

The “Infinity” of the Transcendental Properties of God

The “properties” of God, the so-called transcendental properties, which traditionally include *being*, *goodness* and *truth*, as well as others like *beauty*, are paradigm examples of properties that are not “measurable.” They are not properties that are amenable to extensive measure as that idea is understood in modern science (see notes on extensive measure). That is, they are not properties for which it is possible to define an experimental unit and an experimental operation of “adding” one unit to another (called *concatenation* in measure theory). The best that is available for “quantities” of masses like being, goodness, truth, and beauty is that they may be put in to an ordering of more to less without exact numerical evaluation. It follows that it is not possible to apply the modern mathematical notion of “the infinite” to such “quantities” because the modern notion presupposes that it is possible to count – apply numbers to – the quantities that are being measured. It also follows that the only sense in which the properties of God would be infinite in a sense that is appropriate to a non-numerical ordering. In God’s being, truth, goodness, etc. are infinite only in the sense that the quantity of the properties that God possesses is the greatest possible.

Below are internet texts explaining the transcendental properties. See also Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q1, Articles 1-3

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentals>

Transcendentals

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This article is about the transcendental properties of being, for other articles about transcendence; see [Transcendence \(disambiguation\)](#).

The **transcendentals** are the properties of [being](#). In typical accounts being is said to be One, Good and True (unum, bonum, verum). Additional properties such as Thing, Beautiful and Being (ens) are often posited as transcendentals but remain more disputed.

It was [Parmenides](#) who first explored the properties co-extensive with being. [Plato](#) then followed. However, it is in [Aristotle](#) we first see the term transcendentals used. They were so called as they transcended (*ὑπερβαίνειν* *huperbainein*) each of his ten [categories](#). Aristotle treat only of unity ("One") explicitly because it is the only transcendental intrinsically related to being, whereas truth and goodness relate to rational creatures.^[1]

[St. Thomas Aquinas](#) listed five transcendentals: res, unum, aliquid, bonum, verum.^[2] Saint Thomas does not list these as transcendentals, at least not in the cited source. He follows the typical account of the transcendentals consisting of the One, Good, and True.

The transcendentals are [ontologically](#) one, thus they are convertible. Where there is truth, there is beauty and goodness also.

In [Christian theology](#) the transcendentals are treated in relation to [Theology Proper](#), the doctrine of [God](#). The transcendentals, according to Christian doctrine, can be described as the ultimate desires of man. Man ultimately strives for perfection, which takes form through the desire for perfect attainment of the transcendentals. The [Catholic Church](#) teaches that God is Himself Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

Each transcends the limitations of place and time, and are rooted in being. The transcendentals are not contingent upon cultural diversity, religious doctrine, or personal ideologies, but are the objective features of all that is.

Beauty, Goodness, Truth

The three terms **Beauty, Goodness, Truth** form a separate subgroup within the general family of transcendentals and their development can be considered separately. Associated in particular with Platonism the ideas may have an earlier origin, appearing for example in the *Bhagavad Gita* to describe "words which are good and beautiful and true".

In Plato's *Dialogues* various words representing these highest forms or ideas are mentioned although nowhere in his works are beauty, goodness and truth put forward as a specific group. In several places he mentions beauty, goodness and justice; in other places he mentions justice, goodness and wisdom. In *Phaedrus* he talks of "the ability of the soul to soar up to heaven to behold beauty, wisdom, goodness and the like".^[3] In the *Symposium* we read the following passage that gives a clue as to their correct order:

"The true order of going is to use the beauties of the earth as steps along which to mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty: from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions until he arrives at the idea of absolute beauty".^[4]

Aristotle says less about beauty, goodness and truth than Plato. Like Plato he conceived of the possibility of structuring the intelligible world, but for Aristotle this resulted not in an eternal world of forms but in a set of universal categories by which all things could be predicated. Standing above or transcending the categories, as he noted in *Metaphysics*, stood such concepts as Being, Unity, Truth, Goodness and the rest.^[5]

Some of Aristotle's other ideas were however of importance to the later development of beauty, goodness and truth. Among these was the division of the sciences into three: the Productive, the Practical and the Theoretical.^[6] The productive concerned itself particularly in ancient Greece with the production of beautiful objects; the Practical concerned itself with ethics and the nature of the good; the Theoretical was concerned with knowledge and truth. In *Topics* Aristotle talks of

"the theoretical, the practical and the productive and each of these signifies a relative". ^[7] A different type of relation underlies each of the three and in *Metaphysics* he gives us a clue as to what these three types of relation might be:

"Things are called relative in three ways: as the double to the half; as that which acts to that which is acted upon; and as the knowable to knowledge". ^[8]

We can see here the beginning of a structure underlying beauty, goodness and truth based on different types of relation. Beauty can be seen in terms of mathematical relations, as the double to the half; Goodness in terms of the causal relations underlying action and conduct; and Truth in terms of those categorical relations underlying knowledge.

There was a resurgence of Platonism in the second century AD. Plotinus reduced Aristotle's ten categories to five and questioned whether "Beauty, Goodness and the Virtues should not be placed with these primary genera". ^[9] He concluded that both the categories and the transcendentals arise from Aristotle's three kinds of relation. These can be traced back to the earlier Eleatic dilemmas of Unity/Plurality, Motion/Rest and Likeness/Difference, a group of concepts which Plotinus called the "hearth of reality". ^[10]

At the beginning of the medieval period the philosophy of Aristotle was pre-eminent, kept alive in particular by the work of Arabic philosophers. The term "transcendental" was introduced into the west from Arabic philosophy by Philip the Chancellor in the early thirteenth century. ^[11] Thomas Aquinas reduced the number of transcendentals to three, namely *Unum, Bonum, Verum* the One, the Good and the True which he referred to as the *Ens Realissimum*, or the most real Being. ^[12] Bonaventure added the term *Pulchrum* or Beauty to the list. ^[13]

In the fifteenth century in Florence, it was Marsilio Ficino who was instrumental in reviving an interest in Plato and translating some of Plato's rediscovered texts. It is to Ficino that we can safely attribute the first definitive formulation of Beauty, Goodness and Truth, and this is found in his *Commentaries* on Plato's Dialogues. ^[14] The idea was not without influence and in Palladio's *I Quattro Libri*, to take an example from architecture, we find reference to the "true, good and beautiful method of building". ^[15]

In Italy in 1706, Muratori wrote on Beauty, Goodness and Truth. ^[16] In France Diderot, compared *Le Vrai, le Bon et le Beau* to Father, Son and Holy Ghost; and the German J.G.Sulzer in a supplement to Diderot's *Encyclopaedie* in 1776 translated the ideas in terms of the Aesthetic, the Moral and the Intellectual. ^[17]

The great philosophers of the eighteenth century enlightenment were well acquainted with the group of terms. Immanuel Kant's three great books: *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) *Critique of Practical Reason* (1786) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790) dealt with the problems of truth, goodness and beauty respectively. Truth was set out in terms of the categorical relations of predication and the syllogism; ^[18] Goodness was defined in terms of the causal or even hypothetical relations arising from one's actions; and Beauty in terms of the disjunctive relation between sense and color for example, or those relations found in the contemplation of form and proportion.

Hegel drawing on the transcendental dialectic of Kant, introduced a complex system of sets of three among which can be found the group: goodness, truth and beauty. ^[19] Later in the nineteenth century, in America, Charles Sanders Peirce, developed a Logic of Relatives and investigated many sets of threes corresponding in varying degrees to beauty, goodness and truth. In fact we might conclude that Plato's original sequence for the group of terms was reinforced when Peirce wrote that "Logic follows Ethics and both follow Aesthetics". ^[20]

There has been little development of these ideas in philosophy since the 19th Century. Indeed Nietzsche at the end of that Century rejected consideration of the group rather questionably as being "unworthy of a philosopher". ^[21]

References

1. [^] Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X.1-2. Benedict Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 175.
2. [^] Disputed Questions on Truth, q.1 a 1. See <http://www.op-stjoseph.org/Students/study/thomas/QDdeVer1.htm>
3. [^] *Phaedrus* 24
4. [^] *Symposium* 211
5. [^] *Aristotle* Ross D. (Methuen & Co Ltd, London 1923)
6. [^] *Topics* 145a cf *Metaphysics* 1025b
7. [^] *Topics* 144b
8. [^] *Metaphysics* 1020b
9. [^] *Enneads* VI.2.17
10. [^] *Enneads* V.1.4
11. [^] Eco U. *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* 1956 (tr. Bredin H., Radius 1988)
12. [^] Pegis A.C. *Introduction to St Thomas Aquinas* (Random House 1948) p.173
13. [^] *Op.cit.* Eco U. p.45
14. [^] Ficino *The Philebus Commentary* (tr. Allen M. University of California Press 1975) pp.78,110,238
15. [^] Palladio *The Four Books of Architecture* (Dover Publications, New York 1965) p.26
16. [^] Carrit E. *Philosophies of Beauty* (Clarendon press, Oxford, 1931) p.61
17. [^] Crocker L.G. *Two Diderot Studies* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1952) pp.99-101
18. [^] Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (tr. Smith N.K., Macmillan, London) pp.87,107,113
19. [^] Hegel *Logic* (tr. Wallace.W., Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975) pp.124ff
20. [^] Peirce *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Hartshorne C. & Weiss P. (eds) (Harvard University Press 1931) Vol I, p.311
21. [^] Beardsley M.C., *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (University of Alabama Press 1975) p.278

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<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10226a.htm>

(5) *Transcendental Properties of Being* in Aquinas

Equally extensive with the concept of Being are the concepts good, [true](#), one, and beautiful. Every being is good, [true](#), one, and beautiful, in the metaphysical sense, or as the scholastics expressed it, Being and Good are convertible, Being and True are convertible, etc. (*Bonum et ens convertuntur*, etc.). Goodness, in this sense, means the fullness of entity or perfection which belongs to each being in its own order of existence; [truth](#) means the correspondence of a thing to the [idea](#) of it, which exists in the Divine Mind; oneness means the lack of actual division, and beauty means that completeness, harmony or symmetry of essential nature which is only an aspect of [truth](#) and [goodness](#). These properties, [goodness](#), truth, oneness, and beauty, are called [transcendental](#), because they transcend, or exceed in extension, all the lower classes into which reality is divided.

<http://lyfaber.blogspot.com/2011/03/trancendentals.html>

Aquinas discusses the transcendentals in, for instance, *De veritate* I.1. According to him [Aquinas], the transcendentals are properties of being, or rather concepts about being, which are not contained in the concept of being as such but automatically follow upon it. They add nothing essential to the notion of being, because as soon as essential content is added to being you get something which falls under a genus and belongs to one of the ten categories. (God, of course, is not in a genus and does not belong to a category because his essence is not something other than his existence.) Rather they express non-essential aspects of being which serve either to delimit one being from another or to express how beings are ordered without saying anything about their essence. Such notions are the transcendental concepts *unus* (one), *res* (thing), *aliquid* (something), *verum* (true), and *bonum* (good). These concepts add to being the notions of unity, of being in oneself, of being as against other things, or being ordered to the intellect, and of being ordered to the will. All of these are simply different ways of apprehending being which are not contained directly in the notion of being itself, and so they are each coextensive with being and distinct from being only *secundum rationem*, only in our way of thinking about it and not because of any real difference between them.