

The Transcendentals

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Transcendentals are properties found in every being, including the Supreme Being — Yahweh (He Who Is): unity, truth, goodness, beauty. Why are they called “transcendentals”? Because they transcend, surpass or go beyond the categories (i.e., substance and the nine accidents): they are found in all kinds of being. Any being is one, true, good and beautiful.

But are transcendentals the same in all beings? No. Transcendentals, like being, are found in various degrees. All beings are one, true, good and beautiful, but not to the same degree. Let us examine each of these transcendentals one by one. The transcendentals, in fact, are other “names” for being. Even if these transcendentals have their respective senses/meanings, nevertheless they refer to the same thing. In reality, the transcendentals are interchangeable. What is one is also a being — *ens et unum convertuntur*. What is true is also a being — *ens et verum convertuntur*. What is good is also a being — *ens et bonum convertuntur*. What is beautiful is also a being — *ens et pulchrum convertuntur*. In reality they are the same. Yet, in our minds and in our language, they are not the same.

UNITY. When we say that a being is one, we mean that it is not divided. Division gives rise to multiplicity. If we take a piece of modelling clay and divide it into two, then it becomes two pieces of modelling clay; from one being, we get two beings. The degree of unity depends on the degree of being that a thing has. A rubber eraser has less unity than a caterpillar, a man has less than an angel. The Supreme Being is Supreme Unity. He is supremely indivisible.

Societies, including the family, are moral beings. As such, they also have what we can call a moral unity. It is clear that when a society loses its unity, it loses its being. When an association disbands, it ceases to exist. This is why unity is important in any society. Greater unity means greater being, greater closeness to the Supreme Being. Indeed, unity comes from Him.

TRUTH. Truth comes in various levels. The truth that we are talking about here is what we can call “ontological truth” (*ontos* is Greek for “being”), truth that is related to being. We are not talking here of “gnoseological truth” (agreement of what I think with the real situation) or “moral truth” (the agreement of my words or actions with what I actually think).

What is ontological truth? Ontological truth is that which can be known [that which is knowable or capable of being known]. That’s it? That’s it! This means that if I can know something, it exists in some way. We cannot know “nothing” or non-being, can we? But how about things in our thoughts or imagination. Are they beings? Yes, they are called “beings of reason” but common sense tells us that they are not as “real” as beings that actually exist, and hence are not as capable of being known as real things.

And how about God? We know that He is the Supreme Being. If so, He is also Supreme Truth. According to our definition, truth is that which can be known. So then it follows that God is the most knowable of all beings. How come we don’t know him so easily? Let me answer that with a question. Why can’t our eyes look at the sun directly? It is the most visible thing in the sky. But our eyes are not capable of looking at it directly. Same with our mind. It cannot grasp God directly not because he is unknowable but because of our mental limitation. Moreover, because God is Supreme Truth, Infinite Truth, there will never be a time in which we can say “I know Him fully well.” That’s why we need to discover him in prayer. That’s why heaven will be exciting, because heaven is a voyage of never-ending discovery.

GOODNESS. Just like truth, goodness also comes in various levels. Here we will not talk about moral goodness (the conformity of an action to a moral norm) but about ontological goodness. How is “good” defined? A good is something that can be desired. Yes, that’s the definition. A good is something that attracts us. And just as we cannot know non-being (recall that truth is what-can-be-known), we cannot desire non-being. We desire something that exists, or at least has the potency to exist. And just like the other transcendentals, there is more goodness where there is “more” being.

BEAUTY. St Thomas Aquinas defines beauty as *id quod visum placet* — that which pleases or gives delight when it is seen. But there is also a saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”: what pleases another may not please me. Beauty seems subjective, unlike being, one, truth, and goodness. In Aquinas’ definition, the word “*visum*” does not only refer to vision. We can include any kind of perception, especially hearing and understanding. For example, we can say that a symphony we are listening to is beautiful, or that an idea that a colleague proposes is beautiful. The word “*placet*” refers not only to a feeling of happiness, but also includes the delight of the will.

St Thomas (*S Th I*, q39, a8) gives three elements that make for beauty: integrity or completeness, harmony or proportion, and clarity. By “integrity” or “completeness,” he means that all the elements required are present. For example, a song where one line is missing, or a statue where one portion has been broken off, or a speech where the speaker makes no conclusion lacks beauty. By “harmony” or “proportion” he means that the parts are well put together, that they are given their due importance or place. Imagine, for example, a choir singing and the tenors are singing louder than the sopranos, altos and basses. We would not call that beautiful but awful. Finally, by “clarity,” St Thomas means that the thing can be seen, heard or understood clearly. For instance, if an idea is not communicated properly, then it would not be possible to appreciate it. If one cannot hear the words of the poem being recited, one cannot feel delight but pain.

Beauty may seem to be the last of the transcendentals. But, as Pope Benedict XVI had said, in places where people may not be interested in hearing about the truth, or in discussing the good, beauty may pave the way for the acceptance of both [good and truth].