ABSTRACT
THEO-DRAMATIC ETHICS: A BALTHASARIAN APPROACH TO MORAL FORMATION

Andrew J. Kuzma, B.A., M.A.R.
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What role does beauty play in our moral formation? What difference does the perception of beauty make to the way we live our lives? In order to answer these questions, I look to the twentieth-century Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Relatively little has been written about Balthasar’s ethics. He is, perhaps, best known for his retrieval of beauty as a transcendental property of being. Balthasar, though, never set down an extended account of his ethics or moral theology. While he had no explicit ethic, he certainly thought that his theology could be lived. The Theo-Drama, for instance, discusses the implications that the perception of beauty has for Christian life.

I do not intend to present “Balthasar’s ethics.” Instead I will offer a “Balthasarian ethic.” Drawing from his theological aesthetics and dramatics, I will outline the morality implicit in his theology: a Balthasarian theo-dramatic ethics. We can see this kind of ethic at work, I contend, in some of Balthasar’s lesser-known works on Christian life. I will then go beyond Balthasar to consider how we might put this moral formation into practice in our treatment of non-human animals and in the possibility of practicing Christian pacifism in the nation-state.

This dissertation points to the convergence of method and performance. The method of theo-dramatic ethics can never be distilled to a set of abstract rules or terms. We can do so artificially in order to better express what makes performances of the good beautiful. But it is the performance, not the method, of theo-dramatic ethics that we find enrapturing. Being formed by performances of beauty better enables us to recognize and express new forms of beauty. My thesis is that recognizing beauty as the foundation of moral formation affirms the formational power of the Christian tradition as well as that of new experiences and practices because in both cases we are responding to beauty.