

Theological Aesthetics and Revelatory Tension

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Abstract

Much contemporary theological aesthetics treats beauty as straightforward. This is, however, to neglect tensions in our experience and understanding of beauty. The issue of these tensions arises in the examination of the role of the imagination in the epistemology of beauty, as well as in the examination of the relationships between beauty and truth, and beauty and goodness. The treatment of these relationships in the work of Kant and Maritain is assessed. The aesthetics of Kant and Maritain are classic attempts to address and even overcome the tensions in these relationships, but on close examination fail to do so. That writers whose works are often cited in favour of clear-cut positions do not resolve these tensions, and that questions raised by these issues fail to go away, supports the view that these tensions are inherent in our experience and understanding of beauty. If so, and if beauty is understood as in some way revelatory of the divine, it follows that there are tensions inherent in our experience and understanding of beauty as revelatory. Such tensions need to be incorporated into theological aesthetics.

Keywords

theological aesthetics, beauty, goodness, truth

Christian reflection on beauty, after centuries of relative neglect, is undergoing a renaissance.¹ For Hans Urs von Balthasar this

¹ E.g. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark) in English translation in seven volumes; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action, Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980); Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics, A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990); Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty, An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ The Form of Beauty, A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); John Seward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997); Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics, God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite, The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

neglect arose from a devaluing of the contemplative dimension in religious practice and thought, resulting in a forgetfulness of the relationship between beauty and revelation.² Similar fluctuations in the attention given to beauty have also occurred in philosophical aesthetics and artistic practice. From being accorded centrality in aesthetics from classical times, the questioning of the nature and role of beauty since the Enlightenment has gradually led to beauty being frequently viewed as inimical or inessential to aesthetics and the aims of art.³ Artistic movements such as Dada deliberately avoided creating works that could be considered beautiful; and much Pop Art and contemporary conceptual art treat beauty as irrelevant. A reasonable inference to draw from these changes in the fortunes of beauty is that there is something not wholly straightforward in our experience and understanding of beauty. Yet much recent theological aesthetics acts as though unaware of this possibility, treating beauty as clear-cut and making large claims about it, without consideration of the issues that have motivated the questioning of beauty. In so doing, theological aesthetics often consciously reacts against a tradition that has admittedly played a major role in bringing about the present situation. However, it thereby closes itself off from what may be insightful and legitimate within much of the aesthetics of the last three hundred years.

Consider the following passage from the first volume of Hans Urs von Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord*:

The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating. The appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, *and* it is a real pointing beyond itself to the depths.⁴

For Balthasar the experience of beauty involves a transcending of what is given to our senses to the cognition of depths whose foundations are truth and goodness both in the object of beauty and beyond it. A similar view is stated by Richard Viladesau

² See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I, Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), pp. 17–127.

³ See Arthur C Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); and *The Abuse of Beauty, Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2003). Important recent attempts to restore beauty to its former place in aesthetics include: Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (New York: Adams, Banister, Cox, 1984); and Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics I, Seeing the Form*, p. 118. Italics not added.

in *Theological Aesthetics, God in Imagination, Beauty and Art*, that the experience of beauty is a well-founded religious experience:

To experience beauty is to experience a deep-seated “yes” to being – even in its finitude and its moments of tragedy; and such an affirmation is possible only if being is grounded, borne by a Reality that is absolute in value and meaning. In short, the experience of finite beauty in a spiritual being implies the unavoidable (although perhaps thematically unconscious) co-affirmation of an infinite Beauty: the reality that we call God.⁵

What is striking about such substantial claims, and the wider treatments of beauty by these authors, is how far they depart from the concerns of aesthetics since the Enlightenment, in particular the absence of any questioning of the ontological and cognitive status of beauty. Balthasar and Viladesau simply assume the validity of the move from the object to “the depths” of being or to a profound reality underlying being, a necessary step for the move from the worldly to the divine. However, concerns about this process of moving from worldly reality to God need not be viewed as typical of modernist-inspired scepticism, but are present in classical theism. There must, at the very least, be limits: for the imagination to claim that it can by its own powers access the divine is for it to overreach itself and to demonstrate that it is misled. Balthasar and Viladesau are both adamant that there is an infinite difference between God and the created order.⁶ As a transcendental (or ontological) quality of being, beauty reveals the truth and goodness of being, revealing in created forms the presence of the creator God, Who is the ultimate source of beauty, truth and goodness.⁷ This allows for analogies between worldly beauty and divine beauty (or glory), that feature prominently in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics; and for the creation of an anthropology incorporating openness to the divine through receptivity to beauty, which is Viladesau’s aim. Both theologians assert constraints, but neither seriously questions beauty as revelatory. This confidence is not unique to them, and is found in much of the literature of theological aesthetics.⁸

⁵ Richard Viladesau, *op.cit.*, p. 149.

⁶ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics I, Seeing the Form*, pp. 39–41 and Richard Viladesau, *op.cit.*, pp. 39–71.

⁷ For a useful presentation of Balthasar’s understanding of the analogy of being, see: Aidan Nichols OP, *The Word Has Been Abroad, A Guide Through Balthasar’s Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. xiii–xiv, xix.

⁸ E.g. Francesca Aran Murphy, *op.cit.*; Patrick Sherry *op.cit.*; David Bentley Hart, *op.cit.* Of these three writers, Patrick Sherry acknowledges the complexity of our experience and understanding of beauty most. He details both objectivist and subjectivist accounts of beauty, only to assert a strongly realist ontology of beauty mainly on theological grounds (*op.cit.* pp. 43–49). Ambiguities in our experience and understanding of beauty are thereby precluded from playing a positive role in his theological aesthetics.

However, important questions regarding beauty as revelatory arise in even the most cursory examination of aesthetic experience. On a fairly standard view, we experience objects through our senses, and through the use of the imagination we bring perceptions to mind and combine them. With the additional aid of the understanding, we conceive the existence of a world containing those objects, a reality whose presence goes beyond the senses at any particular time. Because this world then forms part of our perspective, through the imagination our current perceptions are imbued with past perceptions. To use an example of John McDowell, we do not simply have the sensation of ‘green’, but, implicitly invoking past perceptions, that a particular object *is* green.⁹ We may accept that this transcending of the limits of actual perceptions is cognitively legitimate. Yet, this still leaves the following question: Given the tendency of the imagination to transcend, is the transcending of the object as mere object, as object of perception of primary and secondary qualities, words and sounds,¹⁰ to object as disclosing the depths of reality, cognitively legitimate? Might it not be, as Ronald Hepburn says: “Imagination prompts, lures, urges; but can do no more”?¹¹ And even if there is revelation of depths in the experience of beauty, imagination may still mislead. At its worst the imagination can seduce, making what is false attractive and convincing; and what is corrupt and base alluring.¹²

It could, therefore, be claimed that our experience and understanding of beauty as revelatory is more ambiguous and complex. In the light of the surely reasonable, even obvious, concerns regarding the legitimacy of cognitive and ontological claims founded on beauty and imagination, might there not be a tension in our experience of beauty as revelatory and our understanding of that experience? This tension would be due to the simultaneous plausibility and appeal of two opposing positions: beauty as revelatory of depths of reality and beauty as non-revelatory of depths of reality. This ‘revelatory

⁹ John McDowell, ‘Aesthetic Value, Objectivity and the Fabric of the World’, in John McDowell, *Mind Value and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 122–126; first published in Eva Schaper, *Pleasure, Preference and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ What constitutes the aesthetic object is an important question in its own right, and is not discussed here.

¹¹ Ronald W Hepburn, ‘Religious Imagination’, in *The Reach of the Aesthetic, Collected essays on art and nature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 80. I am indebted to his insights, especially regarding the imagination, in the essay just mentioned and in the essay, ‘Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions’, in the same volume, pp. 96–112.

¹² There is an ongoing debate on the relationship between acts of violence and films that portray such behaviour in an attractive light. There are also many examples of so-called “high art” that are morally problematic, such as films by Leni Riefenstahl and D.W. Griffiths, and novels by the Marquis de Sade and Henry Miller. Perhaps the most problematic works of art from a moral perspective are not those usually cited; less those works that espouse what is immoral, than those works that dull our moral sensibilities.

tension' would occur where concerns regarding the cognitive and ontological status of any putative revelation of depths become integrated into the experience of beauty as revelatory. Such concerns might be subsequent to any initial experience of beauty, perhaps in the form of doubts regarding the presence, degree or nature of the putative revelation, arising from reflection upon the experience, and being incorporated into later experiences. An object of beauty may transport the mind of the perceiver, resulting in a powerful experience suggestive of the divine; but why should that particular "exalted" experience be privileged, isolated from the wider, perhaps plainer, experiences of the object both before and afterwards?

These questions regarding revelatory tension can be pursued further. Consider Hans Urs von Balthasar's evaluation of Kant's treatment of beauty:

Pure beauty is *formal* in a double sense here: in so far as it ignores the link between the true and the good (which is unheard-of with respect to the classical, Christian tradition), in order to distil in 'pure' form the concept of the beautiful, and in so far as it correspondingly 'abstracts' (this word is Kant's own) from every object and every ethical interest, in order to enjoy the form, as unrelated and possessing meaning only within itself, with the pure formal harmony of our cognitive powers. . . Therefore beauty, whose essence is the pure interrelationship of the powers of the subject (an interrelationship which prescind from the true and the good), possesses exactly the same indefinite character of the finite in itself which, when the rigour of the ethical imperative wanes and is no longer seen, can at some point lead to the pure play of finite existence in nothingness with itself, a play which is not only disinterested and without purpose (*l'art pour l'art*) but also ultimately lacking in meaning.¹³

For Balthasar a necessary condition for beauty as revelatory of depths of reality, leading us to God, is that beauty be radiant of truth and goodness. Since it is necessary that beauty be true, it must be a real property of the object.¹⁴ As beauty resides in the object, primacy is given to the object, and not to the state of the perceiving subject. Similarly, if beauty is revelatory, it is also necessary that beauty manifest goodness. Kant's aesthetic philosophy is judged negatively because it arrives at the conclusion that aesthetic judgments are grounded in subjective response and that the aesthetic has

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics V, The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, C.R.V., John Saward and Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 506–7. Italics not added. For an even more forthright critique of Kant, closely following that of Balthasar, see Francesca Aran Murphy, *op.cit.*, pp. 28–29.

¹⁴ Balthasar understands revelation as objective, in the sense of revelation of some reality whose existence and nature is not dependent on the one experiencing the revelation. This realist view of revelation is assumed throughout the article.

autonomy with regard to the moral. This separates beauty from what is true and from ethical concerns, resulting in aesthetic formalism, “art for art’s sake,” beauty as morally neutral and revelatory of nothing. As well as providing a highly debatable interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics, this assessment makes many assumptions and avoids some obvious questions. Are aesthetic judgements grounded in ontologically real properties of the object or in subjective experience, and what can we know of these? That we differ in our aesthetic judgements to the extent we do supports belief in subjectivism; that we act as though there is something worthy of being contested supports belief in objectivism. Similarly, are aesthetic judgements independent of moral judgements? If not, then how are they related? That we consider works of art to help cultivate certain feelings and perspectives, to enhance life and reflect our deepest concerns, supports belief in an non-accidental overlapping of beauty and goodness; that we know or can readily conceive of individuals of low moral standards possessed of aesthetic sensibilities, and consider certain works of dubious morality to be objects of great beauty, supports belief in the autonomy of beauty and goodness. That these questions arise so frequently and refuse to go away, and that these opposing positions regarding the relationships between beauty and truth, and beauty and goodness, present themselves so readily, suggests the simultaneous plausibility and appeal of two opposing positions: beauty as radiant of truth and goodness, and beauty as not radiant of truth and goodness.

In the rest of this article I argue that these tensions are indeed present in our experience and understanding of beauty. If we accept that beauty as radiant of truth and goodness is a necessary condition for beauty as revelatory, and if we accept that there are tensions inherent in our experience and understanding of the relationships of beauty and truth, and beauty and goodness, then it follows that there are also tensions inherent in our experience and understanding of beauty as revelatory. To argue for this view of revelatory tension, by no means exhaustively, I examine in turn the relationships between beauty and truth, and beauty and goodness, in the work of two significant writers on aesthetics, Immanuel Kant and Jacques Maritain. They are typical of writers on aesthetics since the Enlightenment in that they both address issues raised by these relationships. Their works are classic statements of paradigmatic positions in aesthetics, as well as offering strong contrast, taking in many respects very different positions to each other. Maritain’s aesthetics are close to those of writers such as Balthasar and Viladesau; whilst those of Kant espouse positions that in many respects they wish to counter. In examining their work I argue that neither Kant nor Maritain resolve the tensions in our experience and understanding of the relationships between beauty and truth, and beauty and goodness. That writers whose works are often cited in defence of clear-cut positions on these relationships do

not on close examination resolve the tensions supports the view that there are tensions inherent in beauty as revelatory, something that no theological aesthetics should ignore.

Throughout the article the discussion focuses on aesthetic beauty, beauty as experienced, rather than on transcendental beauty, beauty understood in ontological terms. It is hard to see how one can have an adequate theological aesthetics that neglects the experiential aspect of beauty. Such aesthetics would surely be guilty of excessive abstraction, severing the realm of the real from human subjectivity. In the case of the relationship between beauty and goodness, as the discussions in the literature are usually in terms of the relationship between beauty and morality, I follow suit. Taking morality as always concerned with a certain aspect of goodness, tensions between beauty and morality also point to tensions between beauty and goodness.

Beauty and Truth: the Objectivity/Subjectivity of Aesthetic Judgement

For Kant aesthetic judgement, or, in his terms, “judgement of taste,” involves two peculiarities. The first is: “The judgement of taste determines its object with regard to satisfaction (as beauty) with a claim to the assent of *everyone*, as if it were objective.”¹⁵ The second is: “The judgment of taste is not determinable by grounds of proof at all, just as if it were merely *subjective*.”¹⁶ In aesthetic judgments there appears to be a tension, the simultaneous plausibility of claims to objectivity and to subjectivity. When making an aesthetic judgment we act as if we are making a genuine judgment, ascribing real merit to the object. The object really is beautiful, moving, and so on. On the other hand, when challenged, we find that we are unable to furnish principles or rules to justify the judgment. This may result in defending the lesser claim that the object is beautiful *for me*, making claims about the perceiver, thereby conceding the point to the subjectivist. As soon as we present what may seem a principle of aesthetic merit that promises to provide some informative law-like generalisation, it seems that counter-examples can be produced or circularity detected. We may, for example, claim that well structured sonata movements are more likely to be beautiful than those that are not. This then

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §32 5:281, 162. Passages cited from the works of Kant in this article are specified in the following order: section; volume and page number from the appropriate volume of the Prussian Academy of Science edition of Kant's work, *Immanuel Kants Schriften, Ausgabe der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902); and page number in the English edition. Most English translations have this pagination in the margins of the texts.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §33, 5.284, p. 164.

raises the question of what we mean by ‘well structured’. Since we value musical compositions where musical structure is imaginatively and freely handled, what would seem to constitute ‘well-structured’ is not reducible to the observation of certain compositional rules. It is dependent upon what is aesthetically successful and what comes across as due to the freedom of the composer, and not to ineptitude or ignorance. If what is considered ‘well structured’ depends upon aesthetic merit, it cannot, without circularity, be a criterion of aesthetic merit.¹⁷

Kant attempts to resolve the objective/subjective tension by providing an account of aesthetic judgement as subjectively grounded but merely appearing to be objective. When we ascribe ‘beauty’ to an object we “speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a property of the object and the judgment logical (constituting a cognition of the object through concepts of it), although it is only aesthetic and contains merely a relation of the representation of the object to the subject, because it still has the similarity with logical judgment that its validity for everyone can be presupposed.”¹⁸ Aesthetic judgment makes claims to “subjective universality.”¹⁹ We do not say, “It is beautiful for me”, but, simply, “It is beautiful”, and thereby make claims for others to assent to. We see much agreement in aesthetic judgement, and it matters to us that such agreement exist, to the extent that we may question our own judgements when we find that others do not think as we do. However, Kant also claims that since aesthetic judgement is not based on concepts, it is not based on rules or principles, and must be subjective. When we ascribe beauty to an object we are not making a truth claim about the object, but about our responses to the object, even if the nature of the aesthetic experience is *as if* it were objective. Kant’s explanation for the experience of beauty is that it arises from the “free play” of the imagination and the understanding. These are, respectively, the faculties of recalling and combining what is given to us by the senses; and of concepts and rules, unifying what is given to us by the senses. We find a harmony between the imagination and the understanding that is free because not constrained by determinate concepts,²⁰ and we find this harmony pleasurable.²¹ Since there is a high degree of agreement regarding general cognitive claims, we should also expect the free play of these cognitive faculties to be similar across properly functioning subjects.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive treatment of rules of art, see Mary Mothersill, *op.cit.*, pp. 100–144. See also *Greater Hippias* 290, probably by Plato, for an early criticism of principles of aesthetic merit.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *op.cit.*, §6, 5:211, p. 97.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §6, 5:212, p. 97.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §9, 5:217–8, pp. 102–3.

²¹ For a detailed treatment, see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chapter 3, pp. 60–105.

This account, however, is not sufficient to rule out the possibility that aesthetic judgements are objective. Indeed, examination of Kant's arguments reveals that he fails to show that aesthetic judgements must be subjective, and thereby fails to resolve the objective/subjective tension, despite appearances to the contrary. Kant presupposes that for aesthetic judgements to be objective they must be based on concepts which give rise to rules that can provide justification for the judgements.²² Comparison with the cognition of secondary qualities shows that this is not so. Our understanding of 'red', for example, must be in phenomenological terms, as colour is intrinsically experiential. It cannot be reduced to primary properties, such as the wavelength of emitted light, since such properties do not refer to the subject's experience.²³ Similarly, we cannot reduce colour to the electric signals along a healthy optic nerve. Colour ascriptions cannot be reduced to physical laws. This does not mean that colour ascriptions are merely subjective, since colour ascriptions can be veridical, making truth claims about the object. If colour ascriptions can claim objective validity without recourse to reductive rules, then it seems arbitrary to claim that aesthetic judgment must be subjective for the same reasons.²⁴

Unlike aesthetic judgement, however, we can correlate colour judgement with physical properties, such as the wavelength of emitted light. We have clear standards of what constitutes a normal, functioning eye. With aesthetic judgements we may, in the spirit of Hume, correlate particular aesthetic judgements with people of a certain type, that is, without "prejudice" and possessed of "good sense" and "delicacy,"²⁵ as well as to certain aesthetic objects; but it is difficult to see how one can proceed beyond such vague correlations. Objective accounts of beauty can make sense of this predicament. Just as a secondary property is the property of an object to affect us in some way, aesthetic properties are manifested at least in part by the experience of pleasure.²⁶ Pleasure is a complex and easily affected experience, and

²² Immanuel Kant, *op.cit.*, §18, 5:237, p. 121; §8, 5:215, p. 100.

²³ See John McDowell, 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 131–150; first published in Ted Honderich ed., *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 110–29.

²⁴ This argument owes much to: Anthony Savile, 'Objectivity in Aesthetic Judgement: Eva Schaper on Kant', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21(4) (1981), especially pp. 364–6.

²⁵ David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 133–154.

²⁶ Another argument given by Kant for the subjectivity of aesthetic judgments is that since pleasure is a feeling, and hence non-cognitive, it cannot be the basis for an objective judgment (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §3, 5:206, p. 92). This argument fails since the qualities by which a judgement is made need not be the same as those qualities whose existence is identified in the judgement. A colour sensation, for instance, is in the subject, yet we can assert that the colour is a property of the object. Kant's argument is surprising

one can see why Kant thought that pleasure provides an insufficient basis for the justification of aesthetic judgments. As Karl Ameriks puts it: "It should not be surprising if beauty has a special elusiveness, for it clearly involves a kind of functional satisfaction which, unlike that of most phenomenal qualities, can range over all kinds of sensations. As many different materials may constitute a taste, fragrance, or lustre, so also very many different fragrances, tastes, and/or lustres can constitute beauty, and thus the futility in the search for specific laws of beauty can be understood without special reasons for denying its objectivity."²⁷ To this may be added the complexities of the aesthetic object, involving the complex combination of different elements. Given these complexities of the object and of our experience, beauty may be a real, though emergent property, arising from the elements that make up the object, and that are neither reducible to, nor predictable from, these elements.

In contrast to Kant, the aesthetics of Maritain, like those of Balthasar, are robustly realist. Beauty is that quality which pleases through perception and the act of knowing: "If a thing exalts and delights the soul by the bare fact of its being given to the intuition of the soul, it is good to apprehend, it is beautiful."²⁸ Though bound up with the will because it can satisfy desire, beauty is most fundamentally understood ontologically, as a quality of the object, whether we grasp it or not.²⁹ This leads to the distinction between aesthetic and transcendental beauty, a distinction that is central to Balthasar's theological aesthetics. Transcendental beauty is the beauty that God beholds, "which permeates every existent, to one degree or another."³⁰ This follows from Maritain's commitment to a comprehensive natural theology and metaphysics of a universe created by God, Whose nature is reflected in the created order. Aesthetic beauty, on the other hand, is the beauty where our "senses and sense perception play an essential part, and in which, as a result, not all things are beautiful."³¹ The two kinds of beauty are closely related in that aesthetic beauty is transcendental beauty which is perceived through the senses in an act that includes the understanding. It follows that our

given that he asserts that we make a judgement of beauty before we experience the pleasure deriving from it (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §9, 5:216–9, pp. 102–4). From this it should follow that the pleasure is simply that by which we are made aware of the presence of beauty.

²⁷ Karl Ameriks, 'Kant and the Objectivity of Taste', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23(1) (1983), pp. 11–12.

²⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J.F. Scanlan (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930), p. 23.

²⁹ Jacques Maritain, *ibid.*, p. 28n.

³⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 163.

³¹ Jacques Maritain, *ibid.*, pp. 163–4.

experience of beauty can only be to the extent to which we are capable of participating in what God beholds. Art tries to overcome this distinction, to “absorb aesthetic beauty in transcendental beauty.” The artist tries to reveal the transcendental beauty in things, even to the extent of using the “Ugly, the Foul, the Disgusting, the Nasty, the Filthy, the Gluey, the Viscous and the Nauseous” as subject matter in order to reveal the transcendental beauty that is nonetheless present in them.³²

Maritain’s realist ontology of beauty does not, however, prevent him from having a rich conception of the perceiver, especially in his later writings on beauty. In *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* he presents an inclusive conception of rationality present in the subject possessing a preconscious: “Reason does not only consist of its conscious logical tools and manifestations, nor does the will consist only of its deliberate conscious determinations. Far beneath the sunlit surface thronged with explicit concepts and judgments, words and expressed resolutions or movements of the will, are the sources of knowledge and creativity, of love and supra-sensuous desires, hidden in the primordial translucent night of the intimate vitality of the soul.”³³ The apprehension of beauty as primarily an intellectual activity challenges us to expand our conception of knowledge to embrace the poetic, which he defines as: “that intercommunion between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self.”³⁴ The illuminating intellect, the reflection of God’s intellectual light within our minds, permeates what is brought to the mind by the senses and draws from them the potential intelligibility within them.³⁵ In this process the perceiver also grasps something of his own subjectivity, his own Self, and so in poetic knowledge strict boundaries between world and subject do not apply.³⁶

Maritain’s epistemology of beauty attempts to say something about the subject as well as the object, with the experience of beauty being in some way related to the properties of the object. However, Maritain says very little to elucidate this relation beyond affirming its existence. In this respect there is little to distinguish his account from a standard subjectivist account with a realist ontology of beauty tacked on. Admittedly, Maritain speaks of rules in the creation of works of art, which might seem at first glance to provide a basis for an objectivist account. However, he considers their role as a guide to the production of certain types of form, such as sonata or pictorial representation, and not as formulae for the production of beauty or

³² Jacques Maritain, *ibid.*, pp. 164–5.

³³ Jacques Maritain, *ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁴ Jacques Maritain, *ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁵ See Jacques Maritain, *ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁶ Jacques Maritain, *ibid.*, pp. 116.

the justification of aesthetic judgements.³⁷ Maritain's comprehensive natural theology, where knowledge is understood in terms of connaturality, the harmony between the mind-independent world and our minds due to God Who made us in His image, may point to a realist ontology of beauty, but hardly entails it. Furthermore, even if one accepts that everything possesses transcendental beauty, this sheds little explanatory light on why we single out certain objects as possessing beauty to a high or low degree, or how we might justify an aesthetic judgement by reference to non-aesthetic properties.

This is a major gap in Maritain's aesthetics. The quest for adequate explanation of specific aesthetic judgements is not merely a demand for theoretical completeness, but arises from our common experience, where specific ascriptions of beauty are contested and where we attempt to justify our positions. Maritain's aesthetics seem to say little more than that we consider an object to be beautiful because it possesses beauty and we can perceive it, and so fails to provide arguments to overcome the subjective/objective tension. It is not surprising, therefore, that Maritain gives the impression of aesthetic experience as highly stable, akin to perceptual experiences of primary and secondary qualities. Throughout *Art and Scholasticism* and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* there is little appreciation of beauty as often elusive, where the delight in the perception of an object may vary appreciably, not only among different people, but even in the same subject, and over short periods of time.

Beauty and Goodness: the Relationship of Beauty and Morality

Whilst Kant and Maritain aim to resolve the tension between the objectivity/subjectivity of beauty, they both wish to maintain the tension between beauty and morality. In §59 of *The Critique of the Power of Judgement* Kant relates beauty and morality by giving four reasons why beauty is a symbol of morality. Of these four reasons two are particularly relevant to this discussion: beauty and morality please without any interest; and both involve a universal perspective. By 'symbol' Kant means that there are certain affinities or parallels between morality and beauty, though the connection is not sufficiently close to ensure any entailment, and allows for the possibility of dis-analogies.

What may seem to undermine these attempts to connect beauty and morality is Kant's view that beauty pleases without interest. This is regarded by Balthasar and others as evidence of Kant's formalism,

³⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 41–45.

the separation of the aesthetic realm from our wider concerns.³⁸ In Kant's terms, for an object to please 'without interest' is for it to please where we are indifferent to whether it exists or not.³⁹ In contrast to this, what we value morally is concerned with what exists, as we desire to bring about certain ends. One of the principal reasons for using the concepts of 'interest' and 'disinterestedness' in this way is to provide criteria for the aesthetic by distinguishing aesthetic pleasure from other pleasures. We experience a variety of different pleasures, such as pleasure in the beautiful, in the agreeable and in the good. The agreeable involves gratification, and so the interest that the source of gratification exist; and the good involves practical ends, and so the interest in the existence of certain states of affairs.⁴⁰

In the context of interest or disinterestedness the issue of the object's existence is, however, primarily with regard to whether the object is considered in instrumental terms. Kant is aware that we may experience beauty that involves both interest and disinterestedness.⁴¹ This is what underlies his distinction between free (or pure) and adherent (or dependent) beauty: "The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it."⁴² When we have a concept of what the object ought to be we have a concept of its purpose. Beauty at its purest is without concern for the object's purpose. However, in finding an object beautiful we experience a harmony of the imagination and understanding, which gives rise to a feeling of the object having "purposiveness without a purpose." The object possesses purposiveness in that our desire for harmony is satisfied, but without the object necessarily being placed under a particular concept, and therefore under any concept of particular instrumental purpose.⁴³ This also accords with remarks of Kant in section §2 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: "But if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in

³⁸ See the second quotation from Balthasar above (*The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics V, The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, pp. 506–7).

³⁹ E.g. Immanuel Kant, *op.cit.*, §2, 5:205, p. 91. See Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 221–3.

⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant, *op.cit.*, §3–4, 5:205–11, pp. 91–96. See Henry E. Allison, *ibid.*, p. 86ff.

⁴¹ Many commentators argue that Kant does not adequately show that aesthetic judgments can ever be wholly devoid of interest. See Frank Burch Brown, *op.cit.*, pp. 63–73.

⁴² Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §16, 5:229, p. 114.

⁴³ See Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §11, 5:221, p. 106; and Paul Guyer, *Kant* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 316.

the existence of the thing”.⁴⁴ Moral motivation exhibits interest insofar as that there is a desire that the action be performed or the end attained, which involves the desire that certain objects and actions exist. Moral motivation is disinterested in the sense that it is not based on personal gratification and the treatment of others in an instrumental fashion. Kant therefore manages to show a parallel between the aesthetic and the moral on the basis of interest and disinterestedness, whilst also distinguishing them on the same basis.

Universality is given as a reason for beauty as a symbol of morality because both aesthetic and moral judgements encourage us to “think in the position of everyone else.”⁴⁵ In both cases judgements are made that one believes others should hold. Universality thus helps cultivate feelings that move us beyond our narrow egocentric concerns, feelings that are also required for moral judgement. However, there is another aspect to the importance of the universal perspective. Kant defines the capacity for aesthetic judgement in terms of communicability: “One could even define taste as the faculty for judging that which makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable without the mediation of a concept.”⁴⁶ We are sociable creatures, and so our common experience of beauty, like common morality, provides a means for the creation and sustaining of society, another way in which the moral and the beautiful are integrated in our lives. We engage in discussion about aesthetic judgements. Agreement can strengthen bonds and disagreement can weaken them. The question of the explanation and justification of aesthetic judgements is therefore not just about the relation between beauty and truth, but also beauty and morality.⁴⁷

These parallels between beauty and morality do not, however, undermine the distinctiveness of the aesthetic and moral realms. As Paul Guyer puts it: “taste can only serve moral autonomy only if morality can also recognize aesthetic autonomy”.⁴⁸ Beauty as a symbol of morality does not depend on any prior link, but on the similarities between the kinds of reflection in both cases. Yet these similarities are not sufficient to ensure that those with developed aesthetic sensibilities are possessed of high moral standards: “virtuosi of taste, who are not only often but even usually vain, obstinate, and

⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §2, 5:204, p. 90.

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §40, 5:294, p. 174.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §40, 5:295, p. 175.

⁴⁷ For an influential and positive assessment of this aspect of Kant’s aesthetics, see Stanley Cavell, ‘Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy’ in *Must we mean what we say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 86–96.

⁴⁸ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 19; see Henry E Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, pp. 266–7.

given to corrupting passions, could perhaps even less than others lay claim to the merit of devotion to moral principles".⁴⁹ For Kant there is, strictly speaking, no conflict between aesthetic and moral judgement because aesthetic judgement, unlike moral judgement, makes no cognitive claims. As we have seen, this is a view that Kant does not adequately argue for. That there are analogies and disanalogies between aesthetic and moral judgement is, however, sufficient to engender tension. The exercise of aesthetic judgement can help form the moral agent for the better, but need not do so, and often does not. Aesthetic appreciation can therefore still reflect something of the moral character of the subject, even if the relationship is complex. That Kant asserts the connection between having a good soul with the appreciation of the beauty of nature, and not with beauty in general, is further evidence of the tensions.⁵⁰ A beautiful work of art can reflect moral corruption and even promote it, whilst helping to cultivate other traits that ought to enhance the morality of the subject.

Maritain's treatment of the relationship between beauty and morality is a good deal simpler than that of Kant. Art is a habit of the practical intellect, a disposition of the artist concerned with the good of what is made by the artist. This seemingly innocuous definition leads to a sharp distinction within the practical intellect, between art and prudence, and so between aesthetics and morality. Prudence is concerned with judging from the perspective of morality, whereas art is concerned with judging from the perspective of the good of the object. In *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain heightens the contrast: "It is difficult therefore for the Prudent Man and the Artist to understand one another", even speaking of a "bitter" conflict between art and prudence.⁵¹ It is ironic that a philosopher so committed to a metaphysics of the transcendentals of beauty, goodness and truth should leave himself so open to the accusation of aesthetic formalism.⁵² Yet a closer examination of Maritain's aims shows why he is so concerned with upholding the tension between beauty and morality. In the face of an aesthetics that risks subordinating art to religious didacticism, where art is reduced to the conveying of the message, Maritain upholds the integrity of art. This is a characteristic Thomist position: to respect the integrity of the created order is to allow it to help fulfil God's purposes. It follows that a great artist need not be morally righteous. Maritain concurs with Oscar Wilde: "The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose."⁵³

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *op.cit.*, §42, 5:298, p. 178.

⁵⁰ Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, §42, 5:298–9, p. 178.

⁵¹ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 84–5.

⁵² See Frank Burch Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 28 and p. 197, n.19.

⁵³ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 50–1.

Yet the sharp contrast between art and prudence obscures something important in Maritain's general position.⁵⁴ What Maritain wishes to defend is a conception of art that is not reducible to other concerns, as though beauty could be made to order. Beauty is not something that can be controlled, or imposed on an object. It is a property of the object that emerges from the creative process. In the specific case of intending to make a religious work of art, one risks jeopardising the freedom of the creative process and thereby compromising the object: "If you want to produce a Christian work, be a Christian and try to make a work of beauty into which you have put your heart; do not adopt a Christian pose."⁵⁵ It follows that his understanding of the artistic process is, in fact, one where any sharp dualism between art and prudence is rejected, because the wider concerns of the artist, including moral and religious ones, form part of the person from whose labour the work of art comes. Thus speaking of poetry in the widest sense of the term, Maritain writes: "Poetry is the fruit neither of the intellect alone, nor of the imagination alone. Nay more, it proceeds from the totality of man, sense, imagination, intellect, love, desire, instinct, blood and spirit together."⁵⁶ It is not surprising that for Maritain the greatest period of religious art coincided with the Middle Ages, the period where the religious permeated life in general to the greatest extent, before they began to separate in the Renaissance. Beauty and morality still retain a crucial independence, even where there is significant overlap between them, for we cannot reduce beauty to morality without loss of the beauty we strive for.

Theological Aesthetics and Revelatory Tension

General epistemological concerns regarding our experience of beauty and understanding of beauty; and the examination of the relationships between beauty and truth, and beauty and goodness, in the work of Kant and Maritain, all point to tensions being inherent in our experience and understanding of beauty, and hence of beauty as revelatory. If we hold that beauty is capable of being revelatory, then it is not straightforwardly so. The aim of the examination of the work of Kant and Maritain is not simply to show that the tensions are not resolved in the work of these two particular thinkers. It is also to engage with problems that are reflected in our experience and with which philosophers continue to struggle with no clear resolution in sight: the possible untrustworthiness of the imagination; the difficulties in providing an even vaguely comprehensive

⁵⁴ See Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity, Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 14, 82–4 for a similar view.

⁵⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 70.

⁵⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 111.

explanation and justification of aesthetic evaluations; and the sense that there is a certain non-accidental convergence of what is morally good and what is beautiful, whilst admitting divergence and some clear counter-examples.⁵⁷

The aim of this article has not been to argue against beauty as revelatory, even if some of the arguments could be employed for that end. Nor is the aim to return beauty to the sidelines of theological discussion, or to question the harmony of beauty, truth and goodness understood as transcendentals. Instead, the aim is to call for a treatment of beauty in theological aesthetics that pays more than lip service to our experience of its elusiveness, its complexity and ambiguities, a theological aesthetics that is prepared to embrace the tensions. In the case of Balthasar, a more sympathetic engagement with some of his philosophical interlocutors might have helped him appreciate why they raised the questions they did, without forsaking the importance of the role of beauty in his theology. For example, Balthasar's assessment of the aesthetics of Kant, judging it on the basis of its *conclusions*, not paying sufficient attention to the issues raised in reaching them, results in vital questions regarding beauty being ignored. Strong similarities between their aesthetics are thereby overlooked, and an occasion for dialogue lost. Throughout his aesthetics Kant defends a conception of beauty that cannot be reduced to rules or to any moral project. There are obvious parallels with Balthasar's defence of the irreducibility of beauty, the view that the object of beauty possesses a "freedom", its own dynamic capacity to disclose itself, eluding our attempts to make it an object for the subject.⁵⁸ It is an obvious irony that the reasons Kant gives for the subjectivity of aesthetic judgement form the basis of what he has most in common with some of his sharpest detractors.⁵⁹

An important question remains: How might a proper acknowledgement of revelatory tension affect theological aesthetics? Revelatory

⁵⁷ See, for example, the overview articles by Nick Zangwill and John W. Bender, 'Aesthetic Realism 1' and 'Aesthetic Realism 2', in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The first is sympathetic to aesthetic realism, the second is not. Yet neither claims to provide compelling arguments for their favoured positions. Instead they conclude with weaker claims: "Thus, overall, realism better explains the nature of our aesthetic thought." (Zangwill, p. 78) and "A compelling argument for aesthetic realism has not been forthcoming." (Bender, p. 96). Similar difficulties at reaching conclusions on the relationship between art and morality are present in Matthew Kieran's overview article in the same volume, pp. 451–470.

⁵⁸ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologic I: The Truth of the World*, trans Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), pp. 80–102.

⁵⁹ Balthasar does acknowledge some points in common between his aesthetics and Kant's treatment of the sublime. See *The Glory of the Lord V*, p. 513. An aspect of Kant's aesthetics that also seems amenable to theological aesthetics and is much commented on is his notion of 'aesthetic ideas', where the experience of beauty stimulates thinking in our sensory imagination that transcends our sensory capacities to represent it. See Frank Burch Brown, *op.cit.*, pp. 71–2 and Ronald Hepburn, *op.cit.*, pp. 66–7.

tension certainly heightens the distinction between worldly and divine beauty. In support of Balthasar's aims, it would help to defend his "theological aesthetics" against what he calls, "aesthetic theology", where divine revelation is subject to the criteria of ordinary worldly aesthetics.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the heightening of the distinction would result in the analogy between worldly and divine beauty being weakened in certain respects. A conception of beauty incorporating revelatory tension might be an excessively unstable and elusive analogue for the strongly objective conception of revelation that Balthasar holds,⁶¹ and a less straightforward basis for the Christian anthropology that Viladesau envisages. Yet a theological aesthetics that takes revelatory tension seriously need not be a chastened aesthetics, afraid to make claims about beauty as revelatory. It would, however, be a theological aesthetics where tensions, elusiveness and ambiguities inherent in our experience and understanding of beauty play a positive role; where instances of revelatory insight through beauty are explicitly situated in the context of our wider experiences of the object of beauty, including critical reflection on such insight. In the terms of Cornelius Ernst, this might be a theology where the experience of beauty is a 'genetic moment,' a moment of insight that becomes part of our ongoing engagement with reality: "Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love. It could be said that Christianity is the consecration of the genetic moment, the living centre from which it reviews and renews indefinitely various and shifting perspectives of human experience in history. That, at least, is or ought to be its claim: that it is the power to transform and renew all things: 'Behold I make all things new' (Rev. 21.5)".⁶² The eschatological thrust is appropriate. The genetic moment of beauty is the dynamic vision of the seeds and promise of renewal and consummation in God of our fallen and fragmented world. There is a tension between what is and what should be, and between what is and will be, a tension that is reflected in our experience of beauty as revelatory and our understanding of that experience.

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⁶⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I*, pp. 90–117.

⁶¹ For a clear summary of some of the problems with Balthasar's "analogy of beauty", see Viladesau, *op.cit.* pp. 36–7.

⁶² Cornelius Ernst, 'World Religions and Christian Theology', in Fergus Kerr OP and Timothy Radcliffe OP, eds., *Multiple Echo* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), pp. 34–5.

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