this first stage of the third phase of the contemplative ascent to God that St. Bonaventure believes possible by a willing soul, we can draw some brief conclusions.

The Seraphic finds his conceptual system on several ontological presuppositions that he considers evident, among which stands out that Philosophy and Theology are essentially inseparable: in his opinion, the first must take into account what the second dictates, as the human mind only reaches full truth thanks to the illumination of the divine eternal Truth (God), so that reason can only be right in its judgments based on faith (Revelation).

For Bonaventure, it is evident that, if the human mind enters into itself with attention and goodwill, it can speculate on God in his essential attributes: the first and last, pure, eternal, actual, immutable, perfect, absolutely unique and omnimode Being.

For the Seraphic, it is also indisputable that, for those same essential properties, God, the purest primordial Being, is the universal principle that created the being of all the multiple and diverse creatures from nothingness, and therefore is the efficient cause, the exemplary cause and the final cause of all of them.

Through this speculation that the human soul, entering into itself, makes about God as pure and primary Being, with the attributes above, Bonaventure establishes the first stage of the third phase of his Aesthetics, a step that we call his "transcendent Aesthetics," as the human soul transcends itself, seeing over itself the divine Being that transcends it.

⁶¹ Ibidem, 523–524.

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