

The Inside Story of "The 50 Most Beautiful"

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In May of 2001, the editors of *People* magazine released their annual special issue of "The 50 Most Beautiful People in the World." In the hard copy and its online version, promoters of the event promised their readers "a virtual feast for the senses." Admittedly, they pulled out all the stops with photos of the winner celebrities, a quiz to determine one's own "beauty personality," the "10 Most Beautiful People" chosen by online-only pollsters, and an online discussion of the contest results. It is evident that the magazine's editorial board, in what amounts to a stroke of marketing genius, thoroughly understands the substantial returns on an annual project that capitalizes on one of the most enduring of human past-times: the quest for beauty and the beautiful.

Assessing our culture's mainstream notion of beauty means wading through a good deal of untutored sentiment and notoriously muddled logic. However, not everything of current populist aesthetics is wrongheaded. Take, for example, the congruity—as welcome as it is unexpected—between the medieval aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas and the minority populist view of human beauty that surfaced in the aftermath of the *People* contest.

A philosophical affinity of this sort, though infrequent, is not completely anomalous. After all, Aquinas's theory of aesthetics is a watershed in classical models of art and beauty. As such, its philosophical ballast has the inherent capacity to inform, correct, and enlarge the intuitive aesthetic sense of any culture in any age. Five of the minority insights garnered from

"The 50 Most Beautiful" discussion are not only commensurate with Aquinas's aesthetics but, with proper fertilization and pruning, grow to their native depth and height. **First, human beauty includes but extends beyond bodily beauty.** The judgment that human beauty exceeds the physical and external avoids the shortsightedness of conventional wisdom on the subject. Beauty gurus of our age are afflicted with a proverbial myopia that routinely confuses the part (physical beauty) for the whole (personal beauty). Admittedly, the majority of the online participants who attempt to answer the question posed by *People*, "What features really make celebrities beautiful?" fail to see beyond the physical and external. However, it is heartening to review the handful of responses that are right on the mark.

One person, for example, notes that inner beauty makes for outer beauty and usually presents itself in expressive people—in their eyes, their smile and the way they carry themselves. Another participant comments that a particular celebrity's wide, hazel and dark brown eyes serve to remind her of the truth behind the adage that one's eyes are the windows to one's soul. In the same vein, two others describe the warm, expressive eyes of a "50 Most Beautiful" celebrity as nothing less than "soulful." Yet another participant contends that the classic beauty of a favorite actress is essentially heightened by a calm and tender spirit. What many imply in their most frequently cited requisites of physical beauty—nice eyes, great smile, and a toned body—is the recognition that when these external features are genuinely natural (as opposed to artificially fabricated), they are intimately and mysteriously connected to the interior of the person possessing them.

Aquinas's aesthetics and anthropology corroborate the truth of this initial judgment. Invariably, Aquinas turns to the human body when he wants to explain how beauty on a metaphysical, transcendental level applies to the concrete or particular. Since, for Aquinas, "the form of a thing is its beauty," the human person—who presents *self* through the body—is the most beautiful of created forms. That is to say, the human being is the most complete of organisms with a complex hierarchical system of physical and spiritual powers—vegetative, sensate, affective and intellectual. For optimal natural functioning, the whole human being is meant to have what Aquinas calls "the harmony of its parts;" the entire human being is to be in proper proportion with all its components subordinated to a common good.

The beauty of the human person, Aquinas says, follows from the beauty of the body together with the "brightness of the soul." Human beauty arises from the harmony of the whole. When a particular human being's nature is able to manifest itself naturally—that is, the person is free from physical deformity due to accident or injury and from spiritual deformity due to sin—it is beautiful. This is true on a physical level where beauty is a manifestation of two underlying bodily qualities: good health and good habits of movement. Persons are physically beautiful when, first, they have good health, or as Aquinas calls it, a "harmony of organs" where the bodily organs and systems function harmoniously. Second, human bodies are beautiful when they are marked by good habits of movement, or when they are athletic, that is, possessing proportionate limbs that are trained to move effortlessly and in ways appropriate to their gender. A human being has physical beauty, Aquinas concludes, "because of a fitting proportion of members in size and position and because he possesses a brilliant or bright color."

But beautiful facial expressions and bodily movements are also shaped by an inner emotional order and harmony where elemental human desires and passions—love and hate, hope

and despair—have been brought into accord with reason. In addition, the beauty of a well-trained mind enlivens a person's features. Haven't we all witnessed a person's face and body come alive and energize in the throes of an intelligent conversation? And human goodness, the inner moral beauty that springs from the virtues of an ordered mind, will, and affections, expresses itself in the unforgettable radiance of a kindly face and noble body given over to words and deeds of love and justice. As Aquinas explains, such words and deeds are radiant because through them "shines the light of reason." In short, the more thoroughly we understand the substantial unity of the human being, an embodied spirit whose body reveals the person, the better we are able to appreciate why human beauty includes but cannot be limited to external comeliness.

Second, the spiritual component of human beauty is primary. *People* editors, in a sort of indirect-direct way, underscore the primacy of inner beauty. They introduce their beauty-personality quiz with the leading question, "Is your radiance external, polished by your exquisite wardrobe and makeup abilities? Or is it internal, a glowing reflection of your kind heart and witty mind?"

None of the online participants come that close to straightforwardly arguing for the preeminence of inner beauty. However, with the recognition that physical beauty divorced from an interior, spiritual counterpart always disappoints, a significant number do make that judgment indirectly. One participant, for example, recounts his disenchantment the day he met his favorite "Most Beautiful" celebrity on campus, *sans* makeup and designer clothes, looking very much "like a street bum." What the observer took to be inner beauty manifesting itself externally turned out to be a contrived menagerie of professionally-applied makeup and flattering choices in wardrobe and accessories. Commenting on the photo of one of the "Most Beautiful" females, another chat room critic opines, "her face just doesn't look real." A male celeb comes in for a similar criticism.

Since his beautiful body is wedded to a “crummy personality,” the discussant concludes that he is, for that reason, “less attractive” overall. Finally, another of the chat room pundits, in a disgusted huff, declares that many of the “so-called most beautiful” are a laughable contradiction and a “sham.”

Aquinas’s theory of human psychology helps us understand the foundational wisdom of such populist observations, and it explains why the online respondents recognize the fraudulency of celebrities’ “beauty” that has no spiritual correlate. Thomas insists that “beauty of soul is a quality even as beauty of body.” Hence, the unity of the human being and the beauty of its finely calibrated form requires that, when all is in accord with nature, the body serves the soul; the material component of the person is disposed toward the end or purpose of the spiritual part, that is, reason or intelligent freedom. Hence, Aquinas teaches that individual organs and powers of the body are hierarchized toward the concurrent, harmonious functioning of the body as a whole; the entire body is subordinate to the soul; the body-soul person is subordinate to reason, and the person of reason, that is, the person who is intelligently free, is subordinate to God. Short of such personal integrity and harmony, Aquinas counsels, each of us is no better than the unfaithful spouse, Israel, who “with a mere outward and superficial beauty” remained “polluted in her heart.”

“However much unity the human creature has,” Aquinas teaches, he has “from the power of beauty.” Personal or human beauty, the beauty of the human being as a whole, arises, then, from the unity of body and soul with its implied harmonious, integrated, and proportional functioning. A human being’s beauty has splendor and radiance when the person freely participates in her “spiritual beauty,” in the beauty of her soul. In sum, the truth and goodness of the person’s interior life, the fullness of its being, is writ large on the person’s bodily and facial features.

Third, human beauty attracts, fascinates, and pleases its observer. According to an online contributor, the mysterious quality of the beauty of a certain female superstar demands another’s attention and inextricably draws the observer toward that person. Another participant admits that the facial beauty of one “star” invites the observer to “look and look” without tiring or without exhausting that fascinating “something”—call it radiance—that “makes a celebrity beautiful.” Almost all participants agree that the sight of a beautiful human being gives pleasure and evokes wonder in the observer.

Such insights about the fascinating and captivating character of the beautiful make sense, first, against the backdrop of Aquinas’s insistence that *omnis homo amat pulchrum* (everyone loves the beautiful) and, second, against his definition of beauty, [*p*]ulchra . . . dicuntur quae visa placent (beautiful things are said to be those that please [us] when seen [visa]). The notion of *visa*—an aesthetic way of seeing—interjects into the discussion of beauty the important character of a knowing subject. The beautiful, Aquinas says, “is something pleasant to apprehend.” The apprehension of beauty does not exist until an observer sees another’s beauty, that is, intellectually intuit its truth and goodness. Seeing in this sense involves a *contemplative looking* at the person of beauty until the observer understands the nature of the beautiful one. And, understanding that, the appreciator delights in the intense degree of perfection shining through the person’s body. As Aquinas helps us see, “the contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the beginning of spiritual love.”

Aquinas enumerates the three essential characteristics of beauty. “For beauty includes three conditions, integrity or perfection . . . , due proportion or harmony, and lastly, brightness or clarity” Human beings find pleasure in seeing other human beings in proportion to their integrity, harmony, and clarity. Thus, the one who looks contemplatively at the beauty of another takes great delight, first, in the clarity

of the other's human beauty, in the radiant power that transfuses the body and reveals the hidden mystery of the person. Second, the one who looks long and lovingly at the beauty of another rejoices in the proportion or consonance of a multi-dimensioned person who is harmoniously dedicated to the pursuit of truth and goodness. Third, the one who aesthetically looks at or sees the beauty of another human being is elated by the body-soul integrity of the other, by the other's psycho-somatic perfection.

Fourth, Hollywoodesque "beauty" is very often a poisonous myth rife with disproportion, disintegration, and darkness. One online participant adamantly rejects what she calls Hollywood's rancid brand of beauty with its fixation on "breasts that are out of proportion to the rest of the body" and on lips so large that they are now "competing with oversized breasts." Such facial and bodily exaggerations, the person insists, are "very ugly." Another chat-room member acknowledges that the disproportionate results make the "idea of inflating the lips and breasts just gross." One of the celebrities, opines a discussant, is "uninteresting" despite her near flawless beauty. It's as if her exquisite face is a mask, and there's no one home underneath it all. Other respondents register disgust with a movie industry that promotes forms of "beauty" that encourage paranoid obsessions and bad moral and physical health. In the entertainment industry's obsession for body beautiful, it is axiomatic for the sexes to "lust after" each other and then to view each other as "trophies" to be discarded when someone younger and fresher comes along. It is notoriously pornographic, declares another participant, for Hollywood celebrities to worship at the altar of anorexic-thin female figures and muscle-bound male torsos and then to commercially package the body beautiful as an invitation to sex-for-pleasure-only.

Aquinas's theory of human nature helps to contextualize the responses of those who recoil at disproportionate breasts, lips and body weight. Each part of the body is beautiful insofar as it functions properly for the sake of the entire body; the whole body is beautiful insofar as all of its parts are functioning concurrently in a way

that is adequate to the spiritual pursuit of the true and the good. So, Aquinas explains, since "[t]he beauty of the body consists in a man having his bodily limbs well proportioned," there would be ugliness (lack of beauty) on a bodily level if the person were missing an arm or a leg or had a defective limb. In such cases, there is a "defect of form" because bodily parts are not in proper proportion to the whole bodily form. Reasoning in a similar manner, Aquinas insists that the harmony of the whole body is damaged if a person were to spend an inordinate amount of time making a single part of the body beautiful. This practice would make for a lack of symmetry, and a lack of symmetry makes for an ugly rather than a beautiful body.

Aquinas describes a crippled or maimed person's body as ugly in objective terms of bodily symmetry, but his vision of human beauty forbids us to stop there, as Hollywood beauty gurus might. For, if crippled persons, for example, were to demonstrate courage and serenity in the midst of their disabilities, their enhanced inner beauty, like that of the holy martyrs, would leave its transforming effects on their entire person, including their bodies.

For an antidote to Hollywood's deformed view of the body as a sex object, we need to appreciate Aquinas's understanding of man's dignity. He argues that the very capacity for aesthetic pleasure is indicative of the dignity of the human being. "Whereas the other animals take delight in the things of sense only as ordered to food and sex, man alone takes pleasure in the beauty of sensible things for its own sake." The important contrast, Aquinas teaches, is this: While animals use their senses only for bodily pleasure, the human being has the capacity to use his senses for knowledge. Several important deductions follow: Only the human person is capable of taking pleasure at the knowledge of beauty; only the human person takes pleasure in the beauty of a concrete human body for its own sake; only humans are capable of respecting rather than possessing another beautiful human being. In sum, only human beings who acknowledge their own and others' dignity will be free from the degradation and dehumanization of animal-like reactions toward

their own body and that of others. Intemperance toward sex, food, or drink is disgraceful, Aquinas says, "because it is most repugnant to men's clarity or beauty," that is, it "dims the light of reason from which all the clarity and beauty of virtue arises."

Fifth, no one human being is perfectly beautiful. In one way or another, the online participants recognize that, while the "Most Beautiful" celebrities are always trying to enhance their own beauty, they only manage to approximate perfect bodily beauty. So, in the end, the most we can say is that each of us is physically beautiful in his or her own way; each of us is only more or less beautiful.

Aquinas's theology of the Trinity helps to uncover some critical suppositions of this last popular insight. First, there is an objective ideal of personal beauty. Or, more to the point, there is a body/soul Person who is perfectly beautiful, and who is the ideal to which all humans strive whether knowingly or unknowingly. Jesus Christ, Son of God, is the "express Image of his [all-Beautiful] Father" and "has in Himself truly and perfectly the nature of the Father." As the perfect manifestation of the light and splendor of the Father, Jesus is perfect Beauty, the fullness of Divine Beauty's integrity, proportion, and light. Even in the place of his wounds, the crucified, risen Christ, victor over suffering and death, manifests "a special beauty." Second, since human beings are created in the image of the all-Beautiful God, each human person participates in Divine Beauty. In Aquinas's view of humanity, each person is "a kind of irradiation coming from the divine brilliance." Such participation causes the universal human fascination with beauty and the enduring desire to be more beautiful. Since all human beings are captivated with, and desire ever more, beauty, we are continuously reminded that our beginning and end, our source and fullness of good, is nothing less than ecstatic union with the infinitely Beautiful God. On the journey we call life, God ineluctably draws us, through the radiant power of Incarnate Beauty, ever more deeply into the fullness of his Divine Being.

Therefore, the question, posed by the editors of *People* magazine—What features really make human beings beautiful?—has an answer that defies mere human understanding. In the vision of Aquinas, the features that make real, live, flesh-and-blood human beings beautiful are those radiating from the Person and Nature of God-made-man.