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The Beautiful Place: Understanding, Perceiving, and Participating in Beauty According to the Doctrine of the Two Kinds of Righteousness

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THE BEAUTIFUL PLACE:
UNDERSTANDING, PERCEIVING, AND PARTICIPATING IN BEAUTY ACCORDING TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE TWO KINDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

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This dissertation is dedicated to all those people through whom God has worked to draw me toward my own beautiful place—especially Thomas and Linda Dressler (my parents), Joel and Jeannalee Biermann (my parents-in-law), Justine Dressler (my wife and the gift who most makes me marvel at God's goodness), and my sons (Titus, Jude, Grey, and Edmund) whom I pray will manifest beauty, goodness, and truth in every aspect of their lives.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a dissertation is a humbling process to say the least. Even when I disagreed with them, the authors I engaged never ceased to amaze me with their brilliant insights. Over and again, I was given the impression that I was dealing with matters too high for me. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien paints an incredibly vivid picture of the small band of companions as they try to make their way across an especially treacherous mountain pass. The cold is bitter, the wind savage, and the snow unbelievably deep. Gimli, the dwarf, battles through the snow slowly and agonizingly. Legolas, the elf, walks lightly and easily on top of the snow. I dare say I've known some who think and write about theological matters as easily as Legolas walks atop the snow. I fall most decidedly into the former category. If my writing at times feels laborious, cumbersome, and tiresome to read, know that it was at least that laborious, cumbersome, and tiresome to write.

I begin with this self-deprecating remark because it serves as a useful illustration for what follows. The essential point is this: God has *always* placed me in the company of people who were and are far better than I deserve. My parents are a good example. My father, Thomas Dressler, was a German immigrant. He was a brilliant professor of history, an excellent singer, and a doggedly steadfast Christian who instilled in me (though rarely with great patience) a love of classical music (especially Bach) and of theological thought. When he died in my teenage years, my Opa did what he could to fill the void. The conversations around music and theology continued and gradually deepened. It is to my mother (Linda), however, that I attribute the greatest influence. She encouraged, supported, and challenged me in all these areas. She also took on the challenge of homeschooling, which allowed me to pursue certain areas which would likely have been unavailable in other forms of education. As an example, she chauffeured me

every week to piano lessons with my teacher (a graduate of the Julliard School of Music), who lived over an hour away.

Next, I cannot fail to mention my professor, mentor, father-in-the-faith, and father-in-law, Joel Biermann. I must confess that it was for rather less than noble reasons that I registered for my first class with him. I'd heard rumors about him that upset me. So, frankly, I took the class to "pick a fight." Within the first few sessions, however, he'd won me over. More than any other, he has shaped my theological mind. His steadfastness of faith, his unwillingness to compromise God's truth, his humility in listening to voices both inside and outside the Lutheran tradition set him apart. He has not even the residue of a chip on his shoulder. This, I believe, enables him actually to embody these words of C. S. Lewis.

> Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.[1]

Biermann's truthfulness enables him to cut to the heart of matters that are routinely covered over by countless layers of prevarications.

Of course, the primary reason I owe Joel a debt of gratitude is for introducing me to his daughter, Justine. Above all others, she has served as that "word" of God who has shaped and molded me, ushering me toward my own beautiful place. Not only has she beautified my life, but she has enabled me to push beyond my own tendency toward aesthetic intolerance. Without her influence, this dissertation would likely have strayed into little more than advocacy for culturism. There is also the fact that Justine has put up with my mind being preoccupied with this project for several years, often listening patiently to my initial stabs at the articulation of inchoate

[1] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 190.

thoughts and impressions. Finally, she is beautiful, hence my nickname for her—Belle. She is beautiful not only in the "ordinary" sense of the word, but also in the manner in which she fills her own groove, as mother to our four sons (Titus, Jude, Grey, and Edmund), and in *all* her various vocations.

I also owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr. Kent Burreson, my *Doktorvater*! His insights and encouragement all along the way challenged me to write with far greater clarity. Additionally, his questions and suggestions pushed me to greater depth and comprehensiveness of thought than I ever would have achieved on my own. Every meeting I had with him left me enriched and excited to plunge back into the work!

I thank also my dissertation committee whose insights, expertise, and knowledge of resources were invaluable. Their comments and suggestions showed serious thought and dedication to their task, for which I am truly grateful.

Lastly, I thank the congregation I serve as pastor, Salem Lutheran in Black Jack, MO. They funded my studies from first to last. They also patiently granted me the time I needed to attend and prepare for classes, and patiently listened to various tidbits I brought back with me to Bible study. It has been an honor to serve them, and will continue to be so as long as God allows it.

From my grandfather and parents to my piano teacher, from my father-in-law to my wife, from my *Doktorvater* to the members of my committee, God has blessed me (over and again) with teachers *far* better than I deserve. What is there left to say but—*soli Deo gloria*!

ABBREVIATIONS

Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
AC	*Confessio Augustana* (The Augsburg Confession)
Ep	Epitome of the Formula of Concord
SD	Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord
GL I	von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*. Translated by Erasmo Leiva-Meikakis. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982.
GL V	von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*. Translated by Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Rowan Williams. Edited by Brian McNeil and John Riches. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991.
LC	Large Catechism
LW	*Luther's Works* (American edition). Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986. New series, vols. 56–82. St. Louis: Concordia 2009–
SC	Small Catechism
TD I	von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. Vol. 1, *Prolegomena*. Translated by Graham Harrison. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988.
TD III	von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. Vol. 3, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*. Translated by Graham Harrison. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992.

CHAPTER ONE

BEAUTY, THE ENIGMA

Introduction

In the congregation at which I serve as pastor, two enormous murals flank the chancel. Simply by virtue of their sheer size, they dominate the nave. Those seated in the pews, especially those few brave souls who muster the courage to sit near the front, huddle under the gaze of these distinct portrayals of Jesus. Far from bearing a family resemblance to the striking and often unsettling gazes found in various iterations of Christ as *pantokrator*, however, the visage displayed in these murals fails to "strike" the viewer in any way at all despite their imposing size. The face of Jesus is either benign, or else ambivalent.

Left of the chancel, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, tends some particularly wooly sheep, grazing on the fecund grass with apparent satisfaction. In one arm He cradles a lamb while in the other He holds His shepherd's staff. The sheep are as white as snow. The background is serene, paradisiacal even. On the right side of the chancel, we see an image of Jesus drawn from John's Revelation. He stands outside of a beautiful wooden door, head cocked as if to listen, hand raised and about to knock. A verdant, twisting vine traces the arc of the stone doorframe at the foot of which a blossom-laden lily rises nearly a third of the way up the door.

For some in the congregation, these murals are sacred. Indeed, it would come as no surprise to learn that at least a handful regard these paintings as literal depictions of the incarnate God. Certain members often remark how shameful it would be to cover them with something as banal and industrial and "modern" as screens. Perhaps most shockingly of all, many gush over these paintings, calling them "beautiful."

Yet, another contingent in the congregation, a clandestine society, carefully preserves its

anonymity. This group of nonconformists quietly nurses a dissenting view. I consider myself a member of this furtive band, though I tend to be somewhat less guarded about my perspective. I do not find them beautiful. It is not only that they fall short with respect to technique, however. They also strike me as saccharine, cloying, and sentimental. In short, these images that dominate the nave are textbook examples of kitsch.

That the murals generate such wildly divergent perspectives gives rise to a significant question: How can the taste of Christians (Christians of the same tradition nonetheless) differ so significantly? Furthermore, we may ask if it is even possible for these two polarized groups to discuss their divergent views of the paintings by employing certain objective criteria. If so, what might those criteria be? Or perhaps we must concede that no such criteria can be established at all, that the commonplace relativistic adage that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" carries the day after all. Perhaps the disagreement regarding the murals can only be decided by means of power. In essence, the question that lies before us is this: Is the concept of beauty merely a creation of people groups grounded in social constructs? Or does beauty cut across time and space? The amount of ink spilled over these questions bears witness to the significance of the issue at hand.

Regardless of the position taken concerning the nature of beauty and the possibility of the establishment of contours for its discernment (if, indeed, any can be established), it is a near universally accepted truth that beauty is powerful whether regarded as a transcendental bound up with the nature of being itself, or as "only just" a social construct, by which those who make such an argument mean something ephemeral, contextual, and therefore finally unreal. As we shall see later, however, the ephemerality of social constructs does not necessarily imply vacuity.

It is also clearly the case that beauty and the fine arts are not coterminous.[1] While the majority opinion of the eighteenth century simply assumed that beauty was the goal of the arts, more recent artists and philosophers have recognized that the art world does not, in fact, necessarily aim at beauty in every case. Quite to the contrary, artists may compose an artifact that is intentionally *not* beautiful. Nicholas Wolterstorff puts the nail in the coffin of identifying beauty with the arts. He notes that "good" art is not necessarily "beautiful." On the contrary, art may be intended/appropriated for any number of purposes. The key to appropriate aesthetic judgment, then, is not the question "Is this work of art beautiful?" but rather "What does this work of art count as?"[2] An artist may compose for the express goal of shocking the public with a piece both violent and transgressive, ostensibly in order to unmask a society's systemic injustice of which its members are broadly ignorant. Here, art has a decidedly different aim, one that is both prophetic and apocalyptic in bent, but not aimed toward beauty *per se*.

Art, then, is not limited to the beautiful. But the inverse is also the case. Beauty is not limited to the world of art. Quite to the contrary, philosophers and theologians alike frequently ascribe to natural phenomena the quality of beauty. Immanuel Kant, for instance, argued for the primacy of natural beauty over beauty found in the arts. He writes,

> The concept of a purposiveness of nature . . . if it is not to be just the fraudulent substitution of *what we can make out if it* [nature] for *what it is*, is a concept entirely divorced from all dogmatic philosophy, theoretical as well as practical. It is founded on that principle of the judgment which precedes the empirical laws and initially

[1] Here I have in view the description of arts proffered by Frank Burch Brown: "Art entails knowledgeable, skilful, or inspired making; that an art always exhibits intrinsically appreciable . . . qualities not duplicated by the workings of sheerly abstract thought or exhausted by mere utility; and that . . . certain products of art are among the things we find most human or most divine." *Christian Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 86.

[2] He suggests the following as possible categories of art: memorial art, art for veneration, social protest art, work song, and art reflexive art. Each has different criteria for "good" particular to the ends at which they are aimed. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 68–69.

> makes possible their agreement within the unity of a system . . . [having] its determining basis free from admixture of any other cognitive faculty.[3]

In essence, natural beauty precedes and serves as the foundation of beauty within the arts, the latter a subsequent human appeal (unavoidably invested with "dogmas") to that subjective yet universal experience of beauty in the givenness of the natural world. Indeed, so convinced was Kant of nature's beauty that he even argued that the wanton destruction of natural beauty was morally deleterious for humanity.

> A propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature is opposed to a human being's duty to himself; for it weakens or uproots that feeling in him which, though not of itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it; the disposition, namely, to love some thing (e.g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it.[4]

Kant takes beauty seriously. Whether the beautiful manifests itself in natural or human-made phenomena, human beings have almost always treasured the beautiful. Occasionally, that appreciation reached such heights that it attributed even salvific powers to beauty. After all, Dostoevsky's protagonist and Christ-like Prince Myshkin declared that "beauty will save the world."[5] Higher praise can hardly be imagined. While many, then, continue to take art seriously, we will take beauty itself seriously.

Beauty—Scorned and Despised

The significance of beauty, however, has not always been appreciated. Far from it. Indeed, the eighteenth century paved the way for a serious chastening of what was called "beauty." Far from receiving the praise lavished upon it by the likes of Dostoevsky, beauty fell into broad

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[3] Immanuel Kant, *First Introduction to the Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Haden (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 47.

[4] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 192–93.

[5] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Ignat Avsey (London: Alma Books, 2014), 399.

disfavor among philosophers and theologians alike. Rather than enjoying a privileged place, rather than serving as a central pillar for theology, philosophy, and even aesthetics,[6] beauty was sidelined. More than that, in some cases, it was viciously maligned.

To begin with, beauty is unquestionably *incommensurate* with the Enlightenment's demands for clear and distinct ideas. No rules governing beauty can ever be established to apprehend it fully. Indeed, many argue that forming such criteria would rob it of its wonder and surprise. Kant himself asserts, "A judgment of taste, just as if it were merely subjective, cannot be determined by bases of proof."[7] One of our primary theological interlocutors, Hans Urs von Balthasar, will confirm Kant's appraisal of the situation: "Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another."[8] Beauty, then, refuses to conform to the same rigorous criteria applied either to the good or to the true.

Natalie Carnes surveys three additional theories claiming to account for beauty's demise.[9] The first theory suggests that beauty's downfall had its roots in the eighteenth century's "Copernican Revolution," namely the argument that beauty was subjective, not objective. That is, beauty is not found in *things* but in the *experience* of those things in the perceiving subject. That experience was defined by a sensation of disinterested pleasure. Here, disinterested does not mean "uninterested" or ambivalent. Rather it signifies that the perceiving subject does not find

[6] Aesthetics primarily concerns the making and judging of humans and may or may not involve beauty *per se*. A fuller discussion of where this dissertation falls in the context of current scholarship will follow below.

[7] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 147.

[8] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Meikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 18. Hence forth, references shall be abbreviated GL.

[9] Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nysa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 18.

the object beautiful in an *instrumental* manner, that is, as a means to some ends. Disinterested pleasure, conversely, appreciates an object for what it is *in itself, not* for what it can do for the observer. Thus, what counted as beauty was narrowed.

A further narrowing took place in this same century with the establishment of beauty's counterpart, namely the category of the sublime. To beauty was ascribed feelings such as "pleasure, relaxation, melting," whereas the sublime was characterized by such sensations as "uneasiness, paralysis, horror."[10] Consequently, while the field of aesthetics was still governed by sensations, it was no longer ruled *only* by sensations deemed pleasing, but also by those generally considered negative. It was Edmund Burke who first drew this sharp, effectively antithetical, demarcation between the beautiful and the sublime.

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger; that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure.[11]

According to Burke and those who coopted his definitions, there was a decided "emotional intensity lacking in the beautiful, and such intensity evidences . . . the greater significance of the sublime."[12] Thus, beauty was increasingly seen as frivolous when compared with the sublime.

According to this first theory summarized by Carnes (namely, the devolution of beauty into exclusively subjective terms), a second consequence also emerged. When divorced from things and centered in the subjective experience, beauty became "inclusive and democratic."[13] With all

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[10] Carnes, *Beauty*, 18.

[11] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 51.

[12] Carnes, *Beauty*, 20.

[13] Carnes, *Beauty*, 21.

criteria of judgment with reference to the object eliminated, only the feeling of the subject remains, thus conceivably allowing practically anything to constitute the beautiful. Consequently, "not only is beauty . . . one concept among others; not only is it . . . a less significant aesthetic concept; but it is also an increasingly vague and useless one."[14]

A second account, as related by Carnes, proposes that the demise of beauty was precipitated by an increasing fascination with the powerful human faculty of free imagination. Indeed, imagination came to be seen as the "center of modern aesthetics," such that beauty became but one category among many subordinated under it. The beauty of the object no longer mattered nearly as much as the imaginative genius of the artist. According to this account also, the sublime, perhaps inevitably, rose to the fore in significance since beauty, as with the previous account, was associated with the decorative and the trivial, and not with matters of weight and significance.[15]

A final account of how society finally scorned beauty entails at least two concurrent developments. On the one hand, the art museum developed as a means to preserve various religious artifacts from the iconoclastic elements of French revolutionaries. Placing old masterpieces in museums divorced them from their original contexts which the revolutionaries had set out to overthrow. Safely stashed in a gallery alongside other objects collected for the sole purpose of "disinterested contemplation" effectively defanged these once powerfully symbolic artifacts. "Disinterested contemplation," notice, was now no longer reserved for beauty, but for art in general. Concomitantly, a modified version of the category of "genius" emerged, which prized above all the creation of the new, the novel. Thus, "art" that adhered to previously

[14] Carnes, *Beauty*, 22.

[15] Carnes, *Beauty*, 25.

established rules did not really count as "art." Now it counted as craft, and a craft could be taught to almost anyone since craft is a skill that is handed down as a tradition. Beauty, then, became increasingly democratized (i.e., reduced to the lowest common, popular denominator) because it did not require genius either to create or to appreciate. What was considered genuine "art," on the other hand, became increasingly elitist.[16] As Natalie Carnes succinctly describes the situation, "masculine, sublime, fine arts, and elite were clustered together in their opposition to feminine, beautiful, craft, and non-elite."[17] We are indeed a *very* long way from the likes of Dostoevsky.

Over time, beauty fell even further and was regarded not only with contempt but even with outright opprobrium. Operating with definitions handed down from Burke, Nietzsche, for instance, had little use for beauty. Concerning the quality of artists, his criteria aligned precisely with those that became dominant according to Carnes' narrative of beauty's demise.

> The greatness of an artist cannot be measured by the 'beautiful feelings' he arouses: leave that idea to females. But according to the degree to which he approaches the grand style, to which he is capable of the grand style. This style has this in common with great passion, that it disdains to please; that it forgets to persuade; that it commands; that it wills—To become master of the chaos one is; to compel one's chaos to become form.[18]

For Nietzsche, art is not about beauty. Art is a defiant fist raised against nothingness, the human imposition of self-construed meaningfulness on the canvas of the great meaningless void. Following in his footsteps, one Nietzschean art critic proclaimed that the message of every masterpiece is "the victory of each individual artist over his servitude . . . All art is a revolt against man's fate."[19]

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[16] Carnes, *Beauty*, 26–27.

[17] Carnes, *Beauty*, 29.

[18] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 443–44.

[19] Andre Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), 639.

Nietzsche was not alone in his criticisms. Marxist philosophers have attacked the idea of aesthetics as a whole. The beautiful, they assert, is a wholly human and cultural construct of the ruling classes. Thus, it becomes yet one more technique enabling the bourgeoisie to subjugate the proletariat. As Roger Scruton helpfully summarizes it,

> The function of this way of thinking is to inscribe bourgeois social relations into nature, so placing them beyond the reach of social change. In seeing something as an 'end in itself', I immortalize it, lift it out of the world of practical concerns, mystify its connection to society, and to the process of production and consumption on which human life depends . . . The ideological lie facilitates the material exploitation by generating a false consciousness that blinds us to the social truth.[20]

Terry Eagleton has also noted this political aspect of aesthetics, claiming that aesthetics became such an important category in Europe because "in speaking of art it speaks of . . . other matters too, which are at the heart of the middle class's struggle for political hegemony."[21] Briefly, Marxist philosophy considers the category of the beautiful an ugly tool wielded for the perpetuation of oppression and the consolidation of power by the ruling classes.

Beauty Rises

And yet . . . beauty rises. Despite the scorn and guile it has received (and continues to receive among certain factions of society), the study of aesthetics has once again become a burgeoning field. It may well be that this development was generated precisely because we twenty-first century Westerners find ourselves in a world of our own creation from which beauty has often been intentionally and methodically banished. It turns out that towering, unadorned, rectangular glass skyscrapers casting shadows over the miles and miles of concrete roads and sidewalks below are not good for the human spirit. It turns out that fluorescent-lit subway tunnels

[20] Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 52–53.

[21] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 3. Admittedly, this is only half of Eagelton's thesis. He also argues that the bourgeoise conception of the fine arts contains within it the seeds that finally subvert the very hegemony the ruling class strives thereby to secure.

and yellow cabs crawling in succession like so many ants fail to inspire. The steeple has given way to the smokestack, the tree to the aluminum streetlight, and something deep within the human psyche cries out, "Man does not live by utility alone!" As the late philosopher Roger Scruton so eloquently argued concerning beauty,

> Our need for beauty is not something that we could lack and still be fulfilled as people. It is a need arising from our metaphysical condition . . .seeking our place in a shared and public world. We can wander through this world, alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here, coming to rest in harmony with others and with ourselves. The experience of beauty . . . tells us that we *are* at home in the world, that the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place fit for the lives of beings like us.[22]

Beauty matters and it can only be expelled to our detriment.

Far from being the lone prophet crying for the readmittance of beauty, Scruton proves but one among many. Early in the twentieth century, many significant theologians took up the chorus. Even from such seemingly faraway fields as the sciences have herald voices been heard. Eminent psychiatrist, philosopher, and neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist, for example, argues that the stubbornness of beauty as a concept and the remarkable stability of the features humans attribute to it over time suggests that the perception of beauty, though not definable, is nevertheless *real*, constant, and, to a surprising extent, universal.[23]

Beauty rises. It is precisely because of the undeniably substantial role beauty plays in the human experience, precisely because all human beings have been confronted by beauty that I undertake this project. Whether considered "only just" a social construct (in the sense mentioned above) or a manifestation of God's *ousia*, beauty stubbornly, persistently, consistently surprises.

This dissertation, then, is intended to provide Christians a means by which to construe their

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[22] Scruton, *Beauty*, 145.

[23] Ian McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 443.

experience with beauty theologically, that is, with reference to God. Furthermore, it aims to sketch contours of the beautiful as a means by which to understand, receive, and participate in beauty, and to give an account of it.

In order to achieve that end, I will employ the doctrine of the Two Kinds of Righteousness as a framework for the understanding and perceiving of beauty, and as a guide for participation in beauty. Before proceeding, it will be helpful to provide a brief description of the aforementioned doctrine and three aspects. A far more trenchant discussion will follow, but for now it is enough to describe Two Kinds of Righteousness as a uniquely Lutheran contribution that distinguishes between righteousness before God (*coram Deo*) and righteousness before all creation (*coram mundo*). As for the three aspects of our relationship to beauty, we may say that understanding deals with the nature of beauty, what it is and what it does to us. Perceiving beauty concerns the human capacity to observe beauty in the created order. This ability to perceive beauty is universal, but necessarily mediated and particularized by a person's location in time, location, and situation. Participation in beauty entails how human beings may themselves be beautiful, how we may inhabit our unique, God-designed place in relation to creation and to God Himself.

This dissertation will be grounded according to what might be termed a creature-structured relationship to which the doctrine of the Two Kinds of Righteousness gives rise. By creature-structured, I am suggesting that human nature does not consist *exclusively* of features attributable to particular autonomous and self-contained creatures. Rather, a more comprehensive and Scriptural anthropology will privilege the particular relationships into which God has cast His human creatures—namely *coram Deo, coram mundo, coram hominibus,* and *coram meipso* (that is, before God, before the world, before other human beings, and before the self).

This dissertation, though abstract in its formation, will have incontrovertibly practical ramifications. For example, the conception of beauty presented here may open up new avenues for dialogue within Christian communities embroiled in controversy concerning appropriate liturgical arts; for parents and other guardians seeking a means by which to judge beauty, defend that judgment, and advocate for participation in the beautiful to those in their charge; for the Christian individual yearning to assert that her experience of beauty actually *means* something real that is nevertheless irreducible to a materialist explanation that would seek thereby to dismiss it as "only just" evolution, or "only just" a matter of cultural preference, and therefore ultimately meaningless. "Only just": the last apathetic words of those dancing on the lips of nihilism's maw.

Thesis

Discussions concerning beauty are by no means absent in Lutheran circles. Quite to the contrary, Martin Luther himself offered several of his own ruminations concerning this often elusive quality. His thoughts, however, were far from systematized or complete. Furthermore, his best-known and most significant contribution to the conversation was historically conditioned, a reaction to the prevailing Roman Catholic understanding of God's valuation of the human creature. It is in the Heidelberg Disputation that we see Luther's unique perspective most clearly.

In Thesis 28, Luther writes, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."[24] More will be said concerning Luther's approach later. For now, we may summarize the implications of this claim for beauty as follows: Beauty before God is not a quality sinful man may achieve on his

[24] Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, vol. 31, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 57.

own. To the contrary, beauty before God is a gift bestowed on sinful humanity on account of Christ's work on the cross which, though seemingly hideous, was in fact beautiful in so far as it made sinners righteous (i.e., beautiful) before God. This is the beauty of the cross. One may also speak of Christ's human obedience itself as beautiful, a theme concerning which Paul composes a veritable literary rhapsody in Phil. 2, though, granted, without specifically referring to it as "beautiful."

Lutherans have never faltered in touting this kind of beauty as it hinges on the doctrine of forensic justification. Conversely, Lutherans tend to be more than a little guarded and reticent concerning created beauty. More specifically, Lutherans typically resist providing criteria for what constitutes beauty in the created realm, largely due to lack of clarity regarding the *coram mundo* ramifications of justification *coram Deo*.

I contend that this apparent apprehensiveness unavoidably arises from Gospel reductionism which cannot (nor desires to) sketch the contours of God's will for His creation with any degree of specificity. As such, the Christian life becomes rather amorphous. Because of their innate interconnectedness, this moral formlessness impinges on Lutheran concepts of beauty, creating a lacuna in an otherwise robust first article theology. Mark Mattes, for example, contends that for Luther,

> the creation beauty, which is appropriate as a way to evaluate creaturely things as creaturely, includes the traditional medieval standards for beauty such as proportion, brightness, and perfection or integrity, even though they are hardly adequate for assessing beauty in creation.[25]

It would seem that the apparent insufficiency of those medieval criteria has left us rather mute on the subject as a whole. Consequently, our unwillingness to supply contours has left the door open

[25] Mark Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 107.

to the potentially deformative power of kitsch and desecration alike, as we are provided no tools to discern what is truly beautiful in the created realm.

Conversely, providing such criteria would enable Christians more clearly to understand, perceive, and participate in beauty, thus allowing them to receive it as God's gift and to commend it to others. To that end, I will employ the doctrine of the two kinds of righteousness to establish contours of beauty that will enable us to identify it within creation, contours that also necessarily must encompass the cross. In short, I will argue that beauty is God's persuasive rhetoric by which He draws human beings to the beautiful place, namely the nexus of our *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* reality.

I have selected the word "contours" as a necessary qualification and chastening, however. In this way, I intend to signal that although beauty may be described by various criteria, it can never be apprehended or confined by a definition. Rather, God's gift of beauty surprises and delights us with its ever-fecund manifestations and its propensity to exceed any definition (and therefore limitation) we would impose upon it. Nevertheless, this innate extravagance does not equate with formlessness. That human existence has a *telos* both now and in the new creation grants us license, if not to define, then to describe beauty meaningfully so that our affirmation of beauty's transgressive nature does not devolve into practical aesthetic agnosticism.

Beauty, then, is not purely subjective as many today either argue or assume. Neither, however, is beauty purely objective as many in the past have argued or assumed. To the contrary beauty is first and foremost God's rhetoric, His persuasive "for us" activity in which He aims to *do* something to and through us. In short, through beauty, God aims to draw us into our beautiful place, the *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* nexus.

The Dissertation in the Context of Current Scholarship

This dissertation seeks to answer the following question: What contours of beauty can be described *coram mundo* in order that we may understand, perceive, and participate in it? Toward this aim, we must first reckon with the nature of beauty as a concept. As was gestured toward above, the field of literature addressing the nature of beauty is both immense and immensely varied. Therefore, we must identify in which theological stream of beauty this dissertation seeks to swim.

In his work *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology As Aesthetics*, Jonathan King argues that all theological works concerning beauty may be subsumed under one of the following four categories: natural theology of beauty, theology of the arts, religious aesthetics, and theological aesthetics.[26] While this study falls into the last of these categories, it would be beneficial at least to survey the remaining three so as to clarify what aspects of beauty this proposal will *not* address in more than a tangential way.

King labels the first stream of theological inquiry into beauty as *natural theology of beauty*, which is primarily an apologetic endeavor. It often calls as its witness the common human experiences of awe, fear, and wonder. Their near universality evidences "the universal search for meaning and spiritual insight within human aesthetic experience." Here, beauty is not limited to art, but also seeks the corroboration of the natural sciences and mathematics. A common feature among works that fall into this category is an emphasis on highlighting a "clear resonance with the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty, along with the teleological character of creation."[27]

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[26] Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), chap. 1

[27] King, *Beauty of the Lord*, chap. 1.

Theology of arts, on the other hand, is not primarily apologetic in character. Rather, it "seeks to understand the place of the arts in the life of faith and in the religious community." In brief, it seeks to locate the significance of art within a religious community, arguing that art is not merely decoration, not merely ornamentation glued on to the discursive doctrine already established. On the contrary, art itself is a *locus* of theology. Far from being merely illustrative or didactic, art may also prove generative. Thus, the artist, in his or her creative acts, in some way "participates in the highest excellence of God." Art, then, is included in "God's creative and redemptive purposes," a formative and beneficial means of God's spiritual formation of His people.[28]

If theology of the arts focuses primarily on *generation*, then the third category (*religious aesthetics*) primarily emphasizes *perception*. It "serves to repudiate a purely intellectualist approach to the world, interpenetrating as it were the spiritual dimension of the natural world, works of culture and art, and cultivating spirituality via aesthetic perception and experience."[29] Briefly, religious aesthetics seeks to uncover the ways our faith is shaped not only by verbal, rational argument, but also by aesthetic experience in general.

King labels the final category, and the one in which we will operate, *theological aesthetics*. It is here that this dissertation finds its home. King asserts that in this final category

> beauty corresponds in some way to the attributes of God, and as such is a communicated property or phenomenon of the *opera Dei ad extra*. Inferred from the previous point is that the objective reality of beauty comes from its correspondence to the attributes of God; it is this correspondence that grounds a metaphysically realist view of beauty.[30]

That is, beauty is not *merely* in the eye of the beholder. The discerning of beauty is not a purely

[28] King, Beauty of the Lord, chap. 1.

[29] King, *Beauty of the Lord*, chap. 1.

[30] King, *Beauty of the Lord*, chap. 1.

perspectival affair. Rather, beauty is *in* "things" and in some way bears witness to or is analogous to the essence of God Himself.

Having isolated the field in which we will traffic, we will further narrow the funnel by introducing the primary voices with whom we will engage, offering, for the moment, a provisional evaluation at the end of each section.

Historical Survey

While this particular strand of thought reaches far back in church history, it has enjoyed a great renewal of interest beginning in the last century and continuing into our own. To gain a grasp of the foundations of these more recent developments, we return, briefly, to the sources.

Early and Medieval Christian Perspectives

This brief overview of the Christian conversations regarding beauty is especially warranted as many of the more recent theologians reach far back into church history for their inspiration. As we will see below in the section dealing with disenchantment, this development makes a great deal of sense given the historical circumstances. Though the three primary authors we engage below are not our main conversation partners, we will still evaluate them according to the above criteria (namely understanding, perceiving, and participating in beauty) in order to gain a greater familiarity with the pillars that undergird the theology of our own interlocutors.

As Paul Blowers notes in a very elucidating article written for the *Internation Journal of Systematic* Theology, the very early church fathers' thoughts about beauty were especially shaped by the cosmogonies of Platonism and Neoplatonism. That influence is probably seen most clearly in Origen whose cosmology was thoroughly influenced by the Platonic *gestalt* of his era. Hierarchical in nature, it descended

> from the realm of pure spirit down to coarse materiality and populated by angels, humans and demons punitively embodied according to the degree of their deviation from primordial union with the Logos.[31]

In essence, the more "material" a creature, the further removed it was from the One. That ontological gap could only be bridged by means of the Logos whose goal was to reunite creatures with their Origin by means of ascetic practices.[32]

From Augustine to Plotinus to Pseudo-Dionysius, the understanding of beauty was governed by the transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. Beautiful things are beautiful because they refer to the Source who is the ground of all beauty, because they are reflections of consummate Beauty. Beauty is, in the end, the being of *God*, and the beautiful things we see in this world (*vestigia Dei*) may serve as a ladder by which we ascend to their Source. As Elizabeth Thiessen put it, by and large, beauty was considered "something that attracts and something we love . . . Beauty is the course of everything beautiful and it unites everything. And in turn all creatures must yearn for that God who is Beauty and Goodness."[33] Such is the case when beauty does what God intended it to do. On the other hand, beautiful things may become distractions that tether our souls to this world, preventing their ascent to God.

Though St. Augustine would seem the most obvious *entre* into this line of thought, many of his extrapolations were first voiced by a slightly earlier theologian—the Cappadocian father Gregory of Nyssa. While it is true that Gregory absorbed much Platonic philosophy by way of Origen, Plotinus, Aristotle, and Plato himself, Natalie Carnes convincingly demonstrates that he did not allow Greek thought to dictate the terms of engagement. Quite to the contrary, Gregory's

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[31] Paul M. Blowers, "Beauty, Tragedy and New Creation: Theology and Contemplation in Cappadocian Cosmology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 1 (January 2016): 7, https://doi:10.1111/ijst.12136.7.

[32] Blowers, "Beauty, Tragedy and New Creation," 8.

[33] Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics,* 13.

Christian faith serves as the controlling narrative throughout.

Gregory of Nyssa

For this theologian, Natalie Carnes' excellent book on Gregory will serve as our guide. To begin with, Gregory affirms Plotinus's insistence that truth, goodness, and beauty are simply names of, or perhaps different aspects of, the One. For Gregory, however, the One is also eternally three, and it is in the work of the Trinity that sinful human beings may come to perceive and participate in beauty. For Plato, perception of beauty begins by a pupil's seeing a beautiful object and then ascending, ladder-like, to ever more beautiful manifestations. As one ascends the ladder aided by philosophical discourse, the rungs one mounts along the way are left behind. Indeed, one comes to *despise* those lesser forms of beauty subject to change and deterioration over time. Under the guidance of a wise instructor, material beauty ultimately gives way entirely to the beauty of that which is immaterial, namely "souls, practices, and institutions."[34]

Gregory adopts Plato's imagery of a ladder, but he also significantly reforms it. Firstly, one's journey into beauty begins not with the observation of a beautiful object that then leads to discourse, propelling one on to more beautiful objects. For Gregory, the understanding and perceiving of beauty begins with rhetoric, which is a means of laying open ever deeper appreciation for the fittingness and gratuity of a thing. These two terms warrant unpacking as they will resurface later.[35]

Instead of conceiving of beauty in terms of the commonly accepted binaries of disinterestedness and function, Gregory's writings give rise to fittingness and gratuity. Functionalism begins with criteria, with rules determining the purpose of an object. If it fulfills

[34] Carnes, *Beauty*, 67.

[35] Carnes, *Beauty*, 67.

its purpose, if it abides by those rules, then it is beautiful. And yet one gets the sense that something is being denied here, something intentionally ignored. A Styrofoam cup is a perfectly functional and adequate tool. It fulfills its purpose of holding a liquid so that a person can drink from it. And yet, our appreciation for cups extends beyond such basic requirements. "Functional beauty," Carnes points out, "is never merely functional. It is *exquisitely* suited to its function."[36] Afterall, "there is no need for a cup that is perfectly shaped and balanced for the purpose of drinking," yet "the way it is more excellently suited for drinking than I need it to be in order to drink out of it in this way exceeds my drinking purpose."[37] This realization undermines functionalism. It also, however, undermines the disinterested approach to beauty which would remove functionality from the conversation entirely. The "excellently suited" way in which a cup can *more than* fulfill its function gestures toward gratuity. That gratuity can be found in an object as functional as a cup undermines the arguments of proponents of disinterested beauty who would divorce it from any function whatever.

The question arises as to how fittingness and gratuity relate to Gregory's understanding of beauty as a moniker for God. For certainly, those two criteria of beauty could apply exceedingly well without reference to God at all. Yet, Gregory's Plotinian commitments necessitate that he demonstrate how God's actions rightly can be called fitting and gratuitous. He accomplishes this by drawing on the doctrine of God's transcendence. For Gregory, transcendence does not result in complete unknowability, but rather only in the inability to apprehend, that is, in the human powerlessness to grasp all of God at once because God is infinite. Consequently, God is not limited by the restrictions we would place on Him. Whereas the arch heretic Arius decried the

[36] Carnes, *Beauty*, 54.

[37] Carnes, *Beauty*, 54.

flesh as unfitting for God, the creaturely a diminution of His nature constituting the destruction of His transcendence, Gregory, on the other hand, argued that "not only is it not unfitting that God would become human, but that it is . . . perfectly fitting . . . God can be perfectly immanent as humanity without compromising God's divinity . . . precisely because God radically transcends all things."[38] More than that, what could be more fitting than that God would act to save His creatures? "What is fitting of God is love and particularly the form of love that is mercy. It is this love that goes out to those who are in need, this love that can be perfectly immanent in suffering because it radically transcends all things, that discloses the fittingness of God who is Beauty."[39] This line of argument not only succeeds in defending the incarnation as beautiful, but even the cross.

> But with Christ we learn that the paradigmatic beauty [God] . . . cannot be found apart from ugliness. Thus, while *creatio ex nihilo* gives the doctrine of a God in which radicalized fittingness and gratuity tell us that Beauty holds all things in existence; and while sin and finitude might suggest that the things Beauty holds in existence are in some respects ugly and therefore that beauty might mingle with ugliness; the Incarnation displays the way beauty *does* mix with ugliness, the way Beauty Itself is found in the movement toward poverty, affliction, and the divestment of glory. In other words, the Incarnation reveals for Gregory not just that beauty may happen to be near ugliness, but that beauty's nearness to ugliness is constitutive of its beauty.[40]

In essence, the cross itself is fitting and gratuitous because in that "ugly" action, God is doing not only what His radical transcendence renders possible, but what His character as the God of love renders infinitely fitting and gratuitous—God's kenosis in Christ, His self-emptying for the sake of ugly sinners.

Applying our three criteria above, Gregory understands beauty to be a name for God. One

[38] Carnes, *Beauty*, 120.

[39] Carnes, *Beauty*, 121.

[40] Carnes, *Beauty*, 169.

learns to perceive beauty through the "Spirit's training of the spiritual senses in the church" where "one is refashioned" by the outgoing love of God "into the kind of self that can see how a flower and a sacrifice can both merit the description beautiful. There one can see how both fine art and the poor participate in the dynamic of fittingness and gratuity that characterizes beauty."[41] Participation in beauty is participation in Christ's love for us by doing the beautiful, kenotic thing for those in ugly circumstances, not only because we become conduits of His love thereby, but also because Jesus has located Himself precisely in those whom we normally deem ugly.[42]

Augustine of Hippo

As mentioned earlier, St. Augustine was also heavily influenced by Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. Such influences shine through undimmed in his well-known and much beloved *Confessions*:

> I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation . . . The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all.[43]

While it may fairly be that Augustine was Platonizing, considering the soul the *true* identity of the human person, he was not Manichean. That is, he did not regard matter as sinful *per se*. That God would become a human being, that God is seen most clearly in that which is undeniably creaturely flies in the face of Manichean contempt of the physical.

Indeed, Augustine's thoughts regarding beauty evolved over time. Early in his life as a Christian, he called for Christians to turn inward. The human soul, created in the image of God,

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[41] Carnes, *Beauty*, 250.

[42] Carnes, *Beauty*, 204.

[43] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 231–32.

is higher in the hierarchy of being than that which is corporeal. Therefore, it behooves us to forgo attention to the temporal realm in favor of the soul, and from there to the Source, namely Beauty itself.[44]

As Augustine matured, however, the implications of the incarnation increasingly dawned on him. Indeed, he, like Gregory, came to see all of Christ's life as beautiful, even those aspects the untrained eye would deem hideous.

> He then is 'beautiful' in Heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb; beautiful in His parents' hands: beautiful in his miracles; beautiful under the scourge: beautiful when inviting to life; beautiful also when not regarding death: beautiful in "laying down His life"; beautiful in "taking it again": beautiful on the Cross; beautiful in the Sepulchre; beautiful in Heaven.[45]

Here, physicality does not rob the Son of His glory. Thus, Augustine developed a more positive stance toward corporeal beauty. Quite rightly, however, he does still warn against idolatry, that we not become "curiously absorbed in creation's number, form and measure."[46] On the contrary, we are constantly to recall from whence creaturely beauty derives its glory. Seen through the eyes of faith, temporal beauty may lead us not away from God, but toward Him. Indeed, that, according to Augustine, is precisely God's intention in creating beautiful things. The beautiful aspects of creation are to be used (*uti*) for the purpose of reaching the human *telos*, namely the enjoyment (*frui*) of God, an enjoyment that is its own end.

Nevertheless, one senses in Augustine an appreciation for created beauty which always carries with it a "might-as-well-make-the-best-of-it" attitude. "When man can no longer see and understand beauty in its rational, spiritual concept—the *subtilissima ratio* of the Platonists, God can nevertheless use earthly beauty . . . in order to draw fallen humanity to himself in faith, hope

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[44] Aidan Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 5–6.

[45] Quoted in Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 31.

[46] Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*, 8.

and love."[47] That God uses corporeal beauty reveals a decidedly more friendly view of created things. Still, choice of the word "nevertheless" is rather revealing. As with Gregory, the ladder of beauty is operative in Augustine's theology. And though the physical is not altogether left behind, one gets the impression that Augustine nevertheless leans toward a "might-as-well-make-the-best-of-it" disposition toward created beauty.

How, then, do we participate in beauty? If God is the source of beauty, then the more we contemplate God, the more beautiful humans become. God is holy, therefore the more we participate in holiness, the greater our beauty. For Augustine, though, we are able to ascend from earthly beauty to the source of beauty by the grace of God in which He manifested Himself in the incarnation which not only legitimates the ascription of "beautiful" to the created realm, but also served as the means by which Augustine was able to behold Beauty Itself, leaving his idolatrous love of earthly beauty behind.[48] Indeed, it is through the desire inspired in us by the beauty of the incarnate God, through *love* of that Beauty, that the deformation which sin has worked in us is transformed into beauty, which is, in fact, love.[49]

Thomas Aquinas

By and large, the church in the Middle Ages further elaborated much of the ground first tilled by their predecessors in the faith. Several theologians could be addressed, but Aquinas alone will suffice for our purposes, as he looms large in the theology of Balthasar. He is not alone in this. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to find a theological work concerning aesthetics that does not in some way reference Aquinas's thought.

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[47] Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty*, 9.

[48] The intentional capitalization of "Beauty Itself" signals that we are now speaking of God, Beauty serving as one of the divine names. I am indebted to Natalie Carnes for this shorthand. See *Beauty*, xi.

[49] Nichols, *Beauty*, 10.

Aquinas set for himself a monumental task. He aimed to synthesize the platonically influenced early theologians with the rediscovered philosophy of Aristotle, an endeavor toward which his contemporary Bonaventure was skeptical to no small degree.[50] Unlike Plato, Aristotle insisted that it "is inconceivable that there should be any . . . form which was not the form of some body . . . [We] must accept that forms are logically incapable of existing without the bodies of which they are forms. Forms indeed do not themselves exist, nor come to be, in the way in which substances exist and come to be."[51] As he brought this line of thinking into dialogue with extant theological works, Aquinas gained a greater appreciation of the created realm than Augustine and his contemporaries expressed, who likewise had been more heavily influenced by Plato, Plotinus, Origen, and so forth.

What, then, is beauty for Aquinas? Perhaps surprisingly, that is a matter of some debate. The argument hinges on the question of the transcendentals. They are the first principles, the necessary "backstops" to infinite regression of human knowledge. In other words, they are the necessary givens.[52] More than that, they are the "concomitant conditions of being" which "thus transcend the particular modes of being" and are "properties of being as such."[53] Among them he lists being, unity, truth, and goodness, for they are common to all things.[54] For Aquinas, the transcendentals, as for the earlier theologians we have encountered, are also divine names,

[50] Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 151–52.

[51] Kenny, *Western Philosophy*, 83.

[52] Jan A. Aersten, "The Philosophical Importance of the Doctrine of the Transcendentals in Thomas Aquinas." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 52, no. 204 (1998): 252, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23954584.

[53]Jan A Aertsen, "Beauty in the Middle Ages: A Forgotten Transcendental?" in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, vol. 1. (1991), 69.

[54] Aersten, "Philosophical Importance," 268.

because God is the cause of what is most common.[55]

Interestingly, Aquinas does not actually name beauty among the transcendentals, at least not explicitly. Jan Aersten claims that Aquinas certainly did *not* consider beauty a transcendental: "No texts affirm that the beautiful is a universal property of being or express explicitly the transcendentality of beauty" and that "the arguments that have been advanced for the status of the beautiful as a distinct transcendental are unsound for philosophical and historical reasons."[56] He arrives at this conclusion by claiming that Aquinas never actually distinguished the beautiful from the good, indicating that beauty cannot properly be called a transcendental.[57] Beauty is, according to Aersten, identical with the other transcendentals, "an extension of the true and the good, an extension that is possible because the true and the good include one another."[58]

Umberto Eco, for his part, argues that Aquinas most certainly *did* regard beauty as a transcendental, if not explicitly, then at least implicitly. While he was not brazen in his assertions, Aquinas made references to the works of others who certainly made the claim, such as Pseudo-Dionysius. A degree of reticence on Aquinas' part, more so in the *Summa* than in his earlier works, is attributable to two factors, Eco says. Firstly, Aquinas was no longer trying to popularize Pseudo-Dionysius (whom he was trying to popularize earlier in his *Commentary on the Divine Names*), and secondly because "his conception of beauty was not implicit in his theoretical system as a whole" and there was no further necessity "to insist upon the

[55] Aersten, "Philosophical Importance," 267.

[56] Aersten, "Beauty in the Middle Ages," 71–72.

[57] Aersten, "Beauty in the Middle Ages," 97.

[58] Aersten, "Beauty in the Middle Ages," 97.

transcendental character of beauty."[59] Eco nicely lays out the implications of suggesting that beauty is a transcendental, one that concerns being, the other beauty itself. He avers, "First, the various determinations of being are affected: the universe acquires a further perfection, and God acquires a new attribute. Beauty . . . acquires concreteness and a quality of necessity, an objectivity and dignity."[60]

The arguments for and against beauty's status as a transcendental in Aquinas' work are many and detailed. They also pull us too far afield from the goal of this dissertation. It is enough for us to accept that for Aquinas, beauty is, in some way, an aspect of being, whether that be under the heading of being itself, or under the transcendentals of the Good and the True which are concomitant in all being. That deals with (admittedly with a certain degree of ambiguity) *what* Aquinas holds beauty to be.

How then do we perceive beauty? Eco will serve as our guide here. Very tersely, Aquinas described beauty as that which pleases when seen. Here, however, seeing is not primarily a matter of the eyes, but of intellectual seeing, a seeing of the *soul* which perceives by means of the senses. What then pleases our intellect? That which exhibits "*integritas* (perfection of form), *claritas* (the splendor of proportioned form), and *consonantia* (the harmony of proportioned form)."[61] Often these terms are referred to without delving into what Aquinas actually meant by them. It is only within the context of his entire system of thought that we can glimpse Aquinas' intentions, and their interconnectedness.

Aquinas, Eco says, uses proportion to refer to several different qualities. Firstly, it can refer

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[59] Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 47.

[60] Eco, *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 22.

[61] Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 59.

to "the appropriateness of matter to form, the adequacy of a potentiality to its organizing principle."[62] Secondly, there is the "relation of essence to existence, a proportion which, although it cannot be experienced aesthetically, makes aesthetic experience possible by giving concreteness to things."[63] Thirdly, there is a psychological aspect of proportion which enables judgment by relating the "knower and the known," so that "we discover our own connaturality with their proportions, that there are proportions also in ourselves."[64]

There is yet a fourth category of proportion critical to Aquinas' take on aesthetics. Referred to by scholastics as the *perfectio prima* (or the "first perfection"), this last category has to do with "the adequacy of a thing to itself and to its function."[65] This, Eco says, relates to *integritas*, the "presence in an organic whole of all the parts which concur in defining it as that which it is."[66] For example, Aquinas claims that people missing limbs are ugly because the portion of parts to the whole is off.

This *perfectio prima* feeds directly into the *perfectio secunda* (the "second perfection"), in which a thing "operates in accordance with its proper finality."[67] Indeed this second perfection governs the first, because it is the final cause of a thing that ought to direct its structure. A human artifact, for example, is beautiful if "it is adequate to its scope."[68] His was a teleological view of beauty which Eco says highlights the Medieval tendency to consider ugly that which "did not relate to a hierarchy of ends centered on man and his supernatural destiny; and this in turn was

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[62] Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 76.

[63] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 77.

[64] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 77.

[65] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 77–78.

[66] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 78.

[67] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 78.

[68] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 78.

because of a structural imperfection which rendered it inadequate for its function."[69]

This brings us finally to Aquinas' third criterion, *claritas*, which Eco translates as clarity, splendor, or light.[70] While for the Neoplatonist, *claritas* came from above and "diffused itself creatively in the world," gathering and solidifying things, for Aquinas, light came from below. *Claritas* was "the organizing form manifesting itself."[71] Ontologically, *claritas* corresponds to the "lyricism or symbolism or the iconicity of form."[72] It is through the *visio* that one perceives and grasps the organic nature of a thing, "and the intellect can enjoy the beauty of its discipline and order."[73] Thus, Eco elucidates the often abused quote from Aquinas that what pleases when seen constitutes the beautiful. *Visio* is not simply an intuited and immediate reaction. Rather it is judgment, a "'dialogue' with its object," which "entails activities of collocating and distinguishing, the mensuration of parts with respect to the whole, studies of how the matter lends itself to the form, an awareness of purposes and of how adequately they are fulfilled."[74] Perhaps we may briefly put Aquinas' view of the perception of beauty as follows. The perception of beauty hinges on the subject's comprehension of the object's *telos*, the degree to which it fulfills that *telos*, and the extent to which the object itself bears witness to its *telos*. The last of these two points seems to correspond to Gregory's notion of gratuity, that it is not only function that counts, but the *fit* of a thing to its *telos* and the extravagant manner in which it "lives into" that *telos*.

What, then, of participating in beauty? If we follow Eco's interpretation, then for Aquinas,

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[69] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 80.

[70] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 81.

[71] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 81.

[72] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 81.

[73] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 81–82.

[74] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 82.

as for Augustine, beauty, truth, and goodness are essentially the same thing, only considered from different aspects.[75] Thus, human participation in beauty entails a participation in the true and the good, and therefore also in all the aforementioned facets of beauty, namely *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas*.

Depending on whose interpretation is accepted, the three preceding theologians present us with perspectives of beauty that overlap significantly. The five following shared features are relevant for what follows below. Firstly, God is beautiful. Secondly, while earthly beauty is always partial, the physical is nevertheless beautiful because of its origin. Thirdly, all three assume the transcendental nature of being. That is, all three take for granted that all being participates in beauty, goodness, and truth. Or, to put it another way, all being may be viewed from the perspectives of beauty, goodness, or truth—hence, transcendental. Fourthly, the Incarnation proves that what is beautiful does not necessarily present itself instantaneously. Perception of beauty requires contemplation, and, in the case of the crucifixion, a perception that must first undergo a spiritual transformation. Finally, beauty is a matter of fittingness and gratuity, that is, there is a degree to which beautiful things fulfill their *telos* to a degree that exceeds our expectations.

Contemporary Interlocutors

As was mentioned previously, the influence of the theologians above endures. That is especially true of the two modern theologians who will serve as our primary conversation partners for this dissertation, Hans Urs von Balthasar and David Bentley Hart. Though speaking from the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions respectively, these authors unite over a shared

[75] Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 82.

fear—namely the disenchantment of the world, the separation of nature from the supernatural. We will discuss disenchantment in greater detail below. For now, the following brief synopsis will suffice.

The number of philosophers and theologians who lay the blame of disenchantment at the feet of Modernity is too long to catalogue. For many, the flower of Modernity did not bear its heaviest fruit until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was during this time that what William Everdell refers to as the "atomization" of reality became fully manifest.

> The heart of Modernism is the postulate of ontological discontinuity. So much of the thought and art of the twentieth century follows from atomism that thus far there has been no going back on it, even in the ages of structuralism and postmodernism. We cannot help seeing the objects of our knowledge as discrete and discontinuous – digital rather than analog. Everything from the gene and the quantum to the image and the phenomenological *epoché* defies the insistence on evolution, fields, seamlessness, and *Entwicklung* to be found everywhere in nineteenth-century thought.[76]

Briefly, Modernity saw reality as fundamentally fragmented, a world that would strike as alien Aquinas and his contemporaries for whom the universe was integrated. Although, for the Medievals, aspects of the world certainly were *distinguishable*, they were not seen as *divided*, as discreet monads, but as fluid.[77] The Moderns, on the other hand, delighted in dissecting and pulling apart. Indeed, the Moderns held it as a truism that only by breaking a thing down into its constituent parts could it truly be *known*, truly *understood*. Josef Pieper, however, argued that the motive behind fragmentation extended beyond mere comprehension. A direct line can be traced, he suggested, from Francis Bacon, to Renes Descartes, to Karl Marx who claimed "that up until

[76] William Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 351.

[77] See Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 15. "The concept of integration comes to suggest itself in a central explanatory role, where an integrated culture is taken to mean a culture whose value systems are related to one another, within the culture's necessary limitations, by mutual implication. This integration of values makes it difficult for us to understand nowadays the absence in medieval times of a distinction between beauty . . . and utility or goodness."

his time philosophy saw its task as one of interpreting the world, but that now its task was to *change* the world."[78] Modernity looked upon the world "as the raw material of human activity," a world over which human beings could don the mantle of "lords and masters."[79] It is in these disintegrated waters that the founders of *Nouvelle Theologie* swam . . . and decidedly upstream at that.

Nouvelle Theologie

Essentially, *Nouvelle Theologie* is the appellation given to a twentieth century attempt to repair the Neo-Scholastic tearing apart of the natural from the supernatural. French theologian Henri de Lubac argued that such separation had its origins with the well-known Reformation era Roman Catholic theologian Thomas de Vio, later known as Cardinal Cajetan.[80] De Lubac claims that Cajetan proceeded under the assumption that Aquinas was a thoroughgoing Aristotelian and appropriated as his own the anthropology of Aristotle's *Physics*. Here, human nature became a reality "essentially closed in on itself, with its own intrinsic powers, desires and goals."[81] While intending to fight back against some strands in the developing Protestant theology that referred to the total depravity of human nature, Cajetan ascribed to human nature so much value that he "ended with a two-storey model of nature and grace, juxtaposing the two, as it were, treating grace in relation to nature as essentially extrinsic and adventitious."[82] De Lubac attacked two other Thomistic schools of thought as well, one which argued that human longing for the beatific

[78] Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. by Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 1998), 78.

[79] Pieper, *Leisure*, 79.

[80] Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 136.

[81] Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 136.

[82] Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 136.

vision was not innate, but rather a "vague and ineffective velleity."[83] The other interpreted Thomas as arguing that humans do not have a longing for the beatific vision at all, but rather for a simply natural knowledge of God.

In a highly controversial move, De Lubac argued that Aquinas was no thoroughgoing Aristotelian after all. He was influenced by The Philosopher, yes. But "Aquinas's Aristotle was effectively a Neo-Platonist," assuming no *final* or *"clean*" separation of the natural from the supernatural.[84] Drawing on Eric Mascall, Kerr suggests that for Aquinas "the Christian doctrine of finite begins as dependent realities means that it is the essence of the finite to be incomplete—to be essentially open, that is, open to the activity of God, who without annulling or withdrawing anything given can always give more . . ."[85] If De Lubac (and Kerr) were correct, their pre-Cajetan interpretation of Aquinas would drive a stake straight through the heart of disenchantment.

Although the major figures in the *Nouvelle Theologie* movement were not unified in their method, they all pursued the same objective: the re-enchantment the world, the denial of the existence of any "purely natural" world beyond a hypothetical one. Indeed, all of creation was sacrament. While some reached back to Aquinas (instead of later commentors on Aquinas such as Cajetan), others went even further back to the Eastern fathers who (as we have seen in the case of Gregory of Nyssa) were heavily influenced by Neoplatonism. Having said that, Aquinas himself was not unaffected by Platonists, especially Pseudo-Dionysius. Therefore, the proponents of *Nouvelle Theologie* did not necessarily find themselves at odds with Aquinas, at least as interpreted by the likes of De Lubac.

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[83] Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 137.

[84] Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 137.

[85] Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 146.

Broadly speaking, however, there were two schools within *Nouvelle Theologie*. One emphasized the ascent of humanity (as per Henri De Lubac), and the other the descent of God into space and time.[86] The second emphasized not so much human ascent, but divine *kenosis*.[87] Indeed, as Hans Boersma helpfully points out, while "De Lubac used his sacramental ontology to highlight that it was really *supernatural grace* in which nature participated . . . Balthasar used the same sacramental ontology to stress that it was *nature* itself that participated in supernatural grace."[88] In both schools, however, the objective was the same, namely the re-enchantment of the world.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Agreeing with de Lubac, Balthasar laid at the feet of Neo-Scholasticism the blame for the total flattening of society.[89] In his seminal work *The Glory of the Lord*, he sought to re-enchant the world by means of the transcendentals. Granted, this method does not spark hope for anything particularly novel or unique. What *was* original, however, was the order in which he presented the transcendentals. In a clear shot across the bow of Immanuel Kant, whose three most famous works address respectively truth, goodness, and beauty, Balthasar begins with the beautiful which he does not hesitate to label a transcendental (unlike Aersten with reference to Aquinas).

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[86] Hans Boersma, "Nature and the Supernatural in La Nouvelle Theologie: The Recovery of a Sacramental Mindset," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1043 (January 2012): 41.

[87] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 157.

[88] Boersma, "Nature and the Supernatural," 41.

[89] Boersma, "Nature and the Supernatural," 36: "The notion of pure nature was, in the neo-Thomist tradition, a human state in which God hypothetically could have created Adam. That is to say, according to his absolute power God could have created Adam without original justice and sanctifying grace . . . Out of concern to minimize any kind of inherent link between nature and the supernatural, the Thomist tradition had turned *pura natura* from hypothesis into reality." In other words, in an effort to defend grace, Neo-Scholastics finally envisioned a creation that had no connection to God whatsoever, hence a flattening.

Why begin with beauty? Beauty holds the place of priority because of its capacity to unite. That is, the world presents itself as a whole to human beings *through aesthetic perception* which is, in point of fact, the human being's primary mode of being in the world.[90] Without beauty also, both truth and goodness lose attractiveness and cogency, and subsequently their suasive capacities.[91]

Now, because all beings receive their being from God, and because being consists of the transcendentals, beings also participate in these transcendentals. As Aidan Nichols helpfully summarizes it

> 'To exist' means to belong to the transcendental network of being and thus to be related to all other things. Indeed, it could be said that if being, with its transcendental determinations, were *not* shared by all things, then philosophically speaking every object would be absolutely distinct from every other, and we would not live in a *world*—a common universe—at all.[92]

That is precisely what Modernity destroyed . . . a common universe. According to Balthasar, this "world," then, is held together by its participation in being, the aspects of which are known as the transcendentals. Nevertheless, on account of their finitude, beings only partially participate in the transcendentals. Creatures are "unfinished" and what they lack God supplies with His self-donation in Jesus Christ. In short, human beings have only partial or limited access to being through the participation of beings in the transcendentals.

Balthasar, then, was convinced that human beings are capable of touching on the real, or being itself. Such access is granted first and foremost, however, not through our *ratio*. We are, he argued, primarily *aesthetic* creatures. As such, our introduction to being comes first not through

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[90] This view arrived at philosophically has been born out *scientifically* also through the works of Iain McGilchrist and others.

[91] von Balthasar, *GL*, 19.

[92] Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 6.

logic, but through the perception of form.[93] As a transcendental, beauty is a property that inheres in all beings. By perceiving the beauty inherent in the relationship between things, we are drawn from these *beings* to being, and from being to the source of being—*God*. This beauty is, however, analogical in that while the *dissimilarity* of what we predicate of God and of humans is always greater than the *similarity*, nevertheless,

> Created being would not be an image and . . . 'outflow' of the sovereign and living God if its transcendentals were static properties, clear and evident to our view, or if, despite their immanence in all contingent beings, they did not have something of the freedom and mysterious depths of God's decision to reveal himself.[94]

This beauty captures us, stirs wonder in us, and generates *eros* in us, such that we desire to be united with it. Experientially, then, we are confronted by created form in a manner analogous to the way in which we are arrested by a work of art.[95] It is an *aesthetic* experience that draws us ever in.

Balthasar here distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetics: *aesthetic theology* and *theological aesthetics*.[96] The former aims at Kant for whom beauty was a universal subjective. As Kant himself put it: "the judgment of taste, accompanied with the consciousness of separation from all interest, must claim validity for every man, without this universality depending on objects. That is, there must be bound up with it a title to subjective universality."[97] In other

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[93] Later, we will see that Balthasar's contention that human beings navigate the world primarily through perception or intuition has been substantiated by recent developments in psychiatry and neuroscience.

[94] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A.V. Littledale and Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Crossroads, 1989), 111.

[95] Davies, Oliver, "The Theological Aesthetics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 134.

[96] "Man's habit of calling beautiful only what strikes *him* as such appears insurmountable, at least on earth . . . a theology that makes use of such concepts will sooner or later cease to be a 'theological aesthetics'—that is, the attempt to do aesthetics at the level and with the methods of theology—and deteriorate into an 'aesthetic theology' by betraying and selling out theological substance to the current viewpoints of an inner-worldly theory of beauty." Hans Urs von Balthasar, GL I: 37.

[97] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1964), 46.

words, human beings determine the beautiful (hence "*taste*" even if universalizable), leading to a flattening of the world, a disassociation of beauty with the transcendent, an obsessive focus on beings with a remarkable disregard for being.

In contradistinction, Balthasar argues that in *theological aesthetics*, *God* is the subject. Beauty is not merely a term given to the subjective experience generated by our senses. Beauty is participation by analogy of form in being itself precisely because reality has a hidden depth to it, and "God is the mystery present in all reality."[98] Beauty is "the meeting-place of finite form with infinite light."[99] More definitively, it is the analogous participation of forms in God who was revealed most luminously in the cross.[100]

Now, without progressing beyond his *Theological Aesthetics* and on to his *Theo-Drama*, one could get the impression that God reveals Himself as an icon, a standard of perfection to which humans must ascend. If this were true, beauty would be a static perfection that inheres all forms (to greater or lesser extent), a beauty which requires our approach and contemplation. But, as noted earlier, Balthasar has a much more top-down approach. The Theo-Drama reveals the us-ward trajectory of God's revelation.

> The divine ground actually approaches us . . . and it challenges us to respond. And although this unique phenomenon was described in terms of 'glory', it was increasingly clear from the outset that it withdrew farther and farther away from any merely contemplative gaze and hence could not be translated into any neutral truth or wisdom that can be 'taught'.[101]

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[98] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 157.

[99] Nichols, *Key to Balthasar*, 18.

[100] Nichols argues that the centrality of the cross in Balthasar was due to Barth's influence. Unlike Barth, however, Jesus Christ, while at the center, is not the sole analogue between God and the world. Nicholas, *Key to Balthasar*, 20.

[101] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 16. Hence forth, this will be abbreviated as TD I.

Therefore, the first move is not from human beings to an icon. Rather humans are granted freedom to make this "response" by God's freedom having made room for ours. Indeed, God relates to us in a manner that coincides with human nature. That is, His self-revelation in forms in the unfolding of the Theo-Drama is a revelation which human beings can perceive and to which they are able to give themselves over.[102]

But does this definition go too far? Does not his insistence on the nature of beauty as an "outflow" from God erase the distinction between God and everything else, a distinction upon which Scripture seems to insist? Does it not, in practice, devolve into bald-faced pantheism? We will address this concern in greater detail below, yet a preliminary response to these questions is warranted. Quite simply, no. Balthasar does not fall prey to pantheism. Rather, he walks the line between total separation between divine and creaturely (a move that would contradict Acts 17:28)[103] and total identification of the creaturely with the divine on the other. Balthasar manages neither to confuse nor to detach the world from God by means of proportionalism, or analogy, making of creation a trace of the infinite.[104]

Balthasar's construal of beauty's perception bears significant resemblance to that of Aquinas. Beauty, as a transcendental, is a property inherent in all being. And yet, beauty cannot be *apprehended* by employing the Modernistic method of disintegration or fragmentation, of reduction to the smallest possible constituent parts. Far from being isolated in atomized, isolated

[102] Balthasar hails Mary as the supreme example of this "giving over" which he labels "disponibility." See Ben Quash, "The Theo-drama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50.

[103] "For 'In him we live and move and have our being';"

[104] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aethetics*, vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Rowan Williams, ed. Brian McNeil and John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 626–27. From this point forward, I will refer to this volume as GL V.

things, we perceive beauty in things *by their relationship to other things*. This manner of perception is, in fact, aesthetic. That is, beauty becomes apparent when we contemplate things in the world much as we might a piece of art, without isolating them from their context, from their relationship to the whole. Thus, we gaze at things, not in a way that reduces them to their smallest constituent parts, but in a way that never leaves their context behind. The particular cannot be extracted from the whole without suffering damage, without effacing the beauty that radiates from the *very relationship* of one thing to other things. In the observation of beauty in the world, then, the mind is thoroughly engaged, but its primary form of engagement is receptivity and contemplation of the web of the interrelatedness of things.

As mentioned above, Balthasar distinguishes himself from among other members of the *Nouvelle Theologie* movement in terms of participation (and for our purposes, participation in beauty in particular). Briefly it is a question of the primary direction of dynamism. While he does adopt a Neoplatonic-like framework, for Balthasar, participation was not a matter of *ascent*, but of *descent*, namely the *descent* of God, the *descent* of beauty.[105] God, not human creatures, are the prime movers. God makes the first move, although human beings must (in freedom) ascend to that which presents itself to them.[106]

David Bentley Hart

Critical to a clear understanding of Hart's project is the answer to the following question: "What is he afraid of?" In brief, Hart, like Balthasar, fears the disintegration of reality ushered in

[105] von Balthasar, TD I: 16.

[106] Obviously, the "ascent" language will sound spurious to Lutheran ears. What of the innately adversarial relationship between sinners and God? Even with the reversed arrows of God's condescension there remains the hatred of sinners who are evil for the God who is holy, hatred of sinners who have become ugly for the God who is beauty. How, then, can sinful human beings participate in the beauty of God without some decision on God's part? I will address this more comprehensively below.

by modernism. But more than that he hears the metanarrative of violence which he conceives of as the only possible consequence of *post*modernism. Hart describes the Enlightenment project in this way:

> The art of dialectic, assuming the aspect of a 'neutral' rationality, dissembles its purely suasive intervals by submerging them within the sequences of its style; it achieves the appearance of seamless logic by way of a rhetorical effect, a ploy that makes all its unspoken premises and semantic instabilities invisible to its audience. [107]

Nietzsche recognized this too. For him, all modes of argumentation (modernity's rationalism included) were finally nothing more than veiled (sometimes ornately so) power-grabs, attempts to impose the *will* of some over the rest. But the quest for power was not limited to rational argumentation. All areas of life had the same objective. Aesthetics was no different. Postmodernity set out to overthrow the status quo, not merely broadening the sense of the beautiful (as the Romantics had done)[108] but to disclose the concept of beauty as yet another imposition of will in matters of taste.

What, then, distinguishes modernity from postmodernity in Hart's mind? He argues that, despite its herculean efforts to shake off the shackles of modernity, postmodernity is nothing other than the sharpening and even the culmination of modernity. Hart notes,

> The 'modern' indicates not a single comprehensive narrative, but a single metanarrative ambition: a desire to transcend the conditioned finitude and contingency of stories by discovering the meaning, limits, and motives of all stories, by way of a representation of the absolute, the universal, or the rational.[109]

In this, Hart concurs with Lyotard's assessment of the modern to postmodern shift as a pivot from one controlling metanarrative to the development of a multiplicity of "little narratives" (the

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[107] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 6.

[108] Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: Norton, 2008), 253–54.

[109] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 6.

petit recit).[110] The *petit recit* replaces the metanarrative because it allows for even more successful assertion of the will over particular spheres.[111] Thus, for Hart, postmodernism finally fails to defeat the violent tendencies of modernism. On the contrary, postmodernity further tightened the knots, leading, in some ways, to an even more oppressive captivity—the subsuming of every *petit recit* under a single *objective*—the acquisition of power. It is precisely against this hypermodern (rather than true *post*modern) approach that Hart reacts.

> Christian thought stands outside the opposition that is presumed within either a metaphysics of ontological hypotaxis (such as any idealism describes) or a metaphysics of ontological rupture (such as postmodernism professes); it knows only the beauty of being's parataxis, its open, free, serial, and irreducible declaration of glory; it grasps being neither as an immobile synthesis that stands over against and sublates every utterance, nor as the sheer cacophony of aleatory violence, but as rhetoric, the outward address and proclamation of the God who has eternally spoken, who speaks, and who will speak, the God who "others" Himself in Himself (in the Trinity) and contains and surrenders otherness as infinite music, infinite discourse.[112]

In essence, God (the infinite) is beauty in that He makes room for the other, first in the *perichoresis* of the inter-trinitarian life and (by extension) by making room for created being in the taking up into Himself of humanity in the incarnation. Hart turns to the *analogia entis* to show how all these existents[113] to which God grants space harmoniously "hang together" as a generous, joyful, loving outpouring of God's infinity into the finite. And thus, the distance between the infinite and the finite is not some metaphysical violence or loss, not a tragedy of

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[110] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1984), xxiv.

[111] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 46: "The production of proof . . . thus fall under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity . . . The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power."

[112] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 181.

[113] This term will be used rather frequently throughout the dissertation. By it, I intend any existing thing, anything that God has brought into existence out of nonexistence.

ontology that must be overcome, but rather a *kenosis* of the infinite which allows the finite to exist, to "stand out."[114]

As with the fathers, so also with Hart. The finite is beautiful because of its origin in the infinite. Hart describes what this beauty looks like in the first part of his book. Firstly, beauty is objective. By this claim, Hart in no way intimates something along the lines of a Golden Ratio promoted by the likes of Phidias and Plato. Again, beauty is objective, not in the sense that it can be quantified, qualified, and calculated, but rather in such a way that defies the very type of comprehension the term 'objectivity' seems to suggest.

> There is an overwhelming givenness in the beautiful, and it is discovered in astonishment, in an awareness of something fortuitous, adventitious, essentially indescribable; it is known only in the moment of response, from the position of one already addressed and able now only to reply.[115]

The attempt to define, to comprehend, to grasp beauty, robs it of that which is essential to its very nature.

Not only is it impossible to define beauty without remainder—it is also impossible to define it without *injury*. This is true for Hart because beauty is neither a purely subjective experience generated internally nor a concept reducible to clear and complete criteria. Rather, "In the beautiful God's glory is revealed as something communicable and intrinsically delightful . . . The Christian use of the word 'beauty' refers most properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and return of the riches of being."[116] It is an objectivity that does not reduce beauty to an object.[117] Doxological description, rather than imprisoning definition, becomes the primary (in fact, *only*) way we may speak of beauty. We have in beauty neither the

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[114] See especially Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 247.

[115] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 17.

[116] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 18.

[117] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 18.

hopelessness of equivocity, nor the banality of univocity, but the wonder-inducing gift of analogy shining forth with God's glory.

Secondly, Hart describes beauty as "the true form of distance."[118] Distance and difference are not negative, are not that which is to be overcome. On the contrary, God created with a distance between Himself and His creation, a distance which He declared to be good. Writes Hart, "At the level of ordinary experience, the distance within the beautiful is found in the space between oneself and the object held in one's regard, as well as the distance between that object and an infinite horizon."[119] And here, the shape of that distance is peace, that is, the beholding of another that does not devolve into the violence of subjugation.

Thirdly, peace is not the only defining feature of beauty. Hart claims that beauty calls forth desire, and that for two reasons. "First, beauty is not simply the invention of a fecund, unpremised . . . desire that preexists the object of its appetite . . . but precedes and elicits desire, supplicates and commands it . . . and gives shape to the will that receives it."[120] In some ways, this reiterates his first point concerning objectivity. Beauty is not a feeling, emotion, or concept our will forces on us. Rather, beauty, in a sense, confronts us in such a way that it actually shapes us, shapes our will. "It is the pleasingness of the other's otherness, the goodness that God sees in creation."[121] We are shaped by the external word of beauty such that it generates desire in us. Furthermore, Hart argues that "it is genuine desire", that is, neither mere intellectual contemplation *about* something, nor the "shadow" of desire that would "consume and dispose"

[118] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 18.

[119] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 19.

[120] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 19.

[121] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 19.

of that which is beautiful.[122] As an example of what true desire is *not,* one might imagine the enthusiast who, while claiming to cherish butterflies, kills them and pins them to boards. This is a beauty-inspired craving that destroys the otherness (the form of beauty) by seeking to grasp it by violence and make it one's own. For this reason, desire must be trained because "the beautiful does not always immediately commend itself to every taste."[123] Here surfaces a recurring theme we have seen thus far. The desires, the tastes, must be educated. Human beings (sinful human beings) are not predisposed to find as beautiful the things of God, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, for instance.

Fourthly, "beauty crosses boundaries."[124] Here, Hart draws directly from Balthasar who wrote, "Crossing these boundaries so forgetfully belongs to the essence of the beautiful and of aesthetics almost by necessity."[125] What are the boundaries beauty supersedes? They are the real from the ideal, "transcendent from immanent, supernatural from natural."[126] That is, as a transcendental, the beautiful overcomes the chasm between nature and supernature dug by Neo-Scholasticism (as mentioned above). But more than that, because beauty is the mode of glory that "commends [nature] to the delight of the creature," "beauty shows nature to be an intonation of grace and creation to be full of divine splendor."[127]

Fifthly, "Beauty's authority, within theology, guards against any tendency toward gnosticism,"[128] and this for two reasons. Firstly, "worldly beauty shows creation to be the real

[122] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 19.

[123] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 20.

[124] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 20.

[125] von Balthasar, GL I: 34.

[126] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 20.

[127] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 20.

[128] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 21.

theater of divine glory."[129] This creation in which we live, from which we've been taken, is not a dark cave wall on which shadows dance. On the contrary, creation "is first and foremost a surface, a shining fabric of glory, whose inmost truth is its aesthetic correspondence to the beauty of divine love, as it is eternally expressed by the Trinity: a sacramental order of light."[130] Higher praise for the created world can hardly be imagined. Secondly, beauty resists gnosticism in that it "shows the world to be unnecessary, an expression of divine glory that is free, framed for God's pleasure, and so neither a defining moment in the consciousness of God nor the consequence of some defect or fall within the divine."[131] If creation exists for God's pleasure it can hardly be imagined that we should reject it.

In the sixth place, Hart states that "Beauty resists reduction to the 'symbolic'."[132] By "symbolic" Hart intends a very narrow meaning. Here, symbol refers to "an afterthought, a speculative appropriation of the aesthetic moment in the service of a supposedly more vital and essential meaning . . . it suspends the aesthetic . . . in order to discover something more fundamental than whatever merely 'accidental' form might manifest it."[133] In other words, a symbolic perspective on beauty looks at beauty as having no real significance in itself, but only in what it refers to. This kind of move finally discards the beautiful in the ascent of Plato's, not Gregory's, ladder.[134]

Interestingly, Hart's concern here is reminiscent of that which Hans Frei expressed in *The*

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[129] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 21.

[130] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 252.

[131] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 22.

[132] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 24.

[133] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 25.

[134] The earlier discussion regarding Gregory noted that Plato's ladder extended upward and one discarded lower (more physical) rungs as one climbed. Gregory also speaks of a ladder, but it is one that, in a sense, grows in breadth as one climbs, thus not requiring the disposal of rungs "lower down" the ladder.

Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. After the close of the pre-Modern era, the "meaning" of the gospel narratives became something other than the narratives themselves. "In either case, the history or else allegory or myth, the *meaning* of the stories [is] finally something different from the stories or depictions themselves."[135] Just as the narrative became "accidental" to the hidden meaning of the gospels, so too, there is a tendency to reduce the form of beauty to a mere accident in a greater scheme of things. But, says Hart, "the beautiful is prior to all schemes of isolable meanings: it is excess but never formlessness, a spilling over, jubilant, proclaiming glory without 'explaining' it."[136] In short, when encountering beauty "one need attend only to the glory that it openly proclaims, and resist the temptation to seek out some gnosis secretly imparted."[137] For Hart, any symbolic reduction of beauty would ultimately undermine the Christian faith, which is finally founded on a historical particularity, namely the beauty of the risen Christ. As Hart notes in his conclusion of this section, "that within Christianity which draws persons to itself is a concrete and particular beauty, because a concrete and particular beauty *is* its deepest truth."[138]

In creation, then, what we see is not a series of signs pointing directly to that which it signals, not a "this means that" corollary. Analogy on that order implies a fixed and locked in-on-itself-immanence of totality, and not the infinity Hart commends.[139] On the contrary, creation signals (participates in) infinity by which Hart means "what one desires when one seeks to see the totality as the gift of a true transcendence, granting the totality its essences, its existence, its values, and its transcendental properties from beyond itself, by the grace of participation under

[135] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 11.

[136] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 25.

[137] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 25.

[138] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 25.

[139] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 14.

the 'rule' of analogy."[140]

There is, in the created world, no "accidental locution," that is, an element of creation that does not in some way reveal God. On the contrary, every "instance of difference tells of God's glory, differently, as another rhetorical embellishment."[141] It is for this reason that human aesthetic sense needs training because it tends to control the limit, to impose restrictions, thus exchanging the inexhaustible gift into a closed taxonomical economy governed by the sinful human who is locked into the metaphysics of violence. Thus, it is that Hart speaks of transcendence as "an endless sequence of utterances, each elaborating upon the other and each rendering the other provisional . . . because it infinitely exceeds every finite expression, comprehends it, and beckons it onward."[142]

Essentially, this analogy for Hart is a matter of *kenosis*, and this *kenosis* is seen most clearly in the cross. The sacrifice of the cross is God's *kenotic* self-giving which overcomes and outstrips the sacrifice of violence for the purpose of appeasement. In other words, it is the beauty of Jesus' entire *kenotic* existence, culminating in His self-donation on the cross, that lures one away from the false narrative of a reality comprised of violence and toward a metaphysics of peace, which is to say, beauty.

To summarize, Hart understands beauty to be the infinity of God, because infinity renders senseless the violent jockeying among existents called for in the postmodern system which asserts that all relationships are predicated on power, competition, and oppression. Perceiving beauty is a matter of beholding the "delight and peace" which constitute the relationship between

[140] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 14.

[141] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 296.

[142] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 315.

infinity and finitude.[143] And it is only the cross that enables us fully to see it. There, we come to realize that tragedy and violence are *not* God's plan, nor do they have any intrinsic value. Easter is not the confirmation of a sacrifice that "worked," but rather God's declaration that no sacrifice was ever needed to bridge the ontological gap between the creature and the Creator.[144] Thus, the cross gives us eyes to see the aforementioned relationship between all things as one defined by love. [145]

Concerning participation, Hart, rather like Balthasar, sees it as a matter of degree and progression. Indeed, participation "comes about as one's will is progressively conformed to the divine will, until one's acts become, in truth, divine acts."[146] Finally, however, such conforming *must* be. Hart is an avowed universalist. The following short selection gives us some insight into what we will discuss at greater length later.

> The eschatological . . . functions as a promise that the verdict of God is on the side of the particular, the name and face of the one lost, that his justice is not a transcendental reconciliation between chaos and order, violence and rest, but a reconciliation of infinitely many sequences of difference. Which is to say that it is the promise that justice will never forget the other, that the other will always be blessed with an infinite regard and charged with an infinite worth: not because the other belongs to an abyss of the ethical, but because the other belongs to the infinite beauty of the surface; because, as this eschatology insists, the entire weight of the infinite in which *all things share*[147], this infinite and infinitely various music, rests upon each instance, requires every voice.[148]

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[143] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 154.

[144] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 393.

[145] Intriguingly, there are some things which Hart sees as more beautiful than others. See David Bentley Hart, "David Bentley Hart: Beauty, Being, and Kenosis: The Aesthetics of the Incarnation - Art Symposium," Biola University, March 1, 2013, educational video, 1:13:47, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPwnE_DNgBw. Here he mention's Sophia Lorenz's face, for example.

[146] David Bentley Hart, "The Bright Morning of the Soul: John of the Cross on Theosis." *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology,* 12 (December 2019): 338.

[147] Italics added.

[148] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 410–11.

In this scheme, participation in beauty is not only a possibility but an *inevitability*, because for Hart, human beings were created inexorably to pursue the Source of the transcendentals and possess the enabled will to do so. At bottom, that pursuit is "the bliss of the gods, and of becoming God in God."[149]

Summary

Both Balthasar and Hart, then, provide remarkably comprehensive accounts of beauty. Much of what they argue will be appropriated for the purposes of this project. There are, however, several points on which we must part ways. Broadly speaking, our differences lie in the category of participation, and in both theologians that difference arises from a two-part disagreement concerning anthropology. Firstly, neither adequately reckons with the extent of human brokenness. While they eloquently and powerfully expound on the "more and more" of participation in beauty, one finds little evidence of an "already" – that is, Hart and Balthasar both lack a clear distinction between sanctification and justification, the way in which we are beautiful both *now* and *not yet*. Both take human evil always and only to be a privation of the good, and never a willful and hate-filled destruction of the beautiful, good, and true. Relatedly, neither of their positions is capable of taking into account that the "privation" we witness in the natural world is not privation only, but often the counterpart to God's loving locution of beauty—namely, God's alien locution of judgment. For this reason, Balthasar and Hart both lean toward universalism, the former tentatively, the latter whole-heartedly. While Balthasar *hopes*

[149] David Bentley Hart, "A Sense of Style: Beauty and the Christian Moral Life," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2019): 243, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48617074. While this may seem to erase entirely the human/divine distinction, such is not, in fact, the case. Here, Hart is referring to something akin to the doctrine of sanctification. More will be said about this in chapter three.

that all will be saved in the end, in his more recent work Hart confesses universalism outright.[150] Following this line of thought, all being was not only created beautiful; all simply can be, are, and will be beautiful. Those who confess that there is a hell "are aware . . . that they have acquiesced to an irrational and wicked tenet of the creed. They think themselves bound by faith to defend a picture of reality that could not be true, morally, or logically, in any possible world."[151] When the clear witness of Scripture is cast aside in favor of a particular account of humanity, it is the latter, not the former, that must give way.

The second difference concerns the degree of clarity we may expect regarding sanctification—a fine bit of irony considering the remarkable eloquence with which they write about it. For David Bentley Hart, for instance, the key passage to which he turns regarding the Christian life is the manner in which Jesus deals with the woman caught in adultery. Here, he writes, we see a

> nonchalant display of the special privilege belonging to those blessed few who can insouciantly, confidently violate any given convention simply because they know how to do it with consummate and ineffably accomplished artistry . . . And there is as well something exquisitely and generously *antinomian*[152] about Christ's actions here. It embodies the same distinctive personal idiom that is expressed in the more gloriously improbable, irresponsible, and expansive counsels of the Sermon on the Mount—that charter of God's Kingdom as a preserve for *flâneurs* and truants, defiantly sparing no thought for the morrow and emulous only of the lilies of the fields in all their iridescent indolence . . .[153]

While it is certainly true that there can be no casuistry regarding the "beautiful life," it is also true, as Paul says, that we "uphold the law" (Rom. 3:31).[154] Hart may lean toward antinomianism.

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[150] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[151] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, xviii.

[152] Italics added.

[153] Hart, *Sense of Style*, 249

[154] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from: Holy Bible English Standard Version, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007.

But St. Paul most certainly does not! If Eco's view of Aquinas is correct, then beauty is strongly teleological. And if it has a *telos*, then there must be a Law for beauty as well. As we will see in chapter three, a certain current of Lutheran theology would likely side with Hart here. Yet, I will demonstrate how such antinomian tendencies are not to be met with approbation but opprobrium, with a clear sense of their inherent danger, their implicit invitation to ugliness and desecration.

The Methodological Procedure to Be Employed

As we have already seen, Balthasar and Hart offer exceedingly compelling accounts of theological aesthetics. Yet even a brief critique demonstrates that their positions are not entirely compatible with a Lutheran take. Therefore, we move toward our goal by first addressing the notion of analogy, a category employed both by Balthasar and Hart. Here, I will argue, with Bonhoeffer, that a faithful Lutheran iteration of analogy should more properly be termed, not *analogia entis*, but *analogia relationis*.[155] This stance acknowledges that meaningful, analogous predication of God is made possible only by God's gracious "for us" action through His Word, and that creation itself serves as an analogy, that is, God's active locution toward us.

Subsequently, we reckon with understanding beauty. Here we will see *to what goal* God is moving us. To that end, we must reckon with the baffling question "What is man," that is, the "beautiful place" of the human being in both the *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* realities. What God wills is beautiful. Any perversion of God's will is ugly. What God creates and how He intends each part to harmonize within the whole, that is beautiful. This applies as much to humanity as to every other part of creation. God has carved for humanity a groove, or, as C. S.

[155] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3*, trans. John C. Fletcher (New York: MacMillan, 1959), 39

Lewis puts it, a "*Tao*": *that* is beautiful, and beauty aims to direct us, to draw us to this *Tao*.[156]

As regards the nature of humanity *coram Deo*, Mark Mattes' interpretation of Luther will be followed, which persuasively argues that humanity's proper relation to God is first and foremost defined by trusting receptivity of divine transcendence before which we are passive. Only subsequently (not chronologically, but logically) does *eros* enter the picture in which we desire for creation what God desires for it.

As concerns humanity's "beautiful place" *coram mundo*, we must wrestle with the question of our place within creation. It will be necessary for us, then, to establish that such a place (1) exists and (2) is identifiable to one degree or another. More commonly, this "beautiful place" is referred to by such terms as the "law of creation" or the will of God for creation. Defending this doctrine gives us license to speak of a definite shape and divine intention for our *coram mundo* existence that has often been neglected in Lutheran circles. Here, we will lean heavily on the work of Joel Biermann who offers much on this front, not only as regards the existence of definite contours of beauty, but also as regards our means of participation in beauty.

Outline

This dissertation seeks to fill the lacuna in current Lutheran theological aesthetics, the gap which does not (indeed considers it anathema to) provide the contours of beauty. To justify the use of the two kinds of righteousness framework for understanding, perceiving, and participating in beauty, we must wrestle with the question of creation itself, what it is, and what God intends through it. That discussion will take place in chapter two. In chapter three we will focus on the first of our three perspectives on beauty, namely understanding. In many ways, this is the heart

[156] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 12.

of the dissertation because here, by recovering a proper sense of the law, we will discover that tracing beauty's contours is a possibility. Chapter four, then, wrestles with the question of perception. That is, what roles do the human mind and the Christian narrative play, and how might the three articles of the Creed open our eyes to beauty's manifold facets? In the fifth and final chapter, we will take up the matter of participation. What is beauty's impact on the human mind, and what are its effects *coram Deo* and *coram mundo*?

CHAPTER TWO

CREATION: GIFT AND ANALOGY

In the previous chapter, we observed the many dispositions espoused by philosophers toward beauty. Beauty has been considered dangerous, a mere confirmation of a potentially unjust *status quo*. And beauty has enjoyed the opposite ascription, that of a salvific role. Theologians too have had mixed sentiments toward beauty. We investigated contributions from early and medieval Christians. In some cases, Plato's vision seemed to overwhelm the Biblical one, leading to a denigration of creation *per se*. Others such as Aquinas and Gregory, however, managed to use their philosophical inheritance as a tool that served, rather than governed, their theology. That is, creation (though not ultimate) was nevertheless truly good. We also acknowledged the long silence regarding beauty as a theological locus, before introducing two representatives from the 20th and 21st centuries, for whom beauty proved a means for overcoming modern disenchantment. It is to that particular discussion—the nature of creation—that we now turn in greater detail.

The question of the nature of creation inevitably arises in the context of this discussion. As Mark Mattes puts it, "For Luther, there is no God to be had apart from some 'covering' or 'wrapper' whether that wrapper is God masking himself in created, material realities, or giving himself sacramentally to the church."[1] We do not experience beauty outside of creation. We have no access to purely ethereal beauty. As corporeal creatures, our experience of beauty is necessarily corporeal. The perception of beauty is always mediated by some *thing* in creation. As Richard Viladesau says, "There is for human beings no purely transcendental experience: the transcendent is co-experienced as the transcendental condition of possibility of spatio-temporal

[1] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 13.

things and events, and . . . as immanent and operative within them."[2] It is precisely this concept that led David Bentley Hart, quoted in the previous chapter, to conclude that beauty "within theology, guards against any tendency toward gnosticism,"[3] and this for two reasons. Firstly, "worldly beauty shows creation to be the real theater of divine glory."[4] That is, it is neither the consequence of some metaphysical fall, nor is it a defining feature in God's consciousness.[5] Yet this is to attempt a leap without yet having gained our footing. To comprehend the nature of creation as the theater of beauty, we must first return to that "moment" before which there were no "moments"—the *principium*.

Charles Arand notes the significance of this word choice. In his translation of the Bible into Latin, Jerome could have selected the word *initium*, which signals a particular moment in time as a starting point. *Principium*, conversely, suggests groundwork, principle, or foundation. Arand argues that this important translational choice has not been given the consideration it deserves. Rather, since the Scopes "monkey trial" in 1925, by far the bulk of academic energy has been spent on questions of protology and origins in conversations concerning creation. That is, the fiercest debates have centered on the *initium* rather than on the *principium*. While considerations of the *initium* certainly do warrant a place in Christian apologetics, what one finds in Genesis is less concerned about origins and protology than it is about the character of God and of the world and their relation to each other. What we have in Scripture's account of the *principium* is far more concerned with ontology, which, unlike questions concerning protology, has enduring and profound ramifications for creation. I concur with Arand's perspective. Thus, the following

[2] Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93.

[3] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 21.

[4] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 21.

[5] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 22.

section deals with the *principium* and what it entails for creation, for this "theater" of beauty.[6]

Creation *Ex Nihilo*

To begin with, the term *ex nihilo* implies at least two ramifications concerning creation. Firstly, when God created, He was not working with preexisting, eternal *materia*. To the contrary, being came into being, as it were, through God's willing it to be so. To the question that frustrates the penetrative powers of so many minds ("why is there something and not nothing?"), Scripture responds with an infuriatingly simple answer: because God wanted there to be something and not nothing.[7] In other words, creation did not (and *does* not) *need* to exist. The universe is not a logical necessity. Neither was it "necessary" for God to create. There is no principle behind God to which He is accountable, no attribute that forces Him to act. Arand quotes Karl Barth concerning the truly unnecessary existence of the world with respect to God: "The miracle is not that there is God. The miracle is that there is a world."[8]

All of this leads to a staggering, and potentially unsettling, sense of the profound contingency of creation. Many modern scientists agree with this point, including Jacque Monod who once savagely declared, "The universe was not pregnant with life nor the biosphere with man. Our number came up in the Monte Carlo game."[9] Indeed, the human being "is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance."[10] That the fact of our existence is anything but necessary was clearly troubling to many. As Monod points out, "We

[6] Charles Arand, "Back to the Beginning Creation Shapes the Entire Story," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 271.

[7] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 272–73.

[8] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 273.

[9] Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 145–46.

[10] Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, 180.

would like to think ourselves necessary, inevitable, ordained from all eternity. All religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science testify to the unwearying, heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its contingency."[11]

The contingency of creation may well be troubling to other religions and philosophies. For Christians, however, humanity's ephemerality speaks a different truth. It points to the boundedness of human creatures in relation to an unbounded God.[12] As Arand so clearly puts it, "First and foremost, it means that I was made. It means that I live by circumstance and contingency . . . And if I have received it, why do I boast of it? As God's creature, I am the personal expression of God. I belong to him and I am entirely dependent upon him."[13]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of the beginning in a similar vein. For him, the beginning is a limit against which human beings rebel. We cannot "get behind" the beginning, cannot grasp it with our imaginations without inventing another beginning behind that one, and so on *ad infinitum*. Our efforts to gain some sense of control over the beginning thus devolves into infinite regress.[14] For Bonhoeffer, then, the beginning

> must not be confused in any way with the year 4004 or any similar particular date . . . *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*. That means that the Creator, in freedom, creates the creature. Their connexion is not conditioned by anything except freedom, which means that it is unconditioned.

This unconditioned beginning leaves a void, a complete absence of any "law of cause and effect" which would have rendered the creation necessary. This differs radically from the common misconception of God as "some very large object or agency within the universe . . . a being among other beings, who differs from all other beings in magnitude, power, and duration, but not

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[11] Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, 44.

[12] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 271.

[13] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 276.

[14] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 17.

ontologically, and who is related to the world more or less as a craftsman is related to an artifact."[15] God is not simply the highest Being among other beings. To the contrary, He is, as Aquinas would have it, the *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, that is, existence itself.[16]

What, then, is the ontological connection between God and the creation? Bonhoeffer puts it very bluntly: "between Creator and creature there is simply nothing: the void. For freedom happens in and through the void . . . Creation comes out of this void."[17] It is precisely this point that, according to Diogenes Allen, both defines Christianity and separates it from the vast majority of the other ancient religious and philosophical traditions.[18] Gustav Wingren rejects the use of the term "void" in describing the beginning. Perhaps he felt it too closely associated with nihilist contentions. Wingren does, however, refer to the obscurity of "the beginning" as a "baffling wall of silence—God's silence. This silence of God means death and judgment for man. Now God's silence is not a meaningless void, but is the omnipotence which refuses to speak."[19] Despite their different terminology, Wingren and Bonhoeffer both have the same goal in view—the human limit, the *principio* as the first sign of humanity's thorough creatureliness. Bonhoeffer puts it most eloquently: "Because thinking desires to penetrate to the beginning and cannot do so, all thinking crumbles into dust, it runs aground upon itself, it breaks to pieces, it is dissolved in the presence of the beginning which thinking posits and cannot posit."[20]

Considering this ontological void between God and creation, we must ask how, in what

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[15] Hart, *Experience of God*, 32.

[16] Thomas Aquinas, *Concerning Being and Essence*, trans. by George G. Leckie (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1937), 24

[17] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 19.

[18] Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for the Understanding of Theology* (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 18.

[19] Gustav Wingren, *Creation and* Law, trans. Ross Mackenzie. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1961) 66.

[20] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 14.

way God relates to creation if we are to avoid conceiving of the universe as a locked-in-on-itself totality, an immanentized, self-contained reality. The "void," or the "wall of God's omnipotent silence" does not imply a total separation between God and His creation such that He has no interaction with it. Such would be the perspective of Deists. To the contrary, God does bridge the void, span the gap, but not by means of some Neoplatonic, semi-divine *demiurge* and diminishing degrees of deity further down the chain of being that emanates from the One.[21] Firstly, that would be creation *ex Deo*, not creation *ex nihilo*. Secondly, it would bring with it all the tragic implications of Neoplatonism which David Bentley Hart elaborates so beautifully.

> The interval discriminating the most high from the here below is the tragic moment of exteriority, alienation, "proof," which allows a distance for reflection, *theoria*, anamnesis . . . but from there to here every movement is one of division, reduction, contamination, and oblivion, and every converse movement, from here to there, is an inversion of the same "benign" impoverishment—reduction, decortication of the world, oblivion of the flesh, flight from time, a journey of the alone to the alone.[22]

In response to this puzzle, we turn to that concept which is at once considered foundational by certain strains of Christian thought, and heavily maligned by others. We turn to the concept of analogy.

God and Language

In order to discuss analogy, we must approach the broader conversation about human language and God. As finite creatures, how much, if any, purchase does our language have on the infinite? Does our speech have any purchase on God, or are we fated to unmitigated apophaticism? At a base level, there are three categories of predication: equivocal, univocal, and analogical. Michael Horton supplies helpful examples for the first two. Equivocal terms are those

[21] Allen, *Philosophy for the Understanding*, 22.

[22] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 246.

that express completely different concepts. For instance, the word "ball" may refer to a round object to be thrown or kicked. It can also refer to a formal dance. In this situation, the use of the word "ball" is equivocal, that is, they have nothing in common. Univocal terms, however, are those words which express the same meaning. For example, if we were to compare two baseball games, the phrase "ball game" would be employed univocally, that is in the same way.[23]

The former kind of predication, equivocity, does preserve God's transcendence. But it also prevents us from saying anything whatsoever. Yet, Scripture has, and we must, be able legitimately to predicate things of God, lest we find ourselves in an apophatic black hole. As Thomas Aquinas wrote,

> It is also a fact that a name is predicated of some being uselessly unless through that name we understand something of the being. But, if names are said of God and creatures in a purely equivocal way, we understand nothing of God through those names; for the meaning of those names are known to us solely to the extent that they are said of creatures. In vain, therefore, would it be said or proved of God that He is a being, good, or the like."[24]

In essence, equivocity precludes any comprehension of God whatever, even in His self-revelation in Scripture, and even more importantly, the incarnation. As Torrance says, equivocal predication "would mean that all theological statements were purely mythological, the arbitrary projection of human images and concepts on to that which transcends the created order."[25]

The latter kind of predication, univocity, does give us our tongues back. But it also fails to maintain the Creator/creature distinction. As Torrance says, univocity "would commit us to anthropomorphism which fails to recognize the divine Infinitude and Transcendence—that God

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[23] Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 54.

[24] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book One: God*, trans. by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 146–47.

[25] Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 128.

may not be subsumed under the category of created reality."[26]

Human predication concerning God, then, must succeed in maintaining the ontological distinction between God and creatures while at the same time permitting us to say something that actually *means* something. Hence, we arrive at the third and final type of predication—analogical.

Analogy of Two to a Third

Ultimately, analogy is an attempt to answer the question of how or if we (as finite creatures) are able to speak meaningfully concerning God. Analogy seeks to avoid the two above pitfalls: univocity and equivocity. It has, however, enjoyed a tumultuous history to say the least, and that largely due to its systematization by Thomas de Vio, also known as Cardinal Cajetan, who sought to further clarify the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas.[27] As with predication more generally, Cajetan spoke of three categories of analogy.

Firstly, there is the analogy of inequality in which "the common character . . . belongs really and truly to each and all of the participants, in the same way but in unequal degrees of intensity or under conditions of existence which are not identical." According to this analogy, we can say that "men and dogs are equally animals but they are not equal animals." That which makes them both animals "but … does not exist in dogs and human beings under the same conditions of existence."[28]

Secondly, there is the analogy of attribution, in which "the common character . . . belongs properly to only one of the participants but is attributed by the mind to the others." For instance,

[26] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 128.

[27] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 129.

[28] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 131.

we can really only speak of an organism being healthy, and "because of the relation in some order of causality which other things like food, medicine, exercises, bear to the health of the organism, these too are called healthy."[29]

Finally, there is the analogy of proportionality. Fearing that Aquinas' approach to analogy could fall into equivocity, Cajetan proposed an interpretation of this iteration of analogy which Torrance succinctly summarizes: "The common characteristic or *ratio* belongs really and truly to each and all in proportion to their respective being (esse)."[30] Phelan fleshed out this concept in the following way: "the basic proposition . . . in its strict and proper meaning, is that whatever perfection is analogically common to two or more beings is intrinsically (formally) possessed by each, not . . . by any two in the same way or mode, but by each in proportion to its being."[31] To use a particular "perfection," we can say that God sees and that humans see, such divine seeing is proportionate to the being God has and human seeing is proportionate to the being humans have.[32]

This would appear to guard against any anthropomorphizing of God. And yet, "This conception of analogy provides . . . a kind of unifying cosmological principle grounded in the universal participation of everything in 'being'."[33] Hence it became known as *analogia entis*. It is, however, precisely God's participation in being that ultimately undermines God's transcendence. That is, for Cajetan, analogy of being essentially claims that both God and human beings participate in some third attribute beyond themselves. Essentially, then, Cajetan produced

[29] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 131.

[30] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 131.

[31] Gerald B. Phelan, quoted in Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 132.

[32] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 132.

[33] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 134.

an analogy of proportionality whereby God and humans were both X, only to varying degrees, thus making X a concept outside of God to which both God and human beings were conformed, *independently* of one another. Not only, then, does analogy of proportionality lead to the domestication of God's transcendence, but it also endorses the notion of human existence which is fundamentally independent from God, an ineluctable consequence of arguing that both God and man participate in the more fundamental reality called "being." It is not difficult to trace a trajectory from this iteration of analogy to a Deistic version of Christianity in which God need not be active within creation for its continuance. Although it is theoretically possible for God to intervene in creation, nature is not *essentially dependent* on Him. It carries on with or without God's direct involvement because it is ontologically whole and self-perpetuating. Thus, God is set at a far remove and becomes irrelevant to the daily activity of human beings. Life may go on without regard of or reference to God's activity among us.[34]

Analogy of One to Another

What, then, is Aquinas' view of analogy? He introduces the concept in this way: "We must say, therefore, that words are used of God and creatures in an analogical way, that is, in accordance with a certain order between them."[35] Aquinas whole-heartedly resisted any domestication of God's transcendence, any overly-optimistic notion that human beings can "get a handle" on God. To rule out any insinuation that Aquinas intends any domestication of God, he wrote that "man reaches the highest point of his knowledge about God when he knows that he knows him not, inasmuch as he knows that that which God is transcends whatsoever he

[34] It was precisely Cajetan's *analogia entis* that led Barth's famous renunciation of the concept as a whole and his subsequent proposal of an *analogia fidei*, which reduced God's connection to the world to a single point – the incarnate Jesus Christ. See Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 12–13.

[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, *Knowing and Naming God*, trans. Hebert McCabe (New York: Black Friars, 1963), q. 13, a. 5, 65.

conceives of him."[36]

It turns out, then, that what Karl Barth so vehemently opposed was not so much Aquinas himself, but precisely Cajetan's version which we assessed above. Intriguingly, Aquinas himself rejects this kind of analogy.

> In the first kind of predication the two things must be preceded by something to which each of them bears some relation . . . whereas in the second kind of predication this is not necessary, but one of the two must precede the other. Wherefore since nothing precedes God, but He precedes the creatures, the second kind of analogical predication is applicable to Him but not the first.[37]

The "first kind" of predication to which Aquinas refers is precisely that advocated by Cajetan. The "second kind," on the other hand, was "the analogy of one to another according to priority and posteriority."[38] And it is precisely this kind of analogy for which Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart advocates.

Hart rejects the suggestion that human beings have an ontological and independent existence like God's, only to a different degree: "The analogy lies in no static hierarchy of essences, no mysterious grounding of the soul's substance in the divine substance, but in the delight that calls out to—and so gives being to—difference, and the love that evokes and responds: in, that is, beauty."[39]

Hart suggests that the connection between God and humanity is much like that between the artist and her work. It is "something like speaking of the irreducible difference and yet declarative relationship between the . . . work of art and . . . the artist . . . Again, the analogy is a disjunction and a difference, while also being the interval of creation's participation in the being

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[36] Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, quoted in William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 23.

[37] Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, 137.

[38] Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 139.

[39] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 252.

that God gives as his gift."[40] According to Hart, the analogy does not consist in the correspondence of two things to some third thing which subjugates God to a principle or quality beyond Himself, suggesting that human beings participate in that quality by their own nature which is independent of God. Contra Cajetan, analogy is strictly, and always remains strictly, a matter of *donation*, the giving over of one to another, not the correspondence of two things to a third thing. The analogy is God's imparting of His own goodness to His creatures, an analogy established by and perpetually contingent upon His *gift*. Indeed, "every finite being is groundless, without any original or ultimate essence in itself, a moment of unoccasioned fortuity."[41] It is for this reason that "the analogy of being finds truth in the ever greater particularity of each thing as it enters ever more into the infinite that gives it being," and not "in the ever less particular emptiness of an essential singularity."[42] Therefore, "every metaphysics that does not grasp the analogy of being is a Tower of Babel, attempting to mount up to the supreme principle rather than dwelling in and giving voice to the prodigality of the gift."[43] Every existing thing, then, "comes to be as pure event, owning no substance, made free from nothingness by the unmerited grace of *being* other than God."[44] The key here is the word "owning." There is a human "substance" in a sense, but not one that exists exclusive of or alongside of God, but that is donated "moment-by-moment," as it were.

Although he flatly states that there is no *analogia entis*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *analogia relationis* sounds remarkably similar to the particular kind of analogy advocated by Hart. The

[40] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 241–42.

[41] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 250.

[42] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 247.

[43] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 248.

[44] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 249.

analogia entis "means that even the relation between man and God is not a part of man; it is not a capacity, a possibility, or a structure of his being but a given, set relationship: *justitia passiva*."[45] Therefore, "this analogy must not be understood as though man in some way had this likeness in his possession." To the contrary, "the likeness has its likeness only from the original."[46] The *Analogia relationis* is "the relation given [one to another, not two to a third] by God himself and is analogy only in this relation given by God. The relation of creature with creature is a God-given relation because it exists in freedom and freedom originates from God."[47] That is, it's a relation not of two to a third, but of One to another. Indeed, it is in this freedom for God, for one another, and for creation that God Himself enters into His creation through the incarnation.[48]

Thus, in stark contrast to various theories of ontological continuity between God and creation, such as is found in Neo-Platonism,

> the God of the Bible remains totally God, wholly Creator, completely the Lord, and his creature remains totally the submissive, obedient creature, praising and worshipping him as the Lord. He is never the creation. He is always the Creator. He is not the substance of nature; there is no continuum that binds or unites him with his work. There is only his Word.[49]

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[45] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 39.

[46] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 39.

[47] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 39.

[48] Bonhoeffer also helpfully comments on the question of nature and creation. For Bonhoeffer, the term creation applies properly only to the prelapsarian state in which Adam and Eve were passive receivers only. In the fall, however, Adam and Eve sought an existence outside of God (autopoiesis) and so were radically thrown back on themselves. The burden of creation exceeded the creature's ability to bear, of course, which led to death. Consequently, creation became either nature or the unnatural. Nature does indeed have a degree of (self-willed) separation from God. Nature, however, is aimed toward the fulfillment promised in Christ whereas the unnatural shuts the door to the coming of Christ. In essence, nature looks forward to becoming renewed creation once more at the eschaton. See *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), 142–45.

[49] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 22.

It is only when we understand what is meant by the "word" that we come to realize that this way of speaking of creation, this de-deification of the universe, this break in Neo-Platonism's great chain of being, does not in any way constitute a denigration of the created realm. But, in order to understand *why* this is so, we must delve into the relationship between creation and word.

Word Beyond Words

Generally speaking, when we speak of words, we think of the sound that comes from our mouths, or the text written in a book. When we speak of God's words to us, the aforementioned manifestation certainly applies. God gave the prophets words consisting of soundwaves to speak to His people. He gave the Biblical authors words (signifiers) to write. But concerning the concept of "word" we must also broaden our definition. To begin with, God's speech to us, His revelation to us, as Ragnar Bring would put it, "not primarily an impartation of knowledge, but an action. It is an intervention of God . . . Revelation is God's presence in action, deed, and conflict."[50] That is, God's word is not limited to signifiers consisting of soundwaves or scribbles on a page. God's word is His address to His people, and that address may take many forms, just as inter-human address may take many forms, and indeed *must* take various forms in order for certain aspects to be communicated.

Frank Burch Brown argues that, by and large, our imaginations convert the words we hear into images. For instance, such expressions as "dizzying prospect," "weigh gains against loss," "balance between rights of one and good of the whole" are examples of this.[51] This connection between word and image by no means excludes theology. Trevor Hart, in his book *Between the*

[50] Ragnar Bring, *How God Speaks to Us. The Dynamics of the Living Word* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 26.

[51] Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste. Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 97.

Image and the Word makes the claim that *all* theological formulations are poetic and contingent upon imagination, regardless of the author's attempts to be scientific about things.[52] As Brown puts it,

> The fact that the primary language of religion is markedly poetic, mythic, and otherwise aesthetic means that it is with such language that theology repeatedly begins and that it is to such language that theology must often return. Theological reflection, however abstract and internally consistent, thus is intimately connected with 'aesthetic ideas'. Yet this cannot be used to argue against the credibility of theological reflection, or specifically against the credibility of theological ideas about the aesthetic. It can only show that whatever credibility theological aesthetics has cannot be judged entirely on strictly philosophical grounds or only by the criteria of religious scholarship within the secular academy.[53]

But Hart goes further still. Building from the arguments of the philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi, Hart argues that even the sciences must make use of "conceptual imagination."[54] "Devising experiments, testing, theorizing" all generate from and continue on account of the imagination; even the terminology scientists employ is image-rich: "electromagnetic fields, sounds waves, particles of light, genetic codes and pre-programmed motor responses . . ."[55] These metaphors point to truth which our words themselves cannot contain nor our minds fully grasp.

Address, though, is clearly not limited to word-produced images. Art and music too are capable of addressing us. Susanne Langer puts it very nicely.

> [A]rt has . . . a double function—first to still the preoccupied mind, to empty it of triviality, to make it receptive and meditative; then to impregnate it . . . enabling one to imagine, to perceive, even to become, what he could not of himself become or perceive or imagine . . . [art] shapes our imagination of external reality according to

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[52] Trevor Hart, *Between the Image and the Word*, Routledge Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts Literature (Farnham: Routledge, 2013), 13.

[53] Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 193.

[54] Hart, *Between the Image*, 35.

[55] Hart, *Between the Image*, 15.

> the rhythmic forms of life and sentience, and so impregnates the world with aesthetic value.[56]

Art is a means of *nondiscursive* communication, communication of which the discursive is incapable.[57] I may try to *describe* a sunset or Bach's *St. Matthew Passion,* yet my words can never contain the fulness of the image or the music itself. One may try to *describe* the crucifixion of Jesus with words, but surely those present at the scene would have found the spoken word a *distraction* during that "communication." Art, then, may also *mean*, but in a different register than spoken language.

Roman Catholic theologian Richard Viladesau makes much the same case in his book *Theological Aesthetics*. He argues that "art may be seen as a specialization in the aesthetic kind of intellection that occurs through feeling." Art is a medium of communication, a means of address that "reproduces in intensified form the experiences of life expressed in action, symbol, image, gesture and text, and invites us to a perception of truth perceived in the affective/intellectual mode."[58] Thus, we may view art not only as a *commentary* on the discursive truth (which many theologians have done),[59] but rather as a *locus* of theological truth. That is, the means by which God addresses His people is not limited to the discursive, to the human artifact known as the instrument of language. God may also take up the human artifact of the arts. Now, if God takes up and uses the human artifacts of language and art to address His people, what else

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[56] Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribners, 1953) 397–98.

[57] See especially Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 170.

[58] Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 86.

[5959] This was especially true of visual art around Luther's day. "During the time of tension between the Reformers and Rome, these art forms became popular media used to support and illustrate the preaching of the Reformers . . . Rather than serving some higher theological purpose, however, as art typically did before the Reformation, these woodcuts and broadsheets served the more practical purpose of supporting the message of the Reformers. They were auxiliary to the work of preaching." William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 55–56.

does He commandeer for His purposes?

This last section has covered a significant tract of theological landscape. Therefore, a few summative words are warranted. There is no chain of being descending from God, the full number of existents participating in that being to various degrees. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer is quite correct—such a chain would erase the ontological gap between God and everything else. It could but terminate in the domestication of God. Bonhoeffer is *also* correct in saying that the connection between God and humanity is *only* the word. But as we have seen above, "word" cannot be limited to vocables. God's engagement of us, the means by which we conceive of God and His relationship to us, *far* exceeds the capacity of the spoken or written word, as wonderful a gift as they are. That such is the case should not surprise us. There are, after all, truths that require *more* than words, truths which, if converted from a particular medium into language, would, in fact, suffer *violence* and *reduction*. Taking a much more mundane example, this makes clear why the *explanation* of a movie, a play, a dance, or a piece of music can never do justice to the thing itself. Such is almost always the case even when it comes to matters of translation. Rarely is the translation of a poem as rich or powerful as the original. Thus, we begin to see that the full significance of communication is bound up in the very *form* of the medium.

The question then becomes, what are the means by which God relates to the world, the means by which He communicates to us? On the one hand, it is certainly true that creation is not divine. Created things are ontologically other than God. Yet were this comment left to stand on its own, it could lead, not just to a de-deified world, but a totally God-absent world. On the other hand, the claim that God's connection to the world is limited to "His word" begs a question. To what does the signifier "word" refer? Does "word" in this instance refer only or primarily to vocables or written language? Or might its meaning be rather broader than that? If human

communication is not limited to spoken or written language (and in many cases cannot be so reduced), why would God narrow His own communication with us to a means too thin to carry the fullness of the meaning humans are capable of receiving? The question, then, to which we now turn is this—what is included in the signifier "word" as it relates to God's interaction with His human creatures?

Creation As Analogy

In the first chapter, I noted de Lubac's attribution of disenchantment and Modernization to Cardinal Cajetan. While he was certainly not misguided in his assessment, other historians have presented alternative theories concerning the flattening of the world. It is to these that we now turn. As we will see, Luther becomes the favorite whipping boy of certain historians. Mattes's work, however, will demonstrate that such blame is badly mislaid.

A Brief History of Disenchantment

We begin with Michael Allen Gillespie. In *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, he presents a serious challenge to the standard account of the historical shift from the medieval to the modern. Often, the rise of modernity is heralded as the triumph of reason over superstition, science over religion, liberating society to reach its full potential. For Gillespie, "The origins of modernity . . . lie not in human self-assertion or in reason but in the great metaphysical and theological struggle that marked the end of the medieval world and that transformed Europe in the three hundred years that separate the medieval and the modern worlds."[60] Gillespie identifies that struggle with the crisis to which nominalism gave rise.

[60] Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 12.

The medieval world was dominated by scholasticism, a method that appropriated newly discovered works of Aristotle. Accordingly, theologians adopted "realism" which "was a belief in the extra-mental existence of universals."[61] Scholastics held that the individual things we encounter in the world are "merely particular instances" of those universals, which were nothing other than divine reason.[62] God, then, could be "known" through the created realm. Though God was indeed infinite, by means of analogy humans could reason their way up to God through the natural order. Some iterations of scholasticism were so convinced of this method that they had little practical use for the revelation of God either in the Scriptures or in the person of Jesus Christ.

Nominalism, on the other hand, rejected the analogous relationship between God and His creation. Whereas scholasticism envisioned a primarily *rational* God, nominalism maintained that God was primarily a *willing* being. Indeed, God's will stands as the *only* absolute necessity. Everything exists solely by God's willing it to exist—not by necessity, but by contingency. Furthermore, God is not bound by the laws of creation. He is radically *free*, thus knowable only by revelation, and not through observation of creation, not by scrambling up the great chain of being. According to nominalism, universals are nothing more than a human imposition upon reality, the tendency of all humans to act as cartographers of being, the overlaying of reality with maps. Far from granting perspicuity to the world, these universals frequently do more to *obscure* truth than to reveal it.

The God of scholasticism is knowable by human effort because he is not, after all, too terribly different from us. This God is therefore comfortable because controllable, at least in the

[61] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 20.

[62] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 20.

sense that humans were to be able to predict God's ways as those ways were accountable to certain rules, such as a certain sense of justice and goodness.[63] The human being and her ability to reason toward God is at the center. The God of Ockham, on the other hand, is wholly other and at least potentially capricious. Humans, then, are entirely contingent upon God both for their existence and their knowledge of God. God alone is in the center and all things are determined by Him, making what humans actually do of little eternal consequence—a proposition many found tremendously unsettling. Gillespie argues that Modernity arose specifically "as the result of a series of attempts to find a way out of the crisis engendered by the nominalist revolution."[64] Modernity was, essentially, the era of disenchantment, the polarization of nature from supernature, and, ultimately, the total denial of the second. While he reckons with several culprits, Gillespie finally identifies Luther as the lead suspect in acceleration of the Modernization of the world. Luther, he claims, denied any analogous relationship between God and His creatures, meaning that humans have no handle on Him at all. Christ alone bridges the gap.[65]

Peter Berger offers another, though not unrelated, theory of how Luther contributed to disenchantment. In an especially evocative turn of phrase, Berger asserts that the Reformation in general, and Luther in particular, "broke the continuity, cut the umbilical cord between heaven and earth, and thereby threw man back upon himself in a historically unprecedented manner."[66] The world was immanentized impregnably, a move which, according to Berger, was not only encouraged by, but given theological legitimation by Luther's doctrine of the two realms, which,

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[63] See Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 87.

[64] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 15.

[65] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 113.

[66] Peter Berger, for instance, Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 112–13.

when misinterpreted, could be read as giving credence to the concept of a temporal, created world possessed of a reality independent from God.[67]

Charles Taylor provides perhaps the most detailed, nuanced, and robust account of secularization in his mammoth work, *The Secular Age*. He argues that the "Reformation as Reform"[68] played a central role in "the abolition of the enchanted cosmos, and the eventual creation of a humanist alternative to faith."[69] Taylor asserts that Luther played a particularly critical role in this reform, and therefore also in the advance of secularization. How so? Firstly, although Luther did not go so far as to reject the sacraments *per se* (as Calvin would do), he did reject sacramentals which provided the pegs on which hung the scholastic concept of analogy.[70]

Secondly, and more significantly, Luther contributed toward the desacralized world by his rejection of monastic life. Taylor presents a compelling image of the manner in which the Medieval hierarchy of Christendom functioned. Though certain tensions remained, a theoretically robust complementarity was enjoyed, the celibate vocations praying for and supporting those who lived "ordinary" lives of marrying, raising children, etc.. As Taylor himself describes it,

> Without overlooking these points of tension, we can read mediaeval Catholicism in one way as incorporating a kind of equilibrium based on hierarchical complementarity. This was certainly recognized as an organizing principle for the society as a whole. For instance, the famous formula: the clergy pray for all, the lords defend all, the peasants labour for all, encapsulates the idea that society is organized in complementary functions, which nevertheless are of unequal dignity.

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[67] Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 123.

[68] Taylor distinguishes between "Reform" and "reform." The latter is characterized by attempts of the more "faithful" to spread their way of life to those of "slower speeds." The former, on the other hand, seeks to delegitimate completely the "slower" ways of life. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 62.

[69] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 77.

[70] Taylor notes that although sacramentals such as candles, relics, and so forth, can be used to encourage the faithful, "they also are the very heart of the 'white magic' by which ordinary human flourishing is defended against threats, and enhanced." See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 44–45.

> Similarly, the celibate vocations can be seen as higher, and undeniably the sacerdotal ones were so seen; but this doesn't prevent them balancing the other, lower modes of life in a functional whole. What this means is that there is in principle a place for something less than the highest vocation and aspirations. The tension resolves into an equilibrium.[71]

Thus, there existed different "speeds" of living the Christian faith. Over time, however, this equilibrium proved unstable, giving way to a desire to erase the gap. One method of accomplishing this goal would be for all Christians to become celibate, as was seen among the Shakers. Alternatively, it could be closed by eliminating all celibate vocations, as the churches of the Reformation would do.[72]

This latter option, however, resulted in the "leveling up" of those at the slower speeds of the faith, [73] not by demanding that they become celibate, but rather by claiming that "ordinary life, the life that the vast majority cannot help leading, the life of production and the family, work and sex, is as hallowed as any other. Indeed, more so than monastic celibacy, because this is based on the vain and prideful claim to have found a higher way."[74] This is precisely the idea behind Luther's doctrine of vocation, which had no place for the ineluctably self-serving tendencies of monastic life. Thus, the mundane itself became the site of the sacred, which is the very *opposite* of disenchantment.

Nevertheless, Taylor asserts that while Luther was justified in his castigation of the spiritual elitism infecting late-medieval monasticism, he nevertheless did contribute to the contemporary secularized world by renouncing vocations of self-denial as such. Our contemporary immanentized world is one in which "renunciation is not just viewed with

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[71] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 45.

[72] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 44.

[73] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 77.

[74] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 179.

suspicion . . . but is off the radar altogether, just a form of madness or self-mutilation. We end up from all this with a narrower, more homogeneous world of conformity to a hedonic principle."[75] Thus, for Taylor, Luther's contribution toward the secularization of the Modern age was less metaphysical (as it was for Gillespie and Berger), but rather primarily ethical.

Although the particulars vary, the above authors agree in one significant point—the Reformation was a major catalyst toward disenchantment, and much of the blame is to be laid specifically at the feet of Luther. At first blush, there is certainly a ring of truth in their arguments concerning Nominalism, the Reformation, and Luther in particular. It certainly seems to make sense that his rejection of sacramentals, his castigation of the "spiritual vocations," and his doctrine of the two realms could all have contributed to the immanentizing of the world. But I contend that it was not Luther himself, but the way in which his work was *interpreted* and *employed* that is to blame. As we will see below, Luther's world was *hardly* cordoned off in some "natural sphere" that exists outside of God's presence and influence. Below, we will follow especially Mark Mattes's treatment of Luther's take on the relationship between God and the world to see why this is so.

Luther's Enchanted World

In *Religious Aesthetics*, Frank Burch Brown compares and contrasts various categories of the concept of God's transcendence. Given the arguments from the above authors, one might find Brown's classification of Luther quite stunning.

> The references to God's substantial presence in, on, over, and through a grain recall Luther's insistence that in the sacrament Christ's body and blood are present in, with, and under the elements. But now, if only implicitly, it is the whole world that is the

[75] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 772.

> sacrament. Transcendent immanentalism of this kind is really sacramentalism pushed to the limit.[76]

In essence, Brown seems to contradict *exactly* the argument made by Taylor concerning Luther's rejection of sacramentals. We must, then, clarify what is meant by "sacramental." In Taylor's case, sacramental referred to a white magic-like cult surrounding certain actions, such that God's power was "on tap," accessible to human beings, provided the correct incantation is spoken. Taylor is quite correct that Luther did reject that kind of sacramental. He is also correct that such a rejection *could* (if taken on its own) lead to desacralization. Yet, Brown makes the stunning claim that for Luther, *all creation* is a sacrament. That is not quite right either. For Luther, Sacraments are those Christ-ordained rituals connected to an element of creation through which God grants forgiveness, life, eternal salvation, and rescue from death and Satan. In essence, sacraments are those creation-mediated means through which God delivers the benefits of Jesus' salvific work, thus restoring our *coram Deo* relationship. A slight alteration to a single word in Brown's quote, however, would render it perfectly accurate. For Luther, *all creation* is *sacramental*. In fact, Luther's world is sacramentalism pushed to the *absolute extreme*, though the sacramentalism Luther embraced differed drastically from the kind described above by Taylor, the kind Luther rightly rejected.

Mark Mattes argues that Luther himself avoids disenchantment with his concept of the *larvae Dei*, or "masks of God."[77] Creation is not absent of God. On the contrary, He uses created things (*all* created things) as means by which to care for His creation, masks that *He Himself puts on* when tending to His creatures. Mothers raising their children, neighbors caring for one

[76] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 129.

[77] As mentioned above, it is certainly not the case that those who claimed the mantle of Lutheranism later on managed to avoid disenchantment.

another's needs, kings leading their citizens—all creatures in one way or another are the means by which God sustains the world, are means through which God works.[78] Far from a flattened creation, Luther saw the world as fully God-charged.

Gustaf Wingren affirms this concept in his book, *Creation and Law*.

> The goodness which exists in anything that we do for our neighbour's sake is the Creator's goodness, mediated to him by a human act. God has created him to live, and life is continually given to him by another's goodness. The human instrument is caught up into the activity of the Creator, and because God's activity is directed towards the *world,* those who are the instruments of His goodness are also directed towards the world.[79]

Notice how Wingren's conception of the human creature as instrument here aligns with Luther's constant refrain that God reveals Himself as a thoroughly *pro nobis* God. Thus, whenever human activity and responsibility is involved, we are dealing with God's ongoing work as the Creator. "It does not matter," he writes, "whether these works have been performed in politics, family, school, art, science, or the administration of justice."[80]

How does this, then, relate to the concept of "word"? Peter Berger was quite right in saying that, for Lutherans, God's Word is not merely biographical information concerning God's nature, nor is it strictly the Bible, as fundamentalists sometimes take as the primary referent of the "Word." Rather, to the contrary, God's Word, is "living and active."[81] As Berger says, the Word is "the uniquely redemptive action of God's grace—the *sola gratia* of the Lutheran confessions."[82] That is true, and yet, even this does not go far enough. Why limit the Word to the

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[78] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 155.

[79] Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 154.

[80] Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 153.

[81] "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:12–13).

[82] Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 112.

second and third articles of the creed? As Heiko Obermann puts it,

> For the Scholastics, revelation meant primarily a means of knowledge, an unveiling of a higher truth. Even though it cannot be known by means of reason, it implies a theoretical knowledge, though of a higher order. For Luther, however, revelation meant God's powerful action, in which God accomplishes his purpose.[83]

God's Word, then, is not primarily a philosophical system or worldview (though it may give rise to either). God's word is not merely information, not merely a means by which we get handle on the *ousia* of God *per se*. The Word includes the *entirety* of His work, His "speech," which is most certainly not limited to the second and third articles of the creed.

In describing God's speech, Luther himself returns to the *principia* in order to highlight the difference that separates divine grammar from human grammar.

> The words "Let there be light" are the words of God, not of Moses; this means that they are realities themselves. For God calls into existence the things (Ps 33: 6, 9) which do not exist (Rom 4:17). He does not speak grammatical words; He speaks existent realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God. Thus everything around us—sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, you, etc.—we are all words of God . . . We, too, speak, but only according to the rules of language; that is, we assign names to objects which have been already created. But the divine rule of language is different, namely: when He says: "Sun, shine," the sun is there at once and shines. Thus the words of God are realities, not bare words.[84]

Note that here, Luther does not even mention the second and third articles of the Creed. To the contrary, he limits himself to the first, demonstrating that literally *everything that exists* is a word of God, spoken into existence and sustained in existence. All creation becomes God's grammar. All creation is God's speech. Thus, the Word of God first active in Genesis at creation is a Word that continues to this day because God has, in fact, never stopped speaking. Gillespie captures well the radical implications for this idea.

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[83] Heiko Obermann, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durkham: Labyrinth Press, 1983), 70.

[84] Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5," ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 1, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 21–22.

> Within both Neoplatonism and scholastic Aristotelianism, the divine is imagined to transcend the physical. The source of sin is thus conceived as a falling away from God into the material world, which is at best an imperfect image of the divine and at worst a snare of the devil. For Luther, by contrast, God is conceived out of the Incarnation. The corporeal is thus not a falling away from divine reality but the place in which the divine comes to be in and for us.[85]

Consequently, because "everything bodily comes from God, even the lowest or most despicable of things . . .All things are sacred."[86]

These sacred realities, however, are not simply things that exist randomly or without cause or purpose. Quite to the contrary, when we examine the creed in particular, we discover that God's words (those things called forth from the void, those things that "exist" [literally that "stand out" from being]) are entirely *pro nobis*.[87] That is, all the "words" that God speaks, all His myriad locutions which are known to us as reality, all of these things are, in fact, the means by which God takes care of us. Therefore, what we know of God is what He tells us concerning His action "for us men and for our salvation," from creation through the Word, to redemption through the Word made flesh, to recreation granted by the Holy Spirit through the Word. Through all of that, God is speaking God's Word.

What, then, do we make of the brokenness of the world? What do we make of the fact that often, creation seems decidedly inhospitable, indeed, exceedingly hostile? What do we make of disease, famine, or sudden natural disasters? An unfiltered view of the creation presents a confounding array of the good and the horrific, the joyful and the tragic, the attractive and the detestable. In short, an unfiltered view of the world reveals a God and a creation that are

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[85] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 126.

[86] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 125.

[87] For this concept, I am truly indebted to Guntis Kalme's fine dissertation, Guntis Kalme, "'Words Written in Golden Letters': A Lutheran Anthropological Reading of the Ecumenical Creeds—'For Us; as the Constitutive Factor of What it Means to be Human" (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2005), https://scholar.csl.edu/phd/53.

ambivalent at best, but more than likely thoroughly malevolent, given that all life ends in death. And that is why the second and third articles are key to perceiving the world as God's *pro nobis* locution.

Mark Mattes eloquently describes precisely how the second and third articles function as the hermeneutical key to the first.

> Through the gospel [accomplished in the second article and delivered to us in the third], humans are granted new birth; this opens them to receive creation as a gift, and not merely as something to conquer or worship . . . Our experience as sinners is mixed: we experience God's hiddenness, in which it is not always clear that the universe is governed by a teleology or is a reflection of beauty. Such divine hiddenness is a challenge to the pancalism[88] . . . embraced by Neoplatonic aesthetics. In contrast, it is only through the gospel that we can unconditionally affirm that the cosmos is beautiful and good. Pancalism cannot be affirmed outside of Christ or outside the lens of promise.[89]

In other words, it is through the third article word—the human voice, touched in baptism, and ingested in the Lord's Supper—that we receive the second article Word, who is God Himself in all His grace and mercy. This reception opens our eyes to "hear" all creation as God's *pro nobis* speech toward us.

With this understanding, we may indeed speak in terms of analogy. As Mattes puts it, "from the perspective of the gospel, nature is not devoid of analogies for God. Luther goes so far as to claim that even the fields and the tress can be sermons better than most preached in churches."[90] Precisely so! And precisely because fields and trees are also words of God, so that "all creatures are God's masks and costumes which God wants to work with him to help create all manner of things, yet he can and does also work without them."[91] Even more pointedly,

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[88] Pancalism is the belief that being itself is innately good, a theory we will delve into more deeply below, especially in chapter 5 regarding participation in the beautiful.

[89] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 176–77.

[90] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 176.

[91] Martin Luther "Sermon on Matthew 4:1–11," quoted in Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 176.

Luther claims that "He who knows God also knows, understands, and loves the creature, because there are traces of divinity *(divinitatis vestigia*) in the creature."[92] Therefore, we may certainly speak of analogy so long as analogy is not conceived of as the participation of two things to a third thing, but rather in terms of donation, of source to recipient, and therefore grounded in God's "for us" Word. During the course of this dissertation, then, when the phrase *analogia entis* is employed, it will be with the understanding that by it we intend the kind of thing suggested by Bonhoeffer's *analogia relationis*. This *relationis* is established and maintained through the Word as active in the three articles of the creed.

The Transcendentals, Revisited

Now we have established that far from personally advocating for a desacralized creation, Luther's world *was* enchanted, and that to an even greater extent than many of his contemporaries and forebears. All creation is God's locution, His persuasive rhetoric, His means of providing for all creatures. *That* is Luther's version of the *analogia entis*. But we have yet to determine whether or not Luther also owns the medieval tradition of the transcendentals, that is, the assertion that all being may be seen under the aspects of truth, goodness, and beauty. We will now turn our attention to that question.

As we saw above, especially in the work of von Balthasar, Medievals conceived of "being" as having three aspects known as the transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. Furthermore, these aspects are "convertible"—that is, if it is true that X is good, it will also be the case that X is true and beautiful. One transcendental cannot pertain to an extant without the other two applying as well. Nevertheless, the transcendentals are not precisely synonymous. Rather, they

[92] Martin Luther, quoted in Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 77.

grant different angles, such that each transcendental provides a different aspect of being, allows us to describe and imagine the extant in a slightly different way. What did Luther make of such conceptions?

As is well-known and much-touted, Luther routinely and ruthlessly condemned the scholastics who attempted to reach God via experience of the natural world, often completely bypassing the Scriptures. "Since the Fall," Oberman explains,

> every man has been a philosopher, for he has taken his experience of the world and his knowledge of reality—which he has succeeded in describing scientifically—as a standard by which to measure God. But the intellect does not suffice to grasp the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He must be apprehended through the Scriptures.[93]

Luther's view of transcendence was certainly influenced by Nominalism in that human reason cannot grasp or comprehend God in any way. The God of Nominalism could indeed have been capricious, a God upon whom human beings could not count or depend upon to act in any consistent manner, especially regarding salvation. It was this unpredictability that gave rise to the common adage, most closely associated with Gabriel Biel, which nearly drove Luther to distraction—*facere quod in se est* ("do what is in you"). Do what is in you, and *then* God would perhaps show mercy. But how does one know when one has done enough? Furthermore, if God cannot be predicted by syllogism, how can one be assured of His mercy? The voluntarist God, governed by nothing other than His will, is in no way bound to abide by any regular and established soteriology. Because salvation is so tenuous a thing, "do what is in you." It might not seal the deal, but it may certainly dispose the unpredictable God in your favor.[94]

Luther himself squirmed beneath the threat of such a willing and unpredictable God. As he once put it, "in His own nature God is immense, incomprehensible, and infinite, so to man's

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[93] Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 170.

[94] Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 39–40.

nature he is intolerable."[95] This sounds not even remotely like the comprehensible God sitting atop a scalable chain of being. This is a God who terrifies, precisely because He is essentially unknowable. This is the picture of God granted by nominalism, a far cry from the relatively safe and predictable God of rationalism.

Thus, relying on human reason for knowledge of God terminates in one of only two possibilities. First, it may end in spiritual pride which finds little or no use for Jesus' salvific work on our behalf (the God of metaphysics). Or, it may end in despair because one cannot be entirely certain of the God who alone grants salvation.

Luther rejected both previous options. There are two realms, Luther asserted—the realm of faith and the realm of reason. The distinction between the two must be *vigorously* guarded. The realm of logic has no purchase on God, no purchase on salvation. Neither did Luther strive to earn the commendation of an unknowable God. As Obermann puts it, "whatever transcends the perception of empirical reality is either based on God's Word or is pure fantasy."[96] The human *coram Deo* reality is simply *inaccessible* to human reason. More than that, as Mark Mattes puts it, "God is not beautiful outside of Christ and indeed is a threat."[97] Therefore, rather than seeking to appease a hidden God about whom humans could only speculate, Luther turned to where God *had* revealed Himself—the incarnation, Jesus Christ. The focus of faith, then, is *not* "on God in his omnipotence but as he incarnates himself in Christ and reveals himself in the Gospel."[98]

Given Luther's apparent rejection of reason and philosophy with respect to salvation, one might suppose that Luther would have dismissed it *tout court*. And indeed, certain of Luther's

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[95] "Lectures on Galatians (1535)," in *LW* 26:113. Quoted in Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 104.

[96] Obermann, *Luther*, 161.

[97] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 104.

[98] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 116.

writings, especially the early ones, seem to confirm this assumption. "In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle's Physics, Metaphysics, Concerning the Soul, and Ethics . . . should be completely discarded." His explanation as to why leaves no doubt about Luther's sentiments: "It grieves me to the quick that this damned, conceited, rascally heathen has deluded and made fools of so many of the best Christians with his misleading writings."[99] Where, then does this leave us regarding Luther's thoughts concerning the transcendentals? Does he, with characteristic bravado, cast them aside into the dung heap? Or does he, after all, find a place for the elements of the Classical tradition that shaped his contemporary theological *milieu*? As incredulous as it may seem, the latter appears to have been the case.

In 1543, Luther sings the praises both of Cicero *and* Aristotle: "Cicero wrote and taught excellently about virtues, prudence, temperance and the rest; likewise also Aristotle excellently and very learnedly about ethics. Indeed the books of both are very useful and of the greatest necessity for the regulation of this life."[100] Melanchthon had an even higher regard for the philosopher, going so far as to include a testament of his admiration in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: "After all, Aristotle wrote so eruditely about social ethics that nothing further needs to be added."[101]

What accounts for Luther's seemingly schizophrenic relationship with philosophy? The answer lies in a key phrase in the above quote—"in *this* life." That is, while Aristotle's works ought to be burned if the intention is to apply them *coram Deo*, he is also both "very useful" and

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[99] Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility," in *The Christian In Society I*, ed. James Atkinson, vol. 44, *Luther's*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 201. Quoted in Joel Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 144–46.

[100] *D. Martin Luther's Werke, Kritische Gessamtausgabe*, 58 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883), 40:608, quoted in Biermann, *Case for Character*, 80.

[101] Ap IV 14 in Robert Kolb, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 113.

even “of the greatest necessity” for life *coram mundo*. We will let Luther himself speak to the necessary distinction between philosophy and theology, between the *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* realms.

> The sophists, as well as anyone else who does not grasp the doctrine of justification, do not know of any other righteousness than civil righteousness or the righteousness of the Law, which are known in some measure even to the heathen. Therefore they snatch the words “do,” “work,” and the like from moral philosophy and from the Law, and transfer them to theology, where they act in a way that is not only evil but ungodly. Philosophy and theology must be carefully distinguished. Philosophy also speaks of a good will and of right reason, and the sophists are forced to admit that a work is not morally good unless a good will is present first. And yet they are such stupid asses when they proceed to theology. They want to prescribe a work before the good will, although in philosophy it is necessary for the person to be justified morally before the work. Thus the tree is prior to its fruit, both in essence and in nature. They themselves admit this and teach that in nature being precedes working and that in ethics a good will is required before the work. Only in theology do they reverse this and put a work ahead of right reason.[102]

Again, the brutal criticism Luther and the other evangelical reformers leveled against Aristotle specifically, but philosophy as a whole more generally, was not aimed at the entire endeavor *per se*. Rather, it was directed toward the misappropriation of such works—namely, the invading of the *coram Deo* realm by that which ought to remain in the *coram mundo* realm.[103]

What, though, of reality *coram mundo*? If we can be established *coram Deo* only through Christ, through the Gospel, through unmerited grace and forgiveness, and not through human reason or human efforts, are we left with nothing to guide us concerning reality in this world? And more specific to the question at hand, are the transcendentals (including beauty) cast aside along with all the criteria so painstakingly catalogued by the Medievals, leaving in their absence nothing but ambiguity?

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[102] Martin Luther, *Lecture on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26, *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 261.

[103] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 80.

While he does not address the traditional three aspects of God's grammar (that is, creation or being) in a comprehensive way, Mark Mattes argues that certain comments of Luther's certainly give the impression that he had not entirely done away with the medieval principles concerning beauty, especially those elaborated by Thomas Aquinas, namely *integritas, claritas,* and *consonantia*. Luther's imaginative description of prelapsarian Adam certainly supports Mattes' claim and merits quoting at length.

> His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquility of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety. To these inner qualities came also those most beautiful and superb qualities of body and of all limbs, qualities in which he surpassed all the remaining living creatures. I am fully convinced that before Adam's sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears, whose strength is very great; and he handled them the way we handle puppies.[104]

Mattes goes so far as to suggest that Luther *did* consider beauty to be a transcendental, and that he undoubtedly assumed the ontological reality of goodness and beauty, as "God is the most real of all realities."[105]

One might wonder, however, why Luther never addressed the transcendentals in a more direct, systematic, or comprehensive way. Why, for instance, did he not spell out more clearly his conception of beauty *coram mundo*? Two plausible answers present themselves. Firstly, Luther was concerned with reform. He had no interest in addressing thoroughly and systematically all theological *loci* because not all of them needed to be reformed. Secondly, there is the distinct possibility that Luther absorbed the medieval tradition regarding *coram mundo* beauty simply because those were the waters in which he swam and there was no reason for him to call it into question. Indeed, Luther considered many findings of the philosophers to be very

[104] "Lectures on Genesis," in *LW* 1:62. Quoted in Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 106.

[105] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 71.

helpful, as we saw above. Again, his criticism of philosophy lay in scholasticism's tendency to "level up" their discipline which ought to have remained a *coram mundo* endeavor, and against nominalism's ultimate inability to provide any degree of certainty regarding salvation.

Ultimately, a definitive answer regarding Luther's view of transcendentals lies outside of our grasp. We simply do not have sufficient documentation to construct an airtight argument either way. Still, Luther's transcendent immanentalism (in which creation itself, being itself, actually *is* God's grammar) in addition to his comments regarding Adam, make it difficult to imagine a scenario in which he would have rejected the medieval tradition of beauty which he inherited.

Thus, even apart from Luther's relative silence regarding the transcendentals, we may at the very least say that Luther's world was thoroughly enchanted. It was enchanted by God's *pro nobis* word. And because God's grammar differs from our own, because God speaks *realities*, creation itself *is* that *pro nobis* word. Thus, creation is that analogous word—not the analogy of two things to some third thing, but of donation, of one to another. Assuming that Luther did accept his forbear's take on beauty *coram mundo*, we may say that the word, creation itself, being in all manifestations, may be seen from the three aspects known as the transcendentals. That is, *coram mundo* reality is simultaneously true, good, and beautiful. Outside of Christ, these transcendentals are not salvific. Nevertheless, God speaks through them. If, however, these words of God are not salvific *in themselves*, the question then arises, to what *end* does God speak? What is the *telos* of God's spoken realities? What does He intend to accomplish through these analogies? To these issues I turn in the following chapters.

Summary

As mentioned above, Mattes helpfully draws into this conversation Luther's concept of the

larvae Dei or "masks of God."[106] These masks are the means, constituted by the Word, through which God provides for His creation. But this kind of provision does not pertain to the body alone. No, the masks through which God works, these embodied words of God, *move* us, shape and mold us. That is, God's *pro nobis* words actively usher His human creatures into the nexus of their *coram mundo* and *coram Deo* reality. Or, more explicitly, God speaks His words of creation to make us human.

This dissertation intends to address beauty from three perspectives, namely understanding, perceiving, and participation. In the following chapter, we will turn to the first of the three. As a consequence, we will see that beauty occupies a unique position among the transcendentals. Beauty is that aspect of creation/being/analogy that is most capable of ushering us into the beautiful place, the nexus of our *coram mundo* and *coram Deo* reality.

[106] Luther writes, "What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but just such a child's performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things. Had Gideon done nothing but take the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been beaten; and God could certainly have beaten them without Gideon. He could give children without using men and women. But He does not want to do this. Instead, He joins man and woman so that it appears to be the work of man and woman, and yet He does it under the cover of such masks. We have the saying: 'God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand.' God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand and take the bully by the horns; that is, you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask." "Selected Psalms: Volume 3," in *LW* 14:114–15.

CHAPTER THREE

UNDERSTANDING BEAUTY AS HUMANITY IN ITS GROOVE

This dissertation argues that beauty is God's eloquent rhetoric, urging and enticing human beings into the nexus of the *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* groove carved for him. The previous chapter discovered that, far from being immanentized, Luther's world was *thoroughly* enchanted, and, in some ways, to a far greater degree than many of his contemporaries could conceive. I argued that all creation, all being, is God's analogy, His *pro nobis* word, and that, furthermore, all creation may be viewed under the aspects of the three traditional transcendentals: beauty, goodness, and truth. We noted that while the transcendentals do not suffice for salvation outside of Christ, they nevertheless are means by which God intends to accomplish something in us. He intends to use beauty to usher us into the *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* nexus which I have called "the beautiful place."

This chapter, then, reckons precisely with this groove, this beautiful place. That is, this chapter will set forth an anthropology toward the understanding of beauty. Now, for Christians dealing with the question of human nature, the rather enigmatic and much debated concept of the *imago Dei* immediately rises to the surface. The *imago Dei* has been a definitive feature of Christian anthropology throughout the ages. That much is incontrovertible. What is less clear, however, is what exactly is meant by the term. For a phrase that appears only a handful of times throughout Scripture, it does a *tremendous* amount of theological heavy lifting. That is, various Christian approaches to everything from ethics to eschatology rely on particular interpretations of what precisely the *imago* implies. This dissertation, however, will adopt the interpretation proposed by Anthony Hoekema, to which we will turn shortly.

Understanding Beauty with Balthasar, Hart, and Mattes

As stated above, this dissertation will attend to understanding, perceiving, and participating in beauty according to the doctrine of two kinds of righteousness. At this stage, however, we will review the positions held by three other theologians—Balthasar, Hart, and Mattes—all three of whom offer significant contributions that drive toward consideration of beauty in terms of understanding, perceiving, and participating. Our primary contention with Balthasar will manifest in his presentation of *participation* in beauty, whereas with Hart, we will take issue both regarding participation and perception. Therefore, chapters 4 and 5 will present a more negative presentation of those theologians than the current one. Nevertheless, their understanding of beauty is difficult to match. We begin with Balthasar as in many ways he continues to cast his shadow over the entire field of theological aesthetics.

Understanding Beauty with Balthasar

As seen above, when Balthasar speaks of beauty, he does so with the understanding that all beings participate in beauty to one degree or another precisely because beauty (along with goodness and truth) are the constituent features of being. What precisely *is* beauty? Beauty is the convergence of finite form with infinite light.[1] Crucial here is Balthasar's insistence that Beauty is not found *behind* the form. Forms do not point away from themselves so that the form itself may be left behind. That is, Balthasar brooks no Platonic dualism. To the contrary, "The beautiful is above all *form*," which has both an exterior and an interior depth, an unfathomable mystery, which cannot be separated from the form itself.[2]

The form *is* thus "the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it." Only those who are able to see and "read," who are "illumined by

[1] Nichols, *Key to Balthasar*, 17.

[2] Notice here the similarity to Gregory's rejection of the "ladder."

the form" will be able to see that mysterious light.[3]

What does that light reveal? And why does beauty delight and draw us? Form appears beautiful to us because "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." For that reason, form holds two things within itself indissolubly—"It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, *and* it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths."[4] That is, in all beings, there is a depth born in the form that nonetheless exceeds the form, a light radiating from within that form that bears witness to the whole, to all of being. That is the case due to the relationship between all existents, a relationship called proportionality.

Oliver Davies provides perhaps the clearest explanation of proportionality.

> Proportionality sustains a universe in which one thing is ordered harmoniously to another, and the whole is ordered harmoniously to a single principle. Proportionality secures the structure of interaction and participation, in which one element reveals another and the whole comes into view in its parts (the very essence of aesthetic perception). But proportionality also guarantees the principle of what von Balthasar calls oscillation, or *Schwebung*, whereby the single element is held in suspension between surrounding forces and thus itself becomes expressive of an encompassing mystery. Where the ground of its suspension is the divine creativity, then it can be said to transmit or mediate the light of transcendence, or what von Balthasar more generally calls 'glory'.[5]

Beauty, then, reveals a transcendence within creation that points to the glory of the Creator, precisely because it contains within itself the goodness, truth, and beauty of the Creator. Hence Balthasar's claim which we already encountered above.

> Created being would not be an image and . . . 'outflow' of the sovereign and living God if its transcendentals were static properties, clear and evident to our view, or if,

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[3] von Balthasar, GL I: 146–47.

[4] von Balthasar, GL I: 118.

[5] Oliver Davies, "Von Balthasar and the Problem of Being," *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 923 (1998): 11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43250078.

> despite their immanence in all contingent beings, they did not have something of the freedom and mysterious depths of God's decision to reveal himself."[6]

The Creator's glory is thus mediated, not outside of created form, but specifically *by* form and, more specifically, in the harmony of form with other forms. There is, however, only one form capable of revealing the glory of the Trinity specifically—that is Jesus Christ. He fully embodied this beauty, this glory, whose human form revealed not only the beauty of creation (because the body is creature) but also the glory of the fullness of the deity which was pleased to dwell in Him. For this reason, Balthasar is able to say that "God's Incarnation perfects the whole ontology and aesthetics of created Being," because it "uses created Being at a new depth as a language and a means of expression for the divine Being and essence."[7]

Thus, rather than polarizing a "natural" beauty from a "divine" beauty, Balthasar asks, "should we not rather consider this 'art' of God's [the Incarnation] to be precisely the transcendent archetype of all worldly and human beauty?"[8] Very poignantly, Balthasar asserts that "contemplation of the mystery of the cross does not do away with the revelation of being (and so of the esthetic factor), nor does it replace the latter, for then God would be canceling his own plan for the world, together with the conditions he laid down for its fulfillment."[9] That is, God's intention has *always been* union with humanity. For that reason, Balthasar and others were wary of Luther whom they interpreted as preferencing the *event* to the *existent*. Contemplation, he asserts, "joins event and form together, indissolubly."[10]

Thanks to Mattes, however, we have already seen that this charge leveled against Luther is

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[6] von Balthasar, *Word Made Flesh*, 111.

[7] von Balthasar, GL I: 29.

[8] von Balthasar, GL I: 68.

[9] von Balthasar, *Word Made Flesh*, 114.

[10] von Balthasar, *Word Made Flesh*, 121.

not justified. God's beauty and goodness *is* seen throughout the created world, precisely because God's grammar consists of physical realities, and precisely because God is the One at work behind them. What is unique about the cross is not that God there engaged in *kenosis*. Such stooping was already seen in His having created anything at all! The cross therefore makes clear *beyond a shadow of a doubt* that ours is a *pro nobis* God. Thus, we may say with Balthasar that "In Christ all that is implied in creation is brought to fulfillment."[11] What is unique about the work of Christ is its salvific nature, its restoration of creatures who had essentially rejected their creaturehood (and the *imago* along with it), and so it fulfills and completes the first article in God's human creatures and for all of creation.

Understanding Beauty with David Bentley Hart

As was discussed earlier, Hart refuses to define beauty because it defies, if not description, then definition. Such is the case because the God (one of whose names is Beauty) who created beauty is Himself infinite. Thus, definition would artificially constrict beauty. There is, he argues "an infuriating imprecision . . . in the language of beauty." But despite its defiance of apprehension, "beauty is there, abroad in the order of things, given again and again in a way that defies description and denial with equal impertinence." And even more relevant for our purposes, "all that theology says of the triune life of God, the gratuity of creation, the incarnation of the Word, and the salvation of the world makes room for—indeed depends upon—a thought, and a narrative, of the beautiful."[12] That is, the subject of theology is, in some real sense, beauty.

Hart goes on to say that beauty can only be understood by way of analogy in two senses. Firstly, by "constant exposure to countless instances of its advent, and through constant and

[11] von Balthasar, *Word Made Flesh*, 118.

[12] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 16.

continuous revision," and that because beauty is ascribed primarily to God. Secondly,

> beauty is not some property discretely inherent in particular objects, but indwells the analogical relationship of all things, each to the other, as a measure of the dynamism of their involvement with one another. The Christian use of the word 'beauty' refers most properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and return of the riches of being.[13]

That is, beauty discloses itself when all things are revealed as being dynamically related to all other things. Beauty is a matter of peace (*shalom*), in which all things are grounded in *eros*-generated *kenosis*. Being is essentially symphonic and harmonic. Thus we find in Hart essentially the same kind of presentation of beauty as offered by Eco's interpretation of Aquinas, Carnes' interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa, and von Balthasar's own particular take. To the latter two especially, Hart acknowledges a debt.[14]

For all four authors, it is the relationship between existents that counts. There is nothing beautiful, they would say, apart from the consideration of its position relative to other things. This is the *consonantia* of Aquinas and Balthasar, the harmonious relation of the parts to the whole constituted by those parts. But what, for example, of the human eye? Surely an eye can be beautiful even when considered apart from a face. Perhaps, but zoom in, and suddenly the eye reveals itself not to be a monad, but itself a whole consisting of harmoniously relating parts. That is to say, parts of wholes themselves become wholes depending on zoom. That may be why the teleological aspect is so critical, in which the beauty of a thing relates to the fittingness of a thing's structure to its purpose and goal. That whole then takes on the aspect of a component of a yet still larger whole. This latter point, we saw earlier, is especially highlighted by Gregory of Nyssa, for whom gratuity and fittingness are key to beauty. That is, the more gratuitously a thing

[13] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 18.

[14] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 29.

fills its *telos* the more beautiful it is. Put another way, the more gratuitously a thing relates to other things, the more beautiful it is.

Understanding Beauty with Mark Mattes

In fairness, it must be noted at the onset that the primary concern of Mattes' book on Luther's theology of beauty is beauty *coram Deo*. For Mattes, that beauty is established through the Gospel. It is not a beauty which we seek to establish for ourselves, but one granted by the Father through the Son as a gift. That gift enables sinners to receive the beauty in creation described, though insufficiently, by Thomas' three-fold description.[15] Mattes is even willing to concede a version of *pancalism* that pervades the writings of Balthasar and Hart, so long as it is perceived through Christ, and not through the *Deus nudus*.[16]

This is the primary criticism Mattes lodges against the previous two authors. They do not distinguish sufficiently between the two kinds of beauty, between justification and sanctification. But whereas Mattes' criticism is the "leveling up" of the *coram mundo* into the *coram Deo*, I will suggest that Mattes suffers from precisely the opposite problem. He pulls the *coram Deo* down into the *coram mundo* such that the contours of beauty, the existence of which he acknowledges, are so vague as to become mostly indiscernible. Such will become apparent in the final section of this chapter.[17]

Summary

As mentioned before, there is little concerning the previous three authors' *understanding* of beauty with which I will take issue. In what follows, however, I will attempt to ground

[15] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 187–88.

[16] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 177.

[17] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 186–86.

theologically the possibility of speaking more concretely about the contours of beauty, contours which Mattes seems reluctant to provide, even if their existence is acknowledged. I will argue that the Law is capable of providing precisely such contours. This conversation naturally entails a particular anthropology. It is to that which we now turn, beginning with a (very) brief review of the developments in Modernity that have led the twenty-first century secular world into an agnosticism regarding human nature, an agnosticism which, in some situations, can serve a Christian perspective rather well.

The Human Being in Modernity

The precise starting point of Modernity is an elusive thing. As we have already seen, many refer to the development of nominalism (especially by William of Ockham) and the attack on the so-called "universals" as products of the human mind.[18] It is clear, however, that Modernity took a dramatic leap in that period of history known as the Enlightenment. Most attribute the beginning of this tectonic shift in history to Rene Descartes. The world had been turned upside down by such things as the plague, a mini-ice age, the Thirty Years' War, and especially by the reorientation of the galaxy by Copernicus. Thus, it is no wonder that Descartes sought a plot of ground on which to stand. But the uncertainty Descartes experienced was ultimately rooted in the ontological ambiguity ushered in by the Nominalists. With universals having been shown the door, what undergirded human experience, reality itself even? It was in the pursuit of clear and distinct ideas, ideas that he could count on, that Descartes dreamed up his *cogito ergo sum*.[19]

As the Enlightenment proceeded, it continued to yield increasingly remarkable discoveries and developments in everything from mathematics and science, to technology and politics. By

[18] See Kenny, *Brief History of Western Philosophy*, 173.

[19] Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 174.

the time the Victorian Era rolled around, progress seemed inevitable. Humanity was gaining an ever-deeper grasp of the mechanics of the universe. Few doubted that soon their drilling down into the nature of things would reach bottom, and reality and being itself would no longer be mysterious. But disturbing breakthroughs in the early twentieth century would throw the world of confidence and inevitable progress into chaos. For our purposes, two examples of such discoveries will suffice to illustrate the terribly confused anthropology to which Modernism gave rise. This will then pave the way for a discussion of the Law's role in understanding beauty.

As William Everdell explains, Bertrand Russel had long been enamored with mathematics. He, along with many others, heralded it as the purist form of logic, and, because of its apparent correspondences with the natural world, the most likely means of uncovering the foundations of reality itself. Russel was in the process of writing a book that he believed would answer all questions and apparent inconsistencies remaining in the field. As the book unfolded, he experienced what can only be described as a kind of euphoria. The words of Russel himself show the heights of his elation. A few hours before January 1, 1900, he wrote the following in a letter to a friend. "Thank goodness a new age will begin in six hours. . . . In October I invented a new subject, which turned out to be all mathematics for the first time treated in its essence."[20] In another letter, he wrote exactly how his discoveries in mathematics affected him.

> The world of mathematics, which you condemn, is really a beautiful world; it has nothing to do with life and death and human sordidness, but is eternal, cold and passionless. To me pure mathematics is one of the highest forms of art; it has a sublimity quite special to itself, and an immense dignity derived from the fact that the world is exempt from change and time. I am quite serious in this. . . . [Mathematics] is the only thing we know of that is capable of perfection; in thinking about it we become Gods.[21]

[20] Quoted in Everdell, *First Moderns*, 179.

[21] Quoted in Everdell, *First Moderns*, 182.

Yet his sense of deification would be short lived. He discovered an inconsistency that was far more than a trifling matter. Indeed, it revealed a gaping hole in the very heart of logic.

Essentially, Russel was working with sets or "classes," as he called them. There are sets that include themselves and sets that exclude themselves. A set of all large sets ought to include itself because it is a large set. A set of all books does not include itself because a set is not a book. But what about a set of all sets that exclude themselves? If *this* set includes itself, it cannot include itself by definition. If this set does *not* include itself, then *it must* include itself by definition. Here was a contradiction in mathematics akin to the claim, "This statement is false," or that of Epimenides of Crete who claimed that all Cretans were liars.[22] A few decades later, mathematician and philosopher Kurt Gödel proved that "any mathematics at all . . . must have propositions in it that are neither true nor false but simply unprovable" and that "if every proposition is provable then the axioms will turn out to be contradictory."[23] Only by accepting certain axioms *on faith* is it possible to say with confidence that Achilles actually will outpace the tortoise. But again, it is only *on faith* that we may make such an assertion.

It turned out that Italian mathematician and philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) was correct all along. Mathematics is, at the end of the day, one of the humanities, "the most completely nonnatural, man-made thing in the world" . . . but man-made, nonetheless.[24] Math did not arise from the universe, or from reality itself. Its origins lay in the human mind. Math does not give us insight into some *noumenal* realm. Rather it is a mental map designed to help us navigate *phenomena*.

Equally unsettling discoveries in the field of physics emerged at roughly the same time.

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[22] Everdell, *First Moderns*, 180.

[23] Everdell, *First Moderns*, 191.

[24] Everdell, *First Moderns*, 352.

The twentieth century introduced the world to quantum mechanics. And with this world came a question about the fabric of reality itself. Is physics indeterministic or deterministic, random or predictable? The Copenhagen interpretation argued for the first option. Werner Heisenberg, for instance, insisted that only when a particle is observed does it actually materialize somewhere, and where precisely it materializes in its "field" is random. The Copenhagen school takes the randomness at face value.[25] As N. David Mermin put it in 1981, "It is not the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics that is strange, but the world itself."[26]

Other more recent physicists follow Einstein in suggesting that what is random at the quantum level may rather be determined at a sub-quantum level. Einstein was convinced that while quantum mechanics had struck upon an element of truth, it was nevertheless an incomplete system. He assumed a *sub*quantum level that could explain the apparent indeterminacy at the quantum level. To this day, there is no consensus concerning what such a level might consist of.[27] In short, human beings still do not know what is "underneath it all."

Again, the previous illustrations serve to demonstrate two things. Firstly, human beings are incapable of "touching bottom," of "knowing" reality itself. They do not possess a god-like ability to drill down to the *noumena*, as it were. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, the above examples show that human beings are not capable of following the sage advice inscribed in stone at Apollo's temple in Delphi: γνῶθι σαὐτόν, "know thyself". Human beings cannot "know" the world through reason alone. Neither can human beings "know" themselves through reason alone. Left to our own resources, we find ourselves floating in who-knows-where

[25] George Musser, "Is the Cosmos Random?" *Scientific American* 313, no. 3 (2015): 90. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26046246.

[26] N. David Mermin, "Quantum Mysteries for Anyone," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, no. 7 (1981): 407. https://doi.org/10.2307/2026482.

[27] Musser, "Is the Cosmos Random?," 91.

on a who-knows-what for the purpose of no-one-knows-why.

Human Beings and Things

Having said all that, it is impossible to deny the break-neck pace of discoveries made during and, as a consequence of, the Enlightenment. Both now and then, such discoveries have been referred to as "progress." Yet classifying such astonishing "progress" proves a significant challenge. Exactly what *kind* of progress led to the utopian hopes that defined the Western gestalt up through the early twentieth century? If it was not progress in plumbing the depths of the universe, sounding the very structure of reality, then what? It was nothing other than human progress in power, in control, over her own environment. Such was precisely the critique of self-proclaimed postmodernists such as Lyotard. He writes,

> The production of proof . . . thus fall under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity . . . The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.[28]

Even the field of education, Lyotard insists, is not grounded in the pursuit and handing down of truth.

> The question . . . now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer "Is it true?" but "What use is it?" In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: "Is it saleable?" And in the context of power-growth: "Is it efficient?"[29]

[28] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1984), 46.

[29] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 51.

That is to say, not only are human beings unable to reach the base of reality (as Russel, Gödel, and various quantum physicists acknowledged), but in the twentieth century, such was not even the goal! The goal was power.

Perhaps surprisingly, Lyotard would have found himself in good company among many of the more influential theologians of the twentieth century, at least as far as this aspect of the human experience is concerned. In his scientific discoveries, his mathematical formulations, even in the invention of language itself, human beings *were* gaining knowledge—not, perhaps, knowledge of the foundation of all things (which seems to recede infinitely), but rather technical knowledge, the knowledge of manipulation of and dominion over humanity's environment in the world (and in many cases, over other human beings). Pannenberg puts it very nicely.

> Man creatively produces his own world in order to deal with the confused diversity surrounding him. In language he produces a network of sounds and sound sequences that represents reality and makes communication possible. In his material culture man produces a system for the arrangement of things in nature so that they become submissive to his needs.[30]

Language itself, Pannenberg suggests, is the very first technology that granted humankind some form of control over its environment. The separating and naming of things in Genesis was a means by which Adam was able to distinguish the part from the whole, and in some way to see the relationship of that part to the whole. It is precisely this "thing-ing out" of reality that allows human beings to see various elements of reality as "things for use," "things for purpose," "things that may be isolated for a particular task at hand."

This is precisely the point made by psychologist and philosopher Ian McGilchrist. He contends that human beings have fundamentally misconstrued the universe for at least the last

[30] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What Is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. by Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 22.

350 years precisely because we have conflated control with understanding. Yet the two are clearly not the same. "To exert power over something," he writes, "requires us only to know what happens when we pull the levers, press the button, or utter the spell."[31] The manipulation of *things* is essentially the equivalent of such lever-pulling. Yet reality is not primarily composed of "things," McGilchrist argues, but rather of relationships and processes, and events. What then of "things?" The term "things," the atomized view of reality, "is a useful shorthand for those elements congealed in the flow of experience, that merge secondarily from, and attract our attention in, a primary web of interconnexions."[32]

McGilchrist suggests that viewing the world as a world of things is a consequence of the hemisphere difference in the brain. The two hemispheres are actually quite different, though not in the simplistic way presented by pop-psychology of yesteryear. Both hemispheres attend to all the phenomena we encounter, but they do so in different ways. Essentially, the right hemisphere enables the human being to *comprehend* the world, whereas the left enables us to *apprehend* the world, to grab it. In the non-human animal world, the left hemisphere enables a creature to isolate a particular "thing" as food and to apprehend it. An obviously necessary activity. Nevertheless, the animal also needs to be able to pay a different kind of attention to the surrounding environment, to the context. This is the domain of the right hemisphere whose way of attending to the world is marked by "broad, open, sustained, vigilant attention, on the lookout for predators, or for conspecifics . . . but also, crucially, open to the appearance of the utterly unfamiliar—whatever may exist in the world of which it had no previous knowledge."[33] Thus, it

[31] Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*, vol. 1, *The Ways to Truth* (London: Perspectiva, 2022), 3.

[32] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 1: 6.

[33] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 1: 20.

turns out that while the right hemisphere attends to vigilant attention, the left attends to manipulation. For that reason, "nothing ever comes to attention as an unformed precept: we always see something 'as' a something, whether we are aware of it or not."[34]

What then is the misunderstanding that, according to McGilchrist, has defined Western thought for the last 350 years? A manner of thinking that preferences the left hemisphere almost exclusively, that deals with inert things extracted from their context, a manner of thinking which will not accept the more reasonable assertion of the right hemisphere that Achilles leaves the turtle in the dust. Indeed, when our way of attending to the world is dominated by the left hemisphere and so becomes a collection of disconnected and isolated phenomena precisely because it imagines that the truth is attained by breaking reality down into its smallest possible components, our thinking becomes *less* veridical, though more useful for manipulation. To this day, the world broken down into bits is assumed to be true, because "our dominant value . . . has, very clearly, become power."[35]

When the world is perceived in this way, the world is no longer perceived as a "world" at all. McGilchrist compares the brain's two modes of perceiving the world to two ways of listening to a piece of music. The left hemisphere would fixate on and isolate a particular note and perhaps then another and another, but always as "atoms," discreet manifestations of sound. In contradistinction, the right hemisphere attends to the assemblage as a *whole*, as a gestalt, and is capable of perceiving from that gestalt, a work of Bach.[36]

Thus, left hemisphere-attending to the world proves not only to be *less* veridical, but also carries with it the net effect of blinding us. Incredibly "by a kind of alienating, fragmenting and

[34] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 1: 21.

[35] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 1: 48.

[36] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 1: 45.

focal attention, you can reduce humanity—or art, sex, humour or religion—to nothing." A poem becomes nothing more than tropes and theories, music becomes nothing more than harmonic shifts, a lover's body becomes nothing more than a collection of parts.[37] Indeed, such a manner of attending to the world blinds us to (or at the very least strives to convince us of the falsity of) such things as goodness, truth, and beauty.[38]

Intriguingly, G. K. Chesterton also picked up on hemisphere differences, though he did not speak in such terms. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton unwittingly makes a defense of right brain cognition (which regards the whole) over against left brain cognition (which focuses on the part).

> Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. I am not, as will be seen, in any sense attacking logic: I only say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination . . . the general fact is simple. Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion . . . To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything a strain. The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch himself in. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.[39]

Notice that Chesterton too points out the final irrationality and potentially devastating consequences of an overreliance on the left hemisphere.

We will return to McGilchrist later, but for now, we will adopt the following primary point: his assessment of the left hemisphere's reductive representation of the world to the human conscious for the purpose of manipulation is exceedingly revealing. It corroborates on a scientific level what Pannenberg states on a theological level.

> Where control over the world becomes its own end, the perversion has already taken place. Then man has himself become the ultimate goal and the object of his infinite

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[37] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 1: 21–22. McGilchrist undermines the "only just" attack ["only just frequencies of sound," "only just splashes of paint on a parchment"] which turns out to be subject to its own judgment, as the mind that invented such a criticism can itself be reduced to "only just" a collection of particles.

[38] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 1: 9.

[39] G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), 28–29.

> trust. In just this way he becomes enslaved to the world. Then life becomes absorbed in procuring the means for life; life is no longer received as a gift.[40]

Essentially, the sole kind of knowledge to which the West was willing to grant any legitimacy over the last 4 centuries has, in fact, robbed us of the truth, precisely because it aims to grasp, to *apprehend* for the purposes of manipulation only.

I suggest that when *apprehension* is the sole motivation, self-deification is the ultimate aim. Sole reliance on apprehension spells the rejection of creatureliness by the creature. The human being who is overly subservient to the left hemisphere becomes the creator. Why? because she does not trust sufficiently in the Creator simply to *comprehend* life and world and reality as a *gestalt*, as a gift given. Because so much of the world lies outside her apprehension, she may even deny that which she could perceive by comprehension, but will not, because it lies outside her manipulatory capacity.[41]

Tying this together with what precedes, we may say the following. The modern human being was radically thrown back on his own resources because he evicted the Creator from the world. As he was now the creator, he could no longer afford to have an eye for the lilies of the field or the birds of the air. He was forced to depend on himself and his capacity to manipulate things. That being the case, he essentially lost sight of the whole, lost sight of the *consonantia*, lost sight of the proportionality and *schwebung*, by which things may not be apprehended, but comprehended, received as a whole, received as a gift.

While McGilchrist is no doubt correct in asserting the increasing dominance of the left hemisphere over the last several centuries and all its consequences, I suggest that he dates the

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[40] Pannenberg, *What Is Man*, 38.

[41] See especially McGilchrist's case studies detailing patients with right hemisphere damage. There are fascinating cases of people denying patently obvious truths because precisely because the left hemisphere cannot adequately create a *gestalt*.

origin of the problem far too late. For that, we must turn to Genesis.

The Image and the Groove

Bonhoeffer reveals an oft-buried truth in saying that human beings may speak of the earth as mother. He was taken from it. Formed out of it. Made of the same stuff. Not only, then, does his original material existence depend on it, but his life continues to depend on it.[42] As has been discussed above at some length, this in no way intimates that humanity is somehow dependent on God *and also on* creation, as if creation existed outside of God. Rather, Genesis affirms that all of creation is caught up in God's *pro nobis* action. As Oswald Bayer rightly notes, "creation is not only God speaking to his creatures, but as an integral part of this is also God speaking by or through His creatures."[43]

Thus, human beings are "creature" through-and-through, and may rightly be called animals. Nevertheless, Scripture draws a clear distinction between humanity and the rest of creation. God creates human beings in His own image and breathes into their nostrils the breath of life. The question that we now face is this: in what does this *imago Dei* consist? How shall we define it? For although the precise phrase is seldom mentioned in the text of Scripture itself, it nevertheless carries a *tremendous* theological density, if you will. That is, one's conception of the *imago* essentially governs how one envisages the beautiful place, the groove. It governs how one understands beauty. If humanity is to find its groove, it must first come to grips with what kind of creature human beings are. We are neither Gods, nor angels, nor dogs. Human beings were created to perform a unique role in creation, a role so wonderful and weighty that God

[42] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 39.

[43] Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. by Jeff Cayzer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 47.

deigned to create us in His image.

Because the Book of Concord is primarily a reform document written in response to various theological errors and not a comprehensive theological tome (such as Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*), not every theological locus is attended to directly and comprehensively. Such is the case for the *imago Dei*. The reformers did not reckon with it as a primary issue, but rather drew upon it within other contexts more contentious at the time, such as the doctrine of original sin. Within that context, however, the Apology describes the *imago* in this way:

> And Scripture affirms this when it says [Gen. 1:27] that humankind was formed in the image and likeness of God. What else does this mean except that a wisdom and righteousness that would grasp God and reflect God was implanted in humankind, that is, humankind received gifts like the knowledge of God, fear of God, trust in God, and the like.[44]

Although it is not explicit, we see here already that the *imago* is witnessed in the two spheres of human existence. *Coram Deo* it grabs hold of God. *Coram mundo* it reflects God.

The fall, however, effaced the *imago* in humanity. Without so much as brushing the soft pedal, the first Lutherans described the devastating effects of original sin.

> Second, that original sin is a complete absence or 'lack of the original righteousness acquired in Paradise' [Ap II, 15] or of the image of God, according to which the human being was originally created in truth, holiness, and righteousness. At the same time it is the absence of any ability or competence in anything that relates to God . . . That not only is original sin (in human nature) such a complete lack of all good in spiritual, divine matters, but also that at the same time it replaces the lost image of God in the human being with a deep-seated, evil, horrible, bottomless, unfathomable, and indescribable corruption of the entire human nature and of all its powers, particularly of the highest, most important powers of the soul, in mind, heart, and will . . . Indeed, it is hostile to God, particularly in regard to divine, spiritual matters.[45]

[44] Ap II. 8 in Robert Kolb, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 113.

[45] SD I. 10–11, in Kolb and Wengert, 533–34.

Thus, the fall destroys the image of God in humanity especially *coram Deo*, but also *coram mundo* because it impacts the *whole* of human nature. The *imago* is not only destroyed but replaced with a profound corruption of what God had originally intended for His human creatures.

And yet, we run across an interesting dilemma in Genesis. Following God's rescue of Noah and his family from the flood, He repeats, with variation, the commands given to Adam and Eve in Eden. In addition to what He had commanded in Genesis, God also mandates punishment for murder because "God made man in his own image."[46] That raises a very interesting question. Does God forbid murder because human beings are still in the image of God, or to honor what God had originally intended His creatures to be, or in light of what they will be once restored? The question at hand is essentially this: is the image of God *completely* destroyed, or does it persist? And if we argue that it persists, in what manner may we construe its preservation such that it proves consonant with the above claim from the Confessions?

Although we will not accept his position *tout court*, Emil Brunner does offer a potentially helpful framework from which to begin. He notes that "We must . . . speak of God's image in man in two senses: in a formal sense and in a material sense."[47] Essentially, the formal sense of the image of God in the human creature remains, the image being that of an accountable being in relationship to God and to other creatures. Those relationships (hence, "form") remain uninfringed. What has been lost entirely, on the other hand, is our capacity to *fill* those relationships rightly. Thus, writes Brunner,

> Even as a sinner, man can only be understood as one created originally in God's image—he is the man who lives in contradiction of that image . . . What we can say

[46] Gen 9:6.

[47] Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, quoted in David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: Collins, 1973), 166.

> in clear terms is this, that the relationship to God which determines the whole being of man is not annihilated by sin, but perverted. Man does not cease to be a being responsible to God, but his responsibility is changed from a life in love to a life under the law, a life under the wrath of God.[48]

This method of distinguishing between the formal and material aspects allows us to continue speaking of the present existence of the image *and of its destruction* simultaneously. Thus, for fallen humanity outside of Christ, the *Imago*, which consists in relational responsibility, has two effects. On the one hand, it provides human beings with a goal, with purpose, and with meaning. It is within these relationships that we find our greatest joy. Yet, because we are incapable of fulfilling these responsibilities perfectly, the *Imago* also hangs around the sinner's neck as a curse and condemnation.

While the above distinction is helpful, Brunner falls short on several fronts. One such failure is his rejection of the historical Adam. For our purposes, however, the most significant shortcoming involves the capacities he lists under the "formal image." While the "formal" consists primarily of relationship, Brunner also includes under that banner such things as reason, language, conscience, and freedom. Yet we would confess that such things were most certainly affected by the fall, to a greater or lesser extent.[49] As the Epitome so clearly states, "we believe, teach, and confess that original sin is not a slight corruption of human nature, but rather a corruption so deep that there is nothing sound or uncorrupted left in the human body or soul, in its internal or external powers."[50] Thus, while Brunner's distinction does enable us to speak of the *imago* in the present tense by means of the formal/material distinction, his sense of the formal incorporates too much.

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[48] Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology*, quoted in David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 165.

[49] Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 510.

[50] Ep I, 8, in Kolb and Wengert, 488.

Anthony Hoekema, then, provides a more helpful proposition by arguing that the image of God is found exclusively in neither the structural (formal), nor the functional (material) aspects of humanity, but rather in both together, which is to say, in the whole human being. He writes, "The image of God in the broader or structural sense [entails] the entire endowment of gifts and capacities that enable man to function as he should in his various relationships and callings."[51] The functional or material aspect, however, signals "man's proper functioning in harmony with God's will for him."[52] That is, human beings were created to re-present God in finite form by carrying out our God-given responsibilities. Bruce Ware helpfully encapsulates Hoekema's position by referring to it as "functional holism."[53]

With this understanding, we may claim, along with the Confessions that human beings are able to live honorably "to a *certain extent* externally." Sinful humans still do perform their God-given tasks *coram mundo* though imperfectly. Before God, however, the capacity has been totally annihilated.[54]

Having distinguished, but not divorced, the formal and material aspects of the *imago Dei*, we will now turn to the manner in which this *imago* was designed to manifest itself, both *coram Deo* and *coram mundo*, that is, we will seek to understand the human creature's beautiful place.

Humanity *Coram Deo*

Luther puts it very simply in *The Freedom of a Christian*. Christians, he states, "live in

[51] Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 70–71.

[52] Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 72.

[53] Bruce Ware, "Male and Female Complementarity and the Image of God," in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 79.

[54] SD II, 26, in Kolb and Wengert, 549. Italics added.

Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love."[55] The *fundamental* posture God intended His creature to assume before Him is one of faith, trust, receptivity, passivity. As has already been stated above, the creation *ex nihilo* signals the depth to which human beings are by nature dependent upon God, not only for their creation, but also for their day-to-day existence. Such contingency applies whether the creature concedes it or not. As Wingren so excellently renders it,

> God was not active only when the world of men came into being, so that what we have got to deal with are the end-products of His original Creation. But when we move and breathe we are in a living relationship to the Creator whose work is still continuing . . . There is nothing lacking in [the goodness of humans toward one another], but throughout it is the Creator's own goodness flowing out into the continuing life which God has created, preserving it from harm.[56]

Here Wingren makes plain the reality that has been obscured (to a certain degree) by the brokenness of the world, but which was unquestionably obvious to the first human creatures—that our lives hang wholly and only on God's will, and that all the things upon which we rely in this world (including one another) are God's means of sustaining us.[57]

Thus from the beginning, the definitive relationship between God and human beings has been grace from God. As Bonhoeffer put it, God's grace is that "which supports man over the abyss of non-being, non-living, that which is not created."[58] In Eden, this was made known to Adam by placing the twin trees in the middle of the garden. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was Adam's limit, the sign and reminder of his creatureliness and contingency. But God

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[55] Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, trans. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 32.

[56] Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 47.

[57] Luther also expresses this exceptionally clearly in his explanation of the first article of the Creed in the Large Catechism: "Thus we learn from this article that none of us has life – or anything else that has been mentioned here or can be mentioned – from ourselves, nor can we by ourselves preserve any of them, however small and unimportant. All this is comprehended in the word 'Creator.'" LC II, 16, in Kolb and Wengert, 432–33.

[58] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 53.

is not the limit only. He is rather also the God who makes existence possible in the first place, who graciously gives being *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and without necessity. That is indicated by the Tree of Life. Thus, God is "at once the limit and middle of our existence."[59]

This contingency, however, extends beyond our bodily existence as well. Human righteousness, even prior to the fall, was received by Adam and Eve as a gift. Their right-relatedness to the world, their perfect inhabiting of the groove, was God's gracious doing. Their right action, their perfect fulfilling of His will, was nothing extraneous to their nature, no goal or aspiration necessitating an internal struggle between conflicting wills. The Apology describes the original condition especially well: "wisdom and righteousness that would grasp God and reflect God was implanted in humankind, that is, humankind received gifts like the knowledge of God, fear of God, trust in God, and the like."[60] Bonhoeffer is indeed right to refer to Adam and Eve's prelapsarian standing before God as *jusitia passiva*.[61] Thus the definitive posture of humanity before God, both for bodily preservation and for righteousness, is that of passivity, receptivity, faith, and trust.

As we will see later, theologians such as David Bentley Hart and especially von Balthasar privilege *agape* and even *eros* as the defining relationship between humanity and God. A more thorough treatment of that assertion will follow, but for now, suffice it to say that *agape*/*eros* follow logically (though not chronologically) upon the heels of trust. That is, our passive receptivity is a necessary precondition for the love of God.

Humanity *Coram Mundo*

[59] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 53.

[60] Ap II, 18, in Kolb and Wengert, 115.

[61] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 39.

Human beings exist in the nexus of but two overarching relationships, the vertical and the horizontal. Yet the horizontal is multifaceted in that human beings are related to all aspects of creation. That being the case, this section will be divided into three subcategories. First, we will attend to interhuman relationships (*coram hominibus*). Secondly, one's relationship to oneself (*coram meipso*), how one perceives oneself, also bears on living life in the groove *coram mundo*. Thirdly, we will attend to humankind's standing within the "natural" realm (*coram naturae*). This division will enable us more accurately to depict humanity's *coram mundo* reality.

Coram Hominibus

Our adoption of Hoekema's anthropology of "functional holism" assumes that human beings are by nature beings in community. That is, the constitutive features which enable us to engage in the functions for which God created us are given form by the relationships in which God has embedded us. Martin Luther (bluntly yet with blinding clarity) describes God's intended relationship of one human being to another.

> Therefore, I will give myself as a kind of Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see will be necessary, advantageous, and salutary for my neighbor, because through faith I am overflowing with all good things in Christ.[62]

That is, as ourselves masks and words of God, we exist *expressly* for the sake of the other. Luther's explanation of the second table of the Law in both his catechisms flesh out such an other-oriented life in greater detail. In essence, we are words of God to our neighbors, "christs," even. Parents, for example, not only provide for the physical needs of their children, but also for their education, so that they might be useful, so that they might be faithful "christs," as they grow

[62] Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*, 98.

as well. Thus, the specific needs of our neighbors, the relationships in which we find ourselves and their related obligations, give form to our lives.

Our obligation to our neighbor extends beyond the first article, however. God has called His church to serve the neighbor also in matters pertaining to the third article of the creed. Bonhoeffer's terse classic on Christian community summarizes that aspect of our *coram hominibus* reality very nicely.

> God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of a man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.[63]

Christians are more than just "words" of God in their providing for the neighbor's bodily needs. We also serve as "christs" by engaging in that performative speech called absolution, by pouring water over the heads of infants in God's triune name, by rehearsing Christ's words at the Last Supper over the elements of bread and wine. In each of these circumstances, the actions performed are thoroughly and necessarily *creaturely* activities with created means, activities we perform at God's behest because they fulfill our neighbor's need.

Therefore, we may understand beauty *coram hominibus* as kenotic self-outpouring, as the giving over of one's life entirely for the sake of the other, as living unreservedly as one of God's enfleshed and active words.

[63] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. by John W. Doberstein. (New York: HarperOne, 1954), 23.

Coram Meipso

Yet more may be said. Not only is it the case that the neighbor structures our existence, but he also provides us with something we could not achieve on our own—self-knowledge. Certainly the trees in the garden taught Adam and Eve their blessed finitude and contingent creatureliness. Yet that is still a low-resolution cosmic picture. It is, in fact, the neighbor who provides a higher resolution image of who we are.

To unpack this concept further, we will turn to the early philosophical writings of twentieth century Russian philosopher, Bakhtin. Bakhtin transposes onto the ontological level a commonly experienced natural phenomenon. Human beings are never able to occupy the same space in the world. As such, each human being is unique, is "other." As Bakhtin so poetically describes this reality, "As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes."[64] These two worlds also include two horizons. That is to say, not everything that I can see from my standpoint can be seen from the standpoint of another. Bakhtin refers to those elements of reality in my field of vision that are absent from yours as the "*excess* of my seeing."[65] This excess of seeing proves *vital* for the sake of the other (as theirs proves *vital* for me) because the most significant lacuna in my field of vision is, in fact, myself.

What Bakhtin aims to show is that an aesthetic view of oneself (that is, a view which unifies into a whole those bits of myself which I know only as fragmented) is only possible through the "authoring" work of the other. Only the other can "consummate" me, can see me as a complete whole within an environment. I am incapable of seeing myself as an aesthetic whole, because my external self, my form, is essentially invisible to me. My *internal* self determines my

[64] M. M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. By Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. by Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 23.

[65] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 23.

self-image, and that internal self is essentially fragmented from my external self. How fragmented? Because I can never see the movement of my body in a purely objective way. Whenever my body moves, it is I who move it, and I move it *purposively*. That is, "it destroys the present of the object for the sake of its future—a future anticipated from within," with the result that "the prospective *goal* of an action breaks up the presently given makeup of the external world of objects, the *plan* of a future actualization breaks up the *body* of an object's present state."[66] In other words, I never see myself as a present existent, as a static or stable reality. I cannot have a picture of myself, because my inner self (as a future-oriented being) is always "on the move," as it were, is always acting toward some future goal, even if that goal should be the seeing of myself! Thus, it is not merely difficult to gain an aesthetic view of myself. It is quite literally impossible.

This is the case even with ubiquitous video technology that enables us to "see ourselves" in action, as it were. Here, Bakhtin is worth quoting at length.

> I myself exist entirely inside my own lived life, and if I myself were in some way to see the exterior of my own life, then this seen exterior would turn at once into a constituent in my life as experienced-from-within and would enrich that life only immanently. That is, it would cease to be a true exterior that actually consummates my life from outside; it would cease to be an aesthetically formable boundary that consummates me from outside.[67]

To put it differently, the image that I have of my external self never becomes consummate with my inner self, but is only integrated by my inner self as yet another piece of me. I cannot, that is, see myself as the "hero" of my story, because I am incapable of seeing myself as a consummated whole within that story.[68] The subject cannot see himself as a whole suited into the environment

[66] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 45.

[67] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 85.

[68] Bakhtin was particularly concerned with novel and what that form of literature revealed about human nature. This accounts for his use of "hero" as a governing metaphor.

of his life (the aesthetic perspective), because the subject is *inside himself*. As Bakhtin rightly states, "the outward image of a human being can be experienced as consummating and exhausting the *other*, but I do not experience it as consummating and exhausting *myself*."[69]

What then is necessary for a human being to come to see himself *truly*, and not fragmentally? I need the "other" with their "excess of seeing," their capacity to see me as a whole, their vantage point supplying them with the aesthetic view of myself that is invisible to me as the subject. It is precisely in the words and expressions of the other toward me that I come to know, not only my obligation in the world regarding my neighbor, but also myself. Most commonly, this aesthetic self-view first comes by way of a child's mother:

> it is in her emotional-volitional tones that the child's personality is demarcated and upbuilt, and it is in her love that his first movement, his first posture in the world, is formed. The child begins to see himself for the first time as if through his mother's eyes, and begins to speak about himself in his mother's emotional-volitional tones . . . . . . He determines himself and his states in this case through his mother, in his mother's love for him, as the object of his mother's cherishing, affection, her kisses; it is his mother's loving embraces that 'give form' to him axiologically . . . For what I experience from within myself is not in the least my 'darling little head' or 'darling little hand,' but precisely my 'head' and my 'hand'—I act with my 'hand,' not my 'darling little hand'.[70]

Clearly, the operative word in the above quote is love. Only the love of the other, with the other's excess of seeing, that "unites one's own *directedness* with a *direction* and one's own *horizon* with an *environment*. A whole, integral human being is the product of the aesthetic, creative point of view and of that point of view alone."[71] Therefore it is not only the need of one's neighbor that gives form to one's living in the groove. Rather, it is also that neighbor's particular aesthetic perspective of me which I cannot have on my own. In a very real sense,

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[69] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 39.

[70] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 50.

[71] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 83.

therefore, my neighbor's love "authors" me as a hero in a story, that is, the groove in which I live.[72]

Intriguingly, von Balthasar said something very much along the same lines in volume V of *The Glory of the Lord*. He too points to a child's first interactions with her mother as the fountainhead of her self-understanding. Indeed, the child's "'I' awakens in the experience of a 'Thou': in its mother's smile through which it learns that it is contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing." It is precisely in the bodily, sensory experiences the child has with her mother that "awakens . . . in to an alert and self-knowing light. But it awakens at the love of the Thou . . ." That, says Balthasar, is why a child gives herself to play—because the very first experience she has of being is the experience of welcome. Only later, he suggests, is the child able to distinguish between the love of God and the love she experienced through her mother.[73] Yet bringing to bear the earlier discussion of analogy, we may well say that it is *precisely* God's welcome, God's love that the child experiences, *mediately*, through the mother. And it is that love and welcome which shapes her into an "I."

Thus, we see that we find our groove only in relation to the human other. That is true because the other's need gives shape to my action, but also because *through* the other I come to see myself aesthetically, as a whole within an environment. That is, it is only through the other's excess of seeing that I come to see myself as a grooved "hero" in a narrative.

Coram Naturae

What then of our relationship to the nonhuman creation? The two terms that govern

[72] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 35.

[73] von Balthasar, GL V: 616.

humanity's relationship to the natural world are the noun "dominion" and the verb "subdue."[74] God hands dominion over all creation to Adam, giving him the instruction to subdue it. He is called to tend the Garden, to work the ground, to exercise authority over every living creature. And yet, such dominion does not entail the negative connotations associated with the near cognate "domination," connotations which have routinely played out in various farming techniques, especially in more recent history.[75] What, then, does such non-domineering dominion entail?

Firstly, the validity of the human claim to dominion must not be founded upon the capacity to exercise power. Power does not equate to "warrant." Rather, "man is to rule . . . as one who receives the *commission* and power of his dominion *from God*."[76] That is, human dominion over and subduing of creation is legitimated only because of God's mandate, not because of human capacity. Secondly, such dominion must take into account that, just as the human creature is to relate to her fellow human creatures as God's mask and specifically for their flourishing, so too, she is to re-present God to the creation as a whole, that is, with the objective of its flourishing. In this regard, Christians can find a small tract of common ground with animal rights activist Peter Singer: "What we must do is bring nonhuman animals within our sphere of moral concern and cease to treat their lives as expendable for whatever trivial purposes we may have."[77] In other words, God gave Adam dominion over the creation for the flourishing of all creation, not to the exclusion of human beings. Yes, humans inevitably impact their environments. We are "under-

[74] Gen 1:28.

[75] Wendell Berry, for instance, avers that although current food production is said to have been modeled after the factory, it bears a far greater resemblance to the concentration camp. Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essay of Wendell Berry*, ed. by Norman Wirzba (Washington: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2002), 323.

[76] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 39. Italics added.

[77] Peter Singer, *Writings on the Ethical Life* (New York: Ecco, 2000), 45.

creators" in that sense. Yet our creation must not become destructive.[78]

Finally, the freedom of rule, the success of it, is inextricably bound up and contingent upon the very creatures God has enjoined us to subdue. Here, Bonhoeffer is worth quoting at length.

> The soil and the animals whose Lord I am are the world in which I live, without which I am not. It is my world, my earth, over which I rule. I am not free from it in the sense that my real being, my spirit requires nothing of nature, foreign to the spirit though it may be. On the contrary, in my total being, in my creatureliness, I belong to this world completely. It bears me, nourishes me, and holds me.[79]

With this necessary qualification and chastening of human rule, Ellen Davis's more nuanced rendering of "dominion over" as "mastery among" seems especially fitting.[80]

Davis's retranslation matches well with the 2010 CTCR report on the care of creation.

> Our care of the earth begins by embracing our creaturely bond with the earth and its creatures. The earth suffers when we seek to be more than creatures, when we seek to be gods or to rise above our physical nature. God did not create us as disembodied spiritual beings who can live apart from a physical environment. Instead, he created us for this particular earth.[81]

The document goes on to compare human beings to gardeners and caretakers. Stewards is another descriptor that fits especially well. It should come as no surprise that such a calling would include "something of an ecological mandate in that humans are to keep the garden in equilibrium and harmony."[82] Still another metaphor applies, that of the "brother-king," a concept derived from Deut 17 in which Israel's king is to rule as a member of the family. The king is to rule, not as a tyrant, but as a servant.[83]

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[78] See Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 299–89.

[79] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 39.

[80] Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 55.

[81] Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth*. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2010), 31.

[82] Commission, *Together with All Creatures*, 41.

[83] Commission, *Together with All Creatures*, 47.

We see a picture of the kind of relation described above in the wonderful stories of James Herriot who wrote about English farmers in the mid-twentieth century. He recalls what agriculture was like prior to the advent of industrial farming. One story introduces us to a farmer named Kakin. "There were only six cows in the little cobbled byre with its low roof and wooden partitions and they all had names. You don't find cows with names anymore and there aren't any farmers like Mr. Kakin, who somehow scratched a living from a herd of six milkers plus a few calves, pigs and hens."[84] Products are numbered. But creatures are named. A name signals a relationship. A relationship entails responsibility and accountability.

In summary, the particulars of a person's groove are given form not only by the web of human relationships in which she finds herself. Rather, her groove is further structured by the duality of dependence and dominion constitutive of her relationship with nature. *That* is the form of the *coram mundo* sphere of her existence.

Let us, then, draw this together with the above discussion concerning analogy. Creation is neither separate from God (having an existence that does not depend on Him), nor is it itself divine. Rather, all of creation is God's embodied speech through which His creatures are shaped and molded by God's other embodied locutions. The words of God that give shape to the human groove *Coram mundo* are both our fellow human creatures, and also the non-human elements of creation which we inhabit, upon which we depend, and "over" which we rule as God's masks in the world. Furthermore, God's ever-creative Word not only grants our existence, but also our right-relatedness to Himself (in faith), and to the neighbor, in self-giving love. *Here* is humanity's beautiful place.

When human beings exist in this beautiful place, we come to see the symphonic harmony

[84] James Herriot, *All Things Wise and Wonderful* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 4.

of Being in which I live among and for other beings. This is the *shalom* which Balthasar and Hart both propose. Human beings find themselves living in what truly may be called a "world" only when they occupy this beautiful space *coram mundo*, this *kenotic*, self-outpouring, this living as God's analogy and *imago* for the other. Only when I occupy the beautiful place am I no longer merely one monad contending with every other monad in a perpetual violent drive for dominance.

Humanity's Fall from Beauty

I have claimed that the intersection of our *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* relationships may be referred to as the "beautiful place." It is for this groove that God created us, and it is by other creatures living in their grooves that we are fitted to ours. It is precisely this latter point that I argue should be called *coram mundo* beauty. If such is beauty, then what constitutes the ugly? For an answer to this question, we turn to Mark Mattes' compelling work on Martin Luther's theology of beauty. While Mattes does treat *coram mundo* beauty to a certain extent, his primary concern is beauty *coram Deo*.

The task is challenging because while Luther did comment concerning beauty frequently, he wrote no work dedicated to it specifically. Therefore, Mattes turns primarily to the Heidelberg Disputation. Mattes espouses essentially the same position adopted in this dissertation, namely that beauty is nothing other than righteousness, that is, being rightly related to God and to the neighbor. Sin, then, is nothing other than the deformation of righteousness, of right relatedness. It is sin that distorts God's "very good" creation, sin that makes us ugly.

As Bonhoeffer would put it, sin is a rejection of the *imago Dei*. It is the pursuit of the *sicut Deus*, the aim to be not only in the *imago Dei*, but even *God-like*. Sin is the creature's refusal to take God at His Word. More than that, it is the rejection of creatureliness and the usurpation of

the role of creator. That is, sin may succinctly be described as *autopoiesis*, self-creation. And in a sense, that is precisely what Adam and Eve achieved. Adam became a new kind of creature, no longer the *imago Dei*, but his *own* creation, the *sicut Deus*. He has developed a new way of existing for God, of being religious, that rejects God's revealed Word in favor of "knowledge" of God *behind* His revealed word.[85] Bonhoeffer proves helpful again.

> *Imago dei*—Godlike man in his existence for God and neighbour, in his primitive creatureliness and limitation; *sicut deus*—Godlike man in his out-of-himself knowledge of good and evil, in his limitlessness and his acting out-of-himself, in his underived existence, in his loneliness. *Imago dei*–that is, man bound to the Word of the Creator and living from him; *sicut deus*–that is, man bound to the depths of his own knowledge about God, in good and evil; *imago dei*–the creature living in the unity of obedience; *sicut deus*–the creator-man living out of the division of good and evil.[86]

In the fall, the *imago Dei* human, separated himself from his Creator. He was thrown radically back *on* himself and must live *from* himself. He must constantly strive not only to "stay alive" but to justify his own existence, to maintain *by his own effort* this new creature that he is, the *sicut Deus* human. Death, in the sense of physical disintegration, is but the culmination and sign of what human beings living from themselves entails.[87] Sin, as a rejection of the *imago Dei*, is nothing other than a lack of faith in God, an autopoiesis which *must* create idols [even if those idols are internal, such as the enlightenment's idolization of human reason] to stand in the place of God because our contingency is ever before us, especially in the face of physical death.

Gustaf Wingren's unpacking of this reality is especially helpful. Many theologians have asserted an anthropology assuming that human beings are essentially *loving* creatures. While there is certainly an element of truth to that claim, it is also true that even more fundamentally,

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[85] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 72.

[86] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 71.

[87] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 86.

human beings are fundamentally *trusting* creatures even in this fallen world. Fallen humans constantly aim at a world with fear abolished. Simultaneously, however, they try to hide from themselves their greatest source of fear, namely death against which they are powerless. As a result, the human "uses his power to 'govern' Creation in order to avert the external aspects of the tyranny of death . . . In so averting them, man comes to put his hope and trust in the means." And so, the human being begins to worship, allows herself to be subjugated to, the very creation within which God placed her to rule.[88]

Human *autopoiesis* persists in the form of works righteousness which, in some sense, assumes (as Mattes says) that God finds what is beautiful (what has *made itself* beautiful) in order to love it. Yet precisely the opposite seems to be the case. *God creates* beauty by loving that which is not beautiful, namely sinners, and turning them into saints. In other words, Mattes stresses that the beauty of the human being *coram Deo* is a matter of grace given through God's kenotic self-sacrifice on the cross. Simply put, the gospel frees us from the impossible task of having to beautify ourselves, a task which finally causes us to hate God, *precisely because of our inability to do it*.[89]

Bonhoeffer again summarizes all that has been said thus far, only more poetically than this author can manage. "*Imago dei, sicut deus, agnus dei*—the One who was sacrificed for man *sicut deus*, killing man's false divinity in true divinity, the God-Man who restores the image of God."[90] The Lamb of God is sacrificed in order to put to death the *sicut deus* human being and to restore the lost *imago Dei*. That is the Gospel. Faith clings to that promise, faith which, as Wingren asserted, is the fundamental stance of creatures toward the Creator. Thus, it is that God restores

[88] Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 65.

[89] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 90.

[90] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 71.

sinners to the beautiful place *coram Deo* by freely giving to them the right relatedness of the Son to the Father.

Understanding Beauty as the Fulfillment of the Law

Perhaps it has become obvious by this point that I am essentially asserting that while we must understand beauty *coram Deo* as a gift freely given, as imputed right-relationship, as gospel, *coram mundo* beauty should be understood as the fulfilling of God's Law, that is, God's will for His creatures. Mark Mattes would certainly concur with the first half of the claim. With the *latter* assertion, however, he would seem to take umbrage, though his disagreement is not immediately obvious. He successfully distinguishes Luther from many of his predecessors. Whereas theologians building their conception of the human *coram Deo* reality from Platonic thought adhered to an "aesthetics of perfectibility," Luther maintained an "aesthetics of freedom."

> On the basis of the theology of the cross we can distinguish a theological aesthetics of perfectibility from a theological aesthetics of freedom. The aesthetics of perfectibility looks to fulfilling the law as a way to achieve the desire of ultimate union with God in the beatific vision, while the aesthetics of freedom receives God's favor given to sinners, which unites them with Christ as a bride is united to her groom. It appreciates this world as a locus of God's goodness and refuses to disparage it as secondary or inconsequential to the heavenly. It acknowledges that 'in the future life' God will bring his creatures to their fulfillment."[91]

That is, the aesthetics of freedom refers to the freedom in which God bestows His grace and the freedom which it establishes for us before Him. This *coram Deo* gift then enables sinners to receive all of creation as a gift from God, neither disparaging it nor depending on it *as* god.

[91] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 187–88.

Indeed, this gospel enables sinners to be once more the *larvae Dei* ("masks of God"), to be God's analogy, by which He cares for His creation.[92]

While Mattes persuasively presents how it is that human creatures are made beautiful *coram Deo* through the gospel, he seems less inclined (indeed to tread so lightly as to make almost no sound) toward specificity *coram mundo*. He concedes that "integrity (perfection), proportion, and clarity or light"[93] do, in fact, apply as standards of beauty within creation. Recalling our earlier engagement of Umberto Eco's interpretation of these three Thomistic standards, one would naturally anticipate that Mattes would offer full-throated support for the possibility of establishing contours of beauty. Yet he also claims that they are nonetheless "hardly adequate" for assessing such beauty.[94] For Mattes, it seems that the validity of integrity, proportion, and clarity consists in the very fact that God's work consistently transcends them. For this reason, he suggests, "thoughtful people can disagree about the degree or depth of . . . beauty or lack thereof."[95]

Given beauty's tendency to surprise us with its excess, that remark ought not perhaps to catch us off guard. And yet we must be diligent not to allow a phrase like "hardly adequate" to elide into a phrase like "zero purchase." That is, while beauty certainly often does surprise its beholders (a feature to which we will attend in greater detail in the next chapter), that fact ought not dissuade us from endeavoring to speak about beauty meaningfully. To speak about something meaningfully requires us to have something more substantial to say about that thing than, "It's always a surprise." Many, for instance, argue that beauty is essentially transgressive.

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[92] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 193.

[93] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 193.

[94] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 111.

[95] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 193.

Such a comment, true as it may be, begs the question, "What exactly is it transgressing?" Our insistence that beauty often surprises only makes sense if there are certain things we learn to expect and anticipate about beauty. I submit that these "certain things" are the contours of beauty, that is, the Law.

As mentioned above, Mattes is primarily interested in beauty *coram Deo*. That may account for the lack of specificity regarding beauty *coram mundo*. But it is also possible that another reason underlies the lacuna. Mattes' prevarication on this front may, rather, have its roots in his commitment to the presuppositions of radical Lutheranism. In his article "The Thomistic Turn in Evangelical Catholics," Mattes argues, in line with Gerhard Forde, that "since it is Christ who sets limits to the law for the sake of service to the neighbor, Luther can infer that the telos of the law entails, in a sense, its suspension for the believer."[96] Mattes goes even further, referring to the law as a "'backup plan', a way of preserving creation until the kingdom comes in its fullness."[97] He is surely correct in saying that "[human] nature is to be creaturely"[98], but surely something more positive can be said concerning human nature than that we are "primarily receivers."[99] That such is the case *coram Deo* certainly falls in line with the Lutheran Confessions, but cannot more be said concerning human nature post-conversion? And surely much more could be said *coram mundo*. We *are* receivers, but what have we received? Grace as pardon only? Or grace and with it a whole new existence with a describable (though not completely definable) shape?

The sharpest lines Mattes is willing to draw in response to this question is that life can be

[96] Mark Mattes, "The Thomistic Turn in Evangelical Catholic Ethics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 84.

[97] Mattes, "Thomistic Turn," 79.

[98] Mattes, "Thomistic Turn," 88–89.

[99] Mattes, "Thomistic Turn," 86.

defined exclusively in terms of "living more and more by faith as we daily face challenges"[100], and that, *coram mundo*, "service to the neighbor"[101] is as precise a guide as we can expect given that what qualifies as "service" is culturally determined.[102] That is no doubt true *to a certain degree*. Nevertheless, as we will see below, the particularity for which Mattes argues does not undermine the universality of certain contours. Indeed, Mattes' language concerning the law bears no small resemblance to his thoughts concerning traditional markers of beauty. That is, both law and beauty contain the seeds of self-invalidation. Both essentially undermine themselves. If the law *coram mundo* has been suspended by Christ and is in fact little more than a placeholder, how shall I know what it means to live as God's creature, to be His mask, image, and analogy? At bottom the concern is this. It seems as if Mattes has transferred his thoughts concerning the law to his understanding of beauty *coram mundo*. That is, the free gift of beauty *coram Deo* suspends the contours of beauty. But how, then, shall I understand, perceive, and participate in beauty?

Critical here is the nature of the Law. To begin with let us consider the following comments from the Epitome of the Formula of Concord.

> We believe, teach, and confess that, although people who truly believe in Christ and are genuinely converted to God have been liberated and set free from the curse and compulsion of the law through Christ, they indeed are not for that reason without the law. Instead they have been redeemed by the Son of God so that they may practice the law day and night (Ps. 119). For our first parents did not live without the law even before the fall.[103]

Several features prove especially enlightening in this brief paragraph. Firstly, the Formula states that Christians are freed from the *curse* and the *compulsion* of the law, not from the law in itself.

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[100] Mattes, "Thomistic Turn," 89.

[101] Mattes, "Thomistic Turn," 84.

[102] Mattes, "Thomistic Turn," 87.

[103] EP VI, 2 in Kolb and Wengert, 502.

In other words, Christians do receive *coram Deo* righteousness as a gift, but that gift is not an end in itself. To the contrary, human beings are justified *for the express purpose of* practicing the law continually, embodying God's will, being the *imago*, God's *analogy*. Here we see that the law was not a contingency for postlapsarian humanity. It was present even in Eden and (more to the point) had *full sway* in Eden. That is, everything was rightly related to everything else, because sinners were not in rebellion against God.

That the law was present even before the fall becomes blindingly obvious when we come to grips with the reformers' definition of the word "law."

> We therefore unanimously believe, teach, and confess that in its strict sense the law is a divine teaching in which the righteous, unchanging will of God revealed how human beings were created in their nature, thoughts, words, and deeds to be pleasing and acceptable to God.[104]

Indeed, the law is nothing other than God's will for His human creatures to be the fully human creatures He designed. Briefly, fulfillment of the law is the human *telos*.[105]

At this point, it may be helpful to describe more precisely what I mean by the law. Defining it as the human *telos* is tautologous if neither term is defined to a certain degree. By "law" I mean the law of creation, the built-in, hardwired, objective design of God for His creation. For that reason, the law is accessible to all humanity to a greater or lesser degree, and all humanity is accountable to it. As Alfred Rehwinkel put it many years ago,

> The fact that the race has learned from experience that certain modes of conduct are conducive to well-being while others are harmful and lead to self-destruction does not establish a law but merely discovers it. If a man crashes with his airplane or falls from a tower and is killed, he does not thereby create the law of gravity, but it proves that the law is already in existence and that it will destroy him if he disregards it . . . And so it is with the Moral Law. The Moral Law, like the physical and biological

[104] SD V, 17, in Kolb and Wengert, 584.

[105] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 144–46.

> laws, antedates man's experience. By experience man discovers . . . the Moral Law [is] fundamental for man's welfare and for the existence of human society.[106]

Rehwinkel is certainly not the only one to hold this conviction. J. Budziszewski says, "Certain moral truths really are common to all human beings. Because our shoes are wet with evasions the common ground may seem slippery to us, but it is real; we do all know that we shouldn't murder, shouldn't steal, should honor our parents, should honor God, and so on."[107] This is the law of creation written by God on the human heart regardless of cultural context.

Having said that, cultural particularity does mean that the law manifests differently through time and space. Yet the degree of continuity between moral codes of conduct found throughout the world and throughout history is striking. Rehwinkel cites Cicero as a case in point.

> True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by commands, and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions . . . It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely.[108]

Here, even a pagan philosopher who predated Christ by a century bears witness to a law embedded within creation.

An argument might be made that such a connection is only logical given the influence of Greek philosophy on early Christianity. Yet Rehwinkel brings forth examples from other cultures and times that say much the same thing. Texts from Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and India all attest to the existence of a law of creation. Not only *is* there such a law, but the manner in which these various cultures expounded that law shows a degree of agreement that cannot easily be dismissed.[109]

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[106] Alfred M. Rehwinkel, *The Voice of Conscience* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 21.

[107] J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas: Spence, 2003), 9.

[108] Quoted in Rehwinkel, *Voice of Conscience*, 42.

[109] Rehwinkel, *Voice of Conscience*, 34–38.

Having said that, both Luther and Aquinas agree that the Decalogue is an especially clear explication and summary of the law of creation.[110] It is, essentially, a guide to being human, a guide to living in the groove, a guide to the Beautiful Place. Indeed, that is why Luther says of the Ten Commandments that "we should prize and value them above all other teachings as the greatest treasure God has given us."[111] Kick against the goads, work against the grain, assume the role of a creator by creating a different "law," and find yourself abandoning the beautiful place God created for us.

Assuming all the above is true, how does it make sense to speak of a suspending of the law? Does God suspend His own will? Or is God's will simply a "placeholder" until the dawn of the new creation? When the law is understood in the light of the confessions, Mattes' comments (which are admirably intended to preserve the Gospel from works righteousness) are rendered unintelligible.

In his book *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, Mattes comes very close to undermining his own thoughts regarding the law. He speaks even of the "contours of the resurrection life," a *form* found especially in Phil. 2, which is to say, the form of *kenosis*. "Christians," he writes, "receive their identity from Christ, not from the world, not from the law, not from the accuser. But that identity reorients and resituates them, makes them to live like Christ."[112] Yet is Jesus not the *εἰκών* of the Father, and were not Adam and Eve created in God's *εἰκών*? While Jesus certainly went beyond the ceremonial law and expounded the 10 Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, to suggest that Jesus "exceeded" the law (again, God's will) is to say that Jesus

[110] See Budziszewski, *The Voice of Conscience*, 28. See also Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 66–67.

[111] LC I, 333, in Kolb and Wengert, 431.

[112] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 186.

"exceeded" His own will.

It is most certainly true that Jesus exceeded the *Pharisees'* interpretation of the law. It is also true that in the Sermon on the Mount, He unpacked God's will in a fuller, more comprehensive sense than Moses had done. In essence, He demonstrated that the Law given through Moses was not intended to be a comprehensive code for the purpose of *becoming* God's creature. Rather, it was a timely expression of God's will for His people, a low-resolution blueprint of God's design for His creatures, a design which Christ, the *Image of God*, fully embodied.

In one sense, Mattes is correct. There are contours of a new creation. There are contours of beauty *coram mundo*. I would argue that these contours are the law. The *kenosis* presented in Phil. 2 is excellent in so far as it goes. But it does not go far enough.

In his book, *The Case for Character*, Joel Biermann ventures where few Lutherans have dared in this regard. As was mentioned earlier, he proposes conforming righteousness in which "the Christian pursues a virtuous life *coram mundo*, but one that is also certainly God-pleasing."[113] I would like to employ Biermann's approach to arrive at narrower criteria concerning beauty *coram mundo* than *kenosis*. Such criteria will be explored further in chapter five, which concerns human participation in beauty.

Summary

This chapter has argued that beauty *is* the groove God has carved for humanity. That groove is essentially nothing other than the law, which is properly understood as God's will for His creatures. This law is given concrete and specific form by the relationships into which God

[113] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 149.

has embedded us. Sinful human beings no longer live in the groove. That loss of the groove *coram Deo* manifests in an innate distrust of God which forces them into *autopoiesis* which is death. *Coram mundo*, the loss of the groove means that human beings are no longer the *imago*, the *pro nobis* analogy, God intended them to be, because their lack of faith in God prevents them from living fully outpoured lives for their neighbors. This constitutes the ugly.

CHAPTER FOUR

PERCEIVING BEAUTY

In the previous chapter, we dealt with the "what" of beauty. I argued that for human beings, the beautiful place is the groove God carved out for humanity. It is the *imago Dei* in which God created Adam and Eve. This beautiful place is nothing other than the creature living into "the law," because the law is nothing other than God's will for His creation. The beautiful place is the intersection of our *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* relationships. The former may briefly be described as trusting receptivity toward God, and entrusting of one's entire life into the hands of Him who creates, preserves, and restores. In essence, it follows the first table of the Law.

Our *coram mundo* reality plays out *coram hominibus* (before humanity), *coram naturae* (before nature), and even *coram meipso* (before myself). In broad and sweeping terms, our *coram mundo* reality may be described as love, as the self-giving, self-outpouring, self-sacrificing mode of being exemplified by Jesus, who was *the* image of God. More narrowly, this aspect of humanity's beautiful place follows the form of the second table of the Law. More narrowly still, it is fine-tuned, given specificity, by the particularity of these relationships. That is, what it looks like to be a good neighbor is manifest by the particular neighbors amongst whom God has placed us. These "words" of God, these "analogies," provide the contours of the beautiful place.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the degree of continuity among moral codes throughout time and space seems nearly impossible to attribute to mere coincidence. Quite to the contrary, the striking similarity speaks to the hardwired, built-in nature of the law of creation. That is, though the manifestation of the law varies somewhat due to historical and cultural particularity, a relatively stable and universal picture of the beautiful place emerges. If it is true,

as I argue, that beauty is what ushers us into that beautiful place, another question arises, namely, what enables us to perceive beauty at all? What is that feature of humanity, apparently unique to our species, that causes us to catch our breath at a glorious sunrise over the ocean, to abandon momentarily a task at hand to gaze at the delicate pink of cherry blossoms, that gives us a feeling of belonging when surveying the rolling green pastures of the Yorkshire Dales? It is to the question of perception that we now turn. More specifically, we turn to the beleaguered state of human perception in the twenty-first century West.

Contemplation

We saw in the first chapter that beauty as a concept had undergone a great deal of criticism over the last few centuries. Natalie Carnes in particular documented how a reductionistic definition of beauty caused the term to be applied almost exclusively to the frivolous, the ornamental, the unnecessary. Beauty was a light, shallow thing, a matter of concern only to femininity (at least according to Nietzsche), and therefore had no bearing on reality, no genuine significance for life.[1] Were this distorted understanding of beauty correct, then its contemplation would constitute a supreme waste of time and energy!

It is perhaps precisely this view of things that drove Josef Pieper to lament the dulling of human perception in the twentieth century. "Man's ability to see is in decline," he wrote.[2] On the face of it, this comment might sound strange, especially given the remarkable progress made in the field of optics. Newer and better instruments have enabled human beings to see both increasingly small things, and celestial bodies at an unfathomable remove.[3] Yet it is not this

[1] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 443–44.

[2] Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 31.

[3] For example, the James Webb telescope launched on Christmas Day in 2021 has enabled scientists to obtain pictures of outer space heretofore unimaginable.

technical capacity to which Pieper refers. He intends, rather, "the spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is."[4] We will examine momentarily what this "spiritual capacity" is to which Pieper refers. First, however, the question of cause arises. That is, what has led to this dulling of humanity's vision? Although he acknowledges the existence of many possible contributing factors, Pieper highlights one in particular: "the average person of our time loses the ability to see because *there is too much to see*!"[5] In Pieper's day, urban and suburban settings were no doubt primarily what he had in mind—neon signs, flashing lights, the ubiquitousness of television sets. Today, this "too much to see" has been amplified beyond reckoning through internet capable devices such as computers and smartphones. Everything a person could *possibly* want to see (and generally much *more* than people want to see) is instantly available at a few swipes of a finger. There is *so much more* to see. And it is precisely this satiation that has dulled rather than enhanced our seeing.

This "too much" applies not only to the visual, however. The same can certainly be said of the auditory. In a 2015 opinion piece for the BBC, philosopher Roger Scruton opined in his characteristically cutting yet winning manner that

> in almost every public place today the ears are assailed by the sound of pop music. In shopping malls, public houses, restaurants, hotels and elevators the ambient sound is not human conversation but the music disgorged into the air by speakers - usually invisible and inaccessible speakers that cannot be punished for their impertinence. Some places brand themselves with their own signature sound - folk, jazz or excerpts from the Broadway musicals. For the most part, however, the prevailing music is of an astounding banality - it is there in order not to be really there. It is a background to the business of consuming things, a surrounding nothingness on which we scribble the graffiti of our desires. The worst forms of this music - sometimes known, after the

[4] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 31.

[5] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 32.

> trade name, as Muzak - are produced without the intervention of musicians, being put together on a computer from a repertoire of standard effects.[6]

This assault by music "drives anybody with the slightest feeling for music to distraction." More than that, it "ensures that a visit to the pub or a meal in a restaurant have lost their residual meaning. These are no longer social events, but experiments in endurance, as you shout at each other over the deadly noise."[7] Both visually and auditorily, we of the twenty-first century are at the mercy of sights and sounds blasted at us as if from a firehose. Thus, we lose the ability to see and to hear.

This ought to elicit significant alarm. It is a well-documented fact that the human brain inherently possesses a remarkable capacity *not* to see what is presented directly before the eyeballs. Iain McGilchrist takes note of a unique television ad campaign that aired in Britain a number of years ago. It was an effort aimed at protecting cyclists from distracted motorists. The commercial presented itself as an awareness test, and featured two teams of four people each, one dressed in black, the other in white. The viewer is instructed to count how many times the white team passes a basketball amongst themselves during a span of roughly 15 seconds. The answer is 13. After the announcer provides the answer, however, he poses another question. Did you notice the dancing bear that passed right through the two groups? The vast majority of people do not. Their attention is fixated on counting how many passes were made by the team in white. Add this natural tendency of the brain *not* to attend to what's right before it to the overstimulation of the senses mentioned above, and Pieper's claim seems not only plausible, but hugely understated!

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[6] Roger Scruton, "A Point of View: Why It's Time To Turn the Music Off," BBC News, November 15, 2015, accessed October 6, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34801885.

[7] Scruton, "Turn the Music Off."

The kind of seeing to which Pieper refers, however, goes deeper even than a mere recognition of a thing's presence. He speaks of a contemplation which "is not limited only to the tangible surface of reality; it certainly perceives more than mere appearances." Pieper refers to the work of artists to clarify exactly what he means by the practice of contemplation. Art that flows from contemplation will not be a mere reproduction of what instantly meets the eye, no matter how technically impressive and exact. Rather, art generated from contemplation seeks to enable us to "capture the archetypes of all that is."[8] I take Pieper (a Thomist scholar of the first order) to be saying that art discloses those three aspects of being (beauty, goodness, and truth) which in some way are analogous to the beauty, goodness, and truth of God (the "divine foundation of all that is").[9] These three fundamental aspects of being have become essentially invisible, not because they are somehow diminished, but because our capacity to "see" them has all but disintegrated. Manifest and truly present, they nevertheless often go unnoticed, much like the dancing bear in the commercial. Contemplation brings to the fore the present depths that our dulled eyes typically scan over and bypass.

Balthasar echoes much of what Pieper argues, only whereas Pieper refers specifically to art, Balthasar broadens the claim to include form in general. Although a portion of what follows was quoted earlier, it merits repeating in this larger section. Here, Balthasar demonstrates his Thomistic (and Aristotelian) appreciation of the created realm.

> 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

[8] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 74–75

[9] This assumption will be justified in a subsequent quote.

> 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 these depths.[10]

That is, when we set aside time truly to contemplate a being, and not merely to perceive a "thing," what we begin to see ought thoroughly to astound us. "We 'behold' the form," Balthasar writes, "but, if we really behold it, it is not as a detached form, rather in its unity with the depths that make their appearance in it. We see form as the splendour, as the glory of Being. We are 'enraptured' by our contemplation of these depths and are 'transported' to them."[11] These "depths" are the archetypes which Pieper claims true artists are capable of making manifest for those with dulled vision.

And yet our perception of being never leaves the created form behind. In some respects, this is the *reverse* of Plato's ladder upon which one kicks aside various forms as when ascends. Balthasar is again worthy of quoting at length.

> The beautiful is above all a *form*, and the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the form's interior, *Species* and *lumen* in beauty are one, if the *species* truly merits that name (which does not designate any form whatever, but pleasing, radiant form). Visible form not only 'points' to an invisible, unfathomable mystery; form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it. Both natural and artistic form has an exterior which appears and interior depth, both of which however, are not separable in the form itself. The content . . . does not lie behind the form, but within it. Whoever is not capable of seeing and 'reading' the form will, by the same token, fail to perceive the content. Whoever is not illumined by the form will see no light in the content either.[12]

Balthasar's ladder clearly differs from that of Plato. Firstly (and reminiscent of Gregory of Nyssa), it is a *downward* ladder in that it plumbs to the depths of reality. Secondly (and again paralleling Gregory), it never leaves the creaturely behind. It is only in and through the physical

[10] von Balthasar, GL I: 115.

[11] von Balthasar, GL I: 116.

[12] von Balthasar, GL I: 147.

that being itself may be perceived. Again, contemplation is that special kind of seeing that perceives being through beings, and is granted a particularly perspicuous vision of being through the beautiful. Pieper argues that this "art of perception, immersed in contemplation" is in fact the most intense form by which human beings may touch "the core of all things, the hidden, ultimate reason of the living universe, the divine foundation of all that is . . ."[13] The physical existents we encounter are always deeper than they at first appear. There is always *more* to behold, a near infinite number of aspects to see and from which to see, precisely because every existent is a manifestation of being. But the "more" never manifests immediately, that is, outside of some physical manifestation.

Yet, as David Bentley Hart rightly notes, the kind of contemplation referenced here is not that of "some ideally disinterested and dispirited state." Quite to the contrary, true contemplation must include desire, for "it is only in desire that the beautiful is known and its invitation heard."[14] Only eyes formed by love that loves the otherness of the other are capable of seeing the true depths of the other. That is why Josef Pieper invokes "the ancient expression of the mystics," namely, "*ubi amor, ibi oculus*." Rather than blinding, "the eyes see better when guided by love; a new dimension of 'seeing' is opened up by love alone! And this means contemplation is visual perception prompted by loving acceptance."[15]

Perhaps we may also say it in the following way. Eyes that "see" without love never take genuine interest in the *other*. The interest taken will necessarily be one of instrumentality, utility, an interest in apprehending the other to serve as some means for my purposes, and will therefore necessarily impose limits upon the aspects by which the other may be seen. Without love, our

[13] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 23.

[14] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 20.

[15] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 75.

vision is darkened, because it is dulled by self-love. Love draws one toward the other and causes delight in that other. Indeed, love opens us to receive the other as *truly other*, as *gift*, and inspires the desire for the other to be revealed to us in all its otherness. In this way, love for the other draws us in, that we might see the beauty of the other in the plenitude of its multitudinous aspects.

This last word of Pieper's is especially helpful, for it already begins to answer another question which naturally arises from the above discussion. What does such contemplation look like in practice? It may well seem counterintuitive, but Pieper suggests that the kind of contemplation he (and Balthasar) describes is not primarily a matter of exertion or work. Quite to the contrary, it "cannot be accomplished except with an attitude of receptive openness and attentive silence." Indeed, "one of the fundamental human experiences is the realization that the truly great and uplifting things in life come about perhaps not without our own efforts but nevertheless not through those efforts. Rather, we will obtain them only if we can accept them as free gifts."[16] If, they are not received as gifts, but rather are taken "by force," as it were, the truly uplifting things will never come, precisely because we are able to force only that which is already known to us and expected. "By force," that is, excludes the possibility of passivity which is the necessary precondition for receptivity. With the help of Iain McGilchrist, I will argue that the only "effort" which does not seek to apprehend by force, and therefore leaves open the possibility for receptivity, is primarily imaginative.

Imagination

As with the word "beauty," the term "imagination" has accrued unhelpful and inaccurate

[16] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 25.

associations. “Imagination” often carries connotations either of exaggerations or of outright falsifications.[17] The father seeking to reassure his daughter that she is safe will refer to the monster under the bed as “merely a figment of the imagination.” The imagination, it is thought, is that aspect of the brain that generates unrealities. It has no uses beyond the realm of entertainment. Essentially, then, most today would equate imagination with fantasy. Iain McGilchrist, however, makes a clear differentiation between the two.

“Fantasy,” he says, “is projected, full-blown, from the workings of our own mind.”[18] That is, fantasy, *per se,* need not have any grounding within reality at all. The individual mind can simply “make it all up,” with the result that the “fantastical” is synonymous with the “farcical.” Imagination, on the other hand, “is inextricably bound up with reality.” In it, “we experience intimations of matters as they are glimpsed, but only partly seen; our conscious minds obscure them . . . This tentative, but rapt, attraction toward something that is not cognized, but at some deep level re-cognised, is not the work of fantasy, but of imagination.”[19] Far from leading *away* from the truth, far from being “an escape from reality,” imagination alone can put us in touch with aspects of reality to which our habits of thought have rendered us blind. It provides us with “a sudden seeing into [reality’s] depths, so that reality is for the first time truly present, with all its import, whether that occur in the context of what we call science or what we call art.”[20]

This last phrase, in particular, will no doubt strike most as an especially odd claim. What

[17] Above, we noted McGilchrist’s observation that the left hemisphere of the brain specializes in *apprehension*. The imagination is the domain of the right hemisphere. See McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 1: 20–21.

[18] McGilchrist, *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*, vol. 2, *What Then Is True?* (London: Perspectiva, 2022), 768.

[19] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 2: 768.

[20] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 2: 768.

has Athens to do with Jerusalem, and what has imagination to do with science?[21] McGilchrist allows the best-known scientist of the twentieth century to speak for himself. Albert Einstein once claimed that in his own work, "imagination is more important than knowledge . . . It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research."[22] Indeed, regarding his most significant discoveries, Einstein's method bore little resemblance at all to the slow, steady, step-by-step process to which many scientists claim strictly to adhere. It was not always with "clear and distinct ideas" that he worked. Quite to the contrary, Einstein "never thought in logical symbols or mathematical equations, but in images, feelings, and musical architecture" . . . hardly the kind of "method" one might expect from such a giant in the world of science.[23] The laborious, incremental work one typically associates with science is certainly necessary, but "only in a secondary stage when the mentioned associative play is sufficiently established and can be reproduced at will."[24] That is, Einstein intuited or imagined a solution *first*. Only *secondarily* did he employ those careful and rigorous proofs commonly assumed to be the *only* path to the discovery of scientific truth.

Einstein explains why imagination proves so vital an ingredient to the scientific endeavor.

> The mind can proceed only so far upon what it knows and can prove. There comes a point where the mind takes a leap—call it intuition or what you will—and comes out upon a higher plane of knowledge, but can never prove how it got here. All great discoveries have involved such a leap.[25]

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[21] Strictly speaking, McGilchrist is dealing with intuition at this point. But seems that for him, intuition is essentially imagination directed toward the sciences rather than the arts.

[22] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 754.

[23] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 755.

[24] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 755.

[25] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 755.

What he says makes perfect sense. Working *only* with what one knows to be true already and only with what one can prove already ineluctably stifles truly significant discoveries. Science, however, is not the only field in which imagination turns out to be, surprisingly, an especially important factor.

Mathematicians too seem consistently to rely on pictures, images, and even metaphor in order to think, discover, and comprehend.[26] Indeed, for many of the most highly regarded mathematicians, one particular criterion consistently rises to the fore—beauty. G. H. Hardy, for example, once asserted that "beauty is the first test; there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics." Bertrand Russel claimed that "mathematics, rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty," and Paul Dirac argued that "it is more important to have beauty in one's equations than to have them fit experiment."[27]

Though those involved in the study of liberal arts may be caught off guard by the above, McGilchrist was not nonplused in the least: "That something of the same process is involved in mathematics and science as in poetry and art . . . should not surprise us. They are all fundamentally creative processes, involving seeing patterns."[28] That is, imagination is a particular kind of thinking, or rather *seeing*, one that differs from analytic thought, but that produces veridical results nonetheless. It is a form of thinking that "precipitates in a new *Gestalt*," that is, in a new picture or vision of the whole, of reality, of being, in which phenomena find their place.[29]

Employing the language particular to this dissertation, the imagination enables us to

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[26] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 757.

[27] Quoted in McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 759.

[28] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 758.

[29] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 758.

perceive "beings" within their groove, their beautiful place. Indeed, analysis, the breaking down of something into its constituent parts, is not an end in itself. Rather its purpose "is to enrich a union."[30] Consequently, imagination, must not be considered an "optional extra, still less an impediment"[31] to human perception of the real. The precise opposite is the case. Imagination is nothing less than "the path whereby our eyes are opened so that we see something, for the first time, as it really *is*—at least as close to what it is as we can ever know."[32]

Summary

A brief summary drawing together our observations about perception up to this point is in order. Since at least the twentieth century, humanity has suffered from a particularly acute case of dullness of a kind of vision. That vision is usually called contemplation, a way of seeing the world empowered by the imagination. The analytical capacity of the mind [associated with the left hemisphere which enjoyed hegemony in the West for well over a century] focuses on dismantling "wholes" into constituent parts for the sake of manipulation. In order to accomplish its goal, it tends to be less connected with reality (as the bicycle safety commercial illustrated).

The imagination, on the other hand, is associated with the right hemisphere. Imagination is the brain's capacity to perceive "wholes," to form a *Gestalt* from what the left hemisphere considers isolated and atomistic things. As we saw earlier, this capacity of the human mind proves essential not only to the arts, but also to the sciences and mathematics. Because the right hemisphere is essentially receptive (as opposed to manipulative), it does not artificially limit the reality that presents itself. For this reason, it very often grants a more accurate vision of the

[30] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 773.

[31] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 776.

[32] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things*, 2: 776.

world. In fact, it would seem that this aspect of the mind is what enables us to speak of a world at all, and not only of atomistic "things." Borrowing language from Balthasar, we may say that the imagination grants us the vision to perceive being as fundamentally symphonic. Or, to employ Gregory's criteria, imagination enables us to see the beauty of things, both their fittingness (the part within the whole) and their gratuity (the excessively elegant manner in which they contribute to the harmony of the whole). This view of the world that is not manipulative, that does not focus on *apprehension*, but rather on *comprehension*, requires a kind of self-forgetfulness and giving over of oneself. That is, it views the world, but not to gain anything thereby. In that sense, we may say that it is a "disinterested" viewing. And yet, as David Bently Hart notes, "disinterested" fails to do justice if by it an "aloofness" or "uninterestedness" is intended by the term. Suspending apprehension requires a kind of agapic love, a selflessness that is more interested in the other than in the self. That is why Pieper rightly says, *ubi amor, ibi oculus*, where there is love there is vision. And when the symphonic whole presents (that is, when the transcendentals once again manifest before the receptive gaze), an *eros* emerges. This *eros* goes beyond the *agapic* in that the *eros* longs not only for the thriving of the other, but also for a participation in the other. That is, *eros* is a love-generated desire to find one's own part in the symphonic whole, the desire to inhabit one's own groove, the beautiful place.

Perceiving Beauty Through God's Narrative

The above argument might seem to indicate that I am advocating for a uniform aesthetic sense throughout all time and across all cultures. After all, if human beings have the imaginative capacity of contemplation which enables them to behold the essentially symphonic (and beautiful) nature of being, would not human beings possess an essentially universal sense of taste? Would they not all find the same things to be beautiful or not beautiful? Such is clearly not

the case, as we will see below. Yet it is also not the case that the human sense of beauty is entirely relative. Below, I will argue that our perception of beauty is formed communally (or culturally). I will further propose that while certain differences are plainly evident, the degree of continuity across time and space is an even more striking feature, much as we saw with various manifestations of the Law in chapter three. There is a "givenness" to the Law because of how God works through His creation to shape and mold us. There is a certain "givenness" also to beauty, because the beautiful place for human beings in one time and place is not completely alien to the beautiful place for those of another time and place. Before delving into the continuity, however, let us first attend to the arguments of those who suggest that beauty is "nothing more than" the product of cultural influences.

It is an undeniable fact that human aesthetic preferences are fluid to a certain extent. Recent studies suggest that our likes and dislikes are most solid in middle age, but more flexible in the young and the old.[33] This flexibility may strike us as somewhat surprising, especially given the significance we attribute to matters of taste, and the felt need we have to defend our taste from assault. Nevertheless, that our taste can and does change over time cannot be denied.

In defense of this claim, Bence Nanay cites a well-known experiment performed by a professor of psychology at Cornell University. During an introductory course on vision science, the professor randomly inserted slides of various pieces of art. The works had no connection to the subject matter at hand, neither did the professor explain them or take time to acknowledge them, and they were only displayed momentarily, apparently as buffers between the slides dealing specifically with the course. Essentially, the paintings served as decoration. This practice continued throughout the semester, some pictures being shown more than others. At the end of

[33] Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 44.

the term, students were asked to rate the pictures to which they'd been exposed. The students' ratings revealed a tremendously clear trend. Overwhelmingly, students claimed to find more beautiful those images shown with greater regularity throughout the course, and only a very few recalled having ever seen the images before. This phenomenon is referred to as the "mere exposure effect." It suggests that humans tend to find most beautiful those particular works of art or those genres with which they are familiar.[34]

This experiment certainly is fascinating. It is also, however, rather disturbing. At the very least, it suggests that humans do not have as much "control" over their aesthetic sensibilities as we'd like to believe. For our purposes, it may also seem to call into question the entire premise of this dissertation, namely, that there are, in fact, identifiable contours of beauty. To the contrary, it could be interpreted as indicating that any and all judgments concerning beauty are purely relative. Before arguing why this is *not* the case, let us first examine another experiment which could be taken to indicate precisely the opposite point.

I will cite two examples. The first concerns the unexpected popularity of a certain piece of music. In 2007, Paul Potts won the popular television competition called Brittain's Got Talent. He did not win it by rapping or singing a pop song. Bucking the trend, Potts stunned the judges, and audiences worldwide, with his rendition of the aria "Nessun Dorma" by Giacomo Puccini, hardly a piece that had lodged itself in the collective conscious. To date, many videos of that performance are posted to YouTube, the most popular of which has enjoyed well over 195 million views. Additionally, there are countless videos showing the reactions of people unfamiliar with the piece, unfamiliar with operas as a whole, practically breaking down into tears, overwhelmed by the beauty and passion of Luciano Pavarotti's performance of the same

[34] Nanay, *Aesthetics*, 44–45.

piece. Those videos themselves have garnered millions of views.

Iain McGilchrist would not be surprised at such findings. He writes, "Much as I argued that moral values, within certain limits, are universal, beauty is also more universal than we have been taught to think."[35] The degree of cross-cultural agreement about beauty is quite astonishing. McGilchrist argues that Easterners and Westerners tend to concur in their assessments of beauty, even if "the forms taken by beauty in art may differ widely in style." He points to one especially astounding example of such cross-cultural agreement, in which members of a tribe from the Amazonian rainforest are overwhelmed by the beauty of Maria Callas singing Bellini's "Casta diva."[36] It is hard to conceive of two cultures at a greater remove. Clearly, prior exposure played no part whatsoever in the assessment of the tribesmen. It seems, then, that there is some commonality in human perception which, when engaged with this piece, elicits a similar reaction, regardless of background. I will refer to this phenomenon as the catholicity of human perception.

The Catholicity and Particularity of Perception

In this case, I employ the term catholic in its original sense to mean "according to the whole," or "universal." That is, human perception may be called catholic in so far as humanity shares a relatively stable sense of perception across time and space. If the reader has accepted the arguments up to this point, the idea of a catholic human perception should not be a surprise. Beauty is a matter of groove, of the exceeding fittingness of parts to the whole. Those things which we perceive as beautiful are beautiful because they fill their groove in such a way as to cause us to love them, not only in the agapic sense (as mentioned above), but also (as Hart

[35] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 2: 1152.

[36] McGilchrist, *Matter with Things,* 2: 1152.

argues) erotically, that is, in such a way as to participate in them. If such is the case, the idea of a catholic sense of perception seems nothing less than ineluctable. It is simply a consequence of our first article, creaturely reality, the truth that human beings (regardless of time and place) were all created in the *imago Dei*.

We have already treated this topic rather extensively in the previous chapter, so I will not belabor the point here. Suffice it to say that from a Christian perspective a cross-cultural appreciation of beauty would not be surprising in the least. Indeed, we should anticipate it, as we should anticipate a degree of similarity in codified civil law cross-culturally. By the same token, the differences in beauty's manifestation in the arts should in no way cause us to deny catholicity. Quite to the contrary, the term "catholicity" necessarily enfolds the differences one finds among particulars. Indeed, the catholic has no existence outside of its particular manifestations.

This is where the contributions concerning inculturation by Benedictine liturgist and theologian Anscar Chupungco prove especially helpful. Before examining his work, however, a definition of culture (what it is and what it does) will be helpful. Here we turn to Gerald Arbuckle, who provides a definition which (though rather unwieldy) is both elucidating and robust.

> A culture is a pattern of meanings encased in a network of symbols, myths, narratives and rituals, created by individuals and subdivisions, as they struggle to respond to the competitive pressures of power and limited resources in a rapidly globalizing and fragmenting world, and instructing its adherents about what is considered to be the correct way to feel, think, and behave.[37]

This definition highlights the fact that "culture tells members of a particular society how to *view*

[37] Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 17.

the world, how to experience it *emotionally*, and how to relate to one another and to people of other societies."[38]

In essence, a culture both reveals and conceals certain aspects of reality, certain aspects of being. It both *enables* and *prevents* us from seeing the near infinite aspects of being. Thus, we should anticipate that those raised in one culture are shaped and molded by their neighbors such that they are able to perceive more readily than those of another culture manifestations of beauty in particular human artifacts, or even manifestations in nature. That is, cultural particularity may well gift a people with the capacity to perceive beautiful aspects of being that lie hidden from the eyes of peoples from other cultures, and conversely also to hide other aspects of being and beauty.

What, then, is inculturation? Essentially, it is the process by which a culture is taken up into and transformed by the church.[39] Referencing A. Shorter's work, Chupungco notes three aspects features of this process.

First, it is an ongoing process that is relevant to every country or region where the faith has been sown; second, Christian faith cannot exist except in a cultural form; and third, between Christian faith and culture there should be reciprocal interaction and integration.[40]

For our purposes, the final two points are the most significant. The fact that Christianity cannot exist except in a cultural form serves as a powerful reminder that culture and the Christian faith are not mutually exclusive, such that culture and the practice of the faith are always at variance. Quite to the contrary, there is no such thing as a cultureless Christianity. Indeed, the

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[38] Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians*, 17.

[39] Anscar J. Chupungco, "Liturgy and Inculturation," in *Fundamental Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 338.

[40] Chupungco, "Liturgy and Inculturation," 338.

faith is always "lived out" culturally because human beings are necessarily cultured (in the sense that God designed us specifically to be creatures formed by our neighbors).

Chupungco argues that the theological foundation of this process is the incarnation, or rather "the incarnation as a mystery that continues to be realized in the life and mission of the Church."[41] The incarnation, as Chupungco describes it, was that event "whereby the Son of God became a member of the Jewish people and a sharer of their faith, culture and traditions." By extension, this indicates that the church, as the body of Christ, "should share the history, culture, and traditions of the people among whom it dwells." This taking up of the culture is not limited to adoption of language however (though it certainly does mean that as well). Rather, the church should also "think the way the people think" and "adopt the cultural patterns that run through their celebrations."[42]

Of course, such adoption is not uncritical. As Chupungco notes, "there can be instances when Christians have to turn their backs on some components of their tradition because they are irremediably incompatible with the gospel."[43] Thus, "though mutual respect governs this dialogue [between Christianity and local culture], it is clear that not everything in possession of a given culture is suitable or useful for Christian purposes."[44] Neither, it must be said, does inculturation imply the sublating of the church under the broader banner of a particular society, rendering it merely another artifact of that culture. Rather, the countercultural nature of Christianity remains.[45] Perhaps the following analogy might clarify what is meant. We might say,

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[41] Chupungco, "Liturgy and Inculturation," 343.

[42] Chupungco, "Liturgy and Inculturation," 344.

[43] Chupungco, "Liturgy and Inculturation," 345. One may think here of the Roman practice of temple prostitutes.

[44] Chupungco, "Liturgy and Inculturation," 339.

[45] Chupungco, "Liturgy and Inculturation," 348.

that just as the incarnation was "the assumption of the humanity into God,"[46] so too is inculturation the assumption of various cultures into the church, which is, after all, not an institution but the living, fecund body of Christ, enriched by all its members. It is, therefore, a matter of translating the Christian story into particular cultural forms, a translation which extends beyond language.

The final trait of inculturation revealed by Chupungco may strike some as even more surprising than the one just discussed. Surely there is no beneficial reciprocity between Christianity and cultures that have not received the Gospel. Surely any benefit is unidirectional, Christianity benefiting the culture to which it is introduced. After all, the faith brings with it God's revealed intentions for His human creatures. Or, to be consistent, it reveals humanity's beautiful place. That is surely true. And yet it is also true that the church catholic has been blessed by the incorporation of various cultural particularities into itself. Consider, for example, John's appropriation and adaptation of Heraclitus' term λόγος in the prologue of his Gospel. That application not only reinterpreted the Greek term, but also enabled the church to conceive of the incarnate Son of God in a new way, a gift given to Christianity by the taking up of culture into itself.

Illustrative of Chupungco's presentation of inculturation is a 2016 article by Lutheran systematic theologian Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. He speaks specifically to the question of the place of Hispanic Christians within the universal church. Sánchez asserts that catholicity entails "an embracing character inclusive of people from different ethnicities, races languages, and tribes, with different gifts and theological contributions. A communion that transcends without

[46] Athanasian Creed.

disembodying."[47] Following the work of Latina theologian Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, he argues that the incorporation of Hispanic Christianity (or any other cultural instantiation) is a question of "belonging".

While commonality could end up in homogenization and a denial of embodied particularity, drawing attention to difference and hybridity as ends in themselves could lead to isolation or ghettoization without solidarity and community building.[48]

Therefore, Sánchez approvingly quotes Nanko-Fernandez who advocates for "an expanded understanding of hybridity as multiple belonging . . . grounded in a shared humanity and derived from creation in the divine image," and in which Christians do not meld into one another but rather "search for intersections and connections."[49]

Therefore, Sánchez calls for "intercultural" thinking which "moves beyond" the mere recognition of other cultures which is perhaps the most one can expect from terms such as multicultural or cross-cultural. Interculturality urges relationships among cultures, relationships analogous to marriage in which "each member, while retaining his or her uniqueness, nurtures the other, and where both partners develop their relationship over ongoing, sustained, creative, and faithful engagement."[50]

Although he does not state it explicitly, perhaps it is the wild and spectacular eschatological vision of Flannery O'Connor's *Revelation* that Sánchez has in mind.

> [Mrs. Turpin] saw the streak [of sunset light] as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vas horde of souls were tumbling upward from the earth through a field of living fire. There were whole

[47] Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Hispanic Is Not What You Think: Reimagining Hispanic Identity, Implications for an Increasingly Global Church," *Concordia Journal* (Summer 2016): 231.

[48] Sánchez, "Hispanic," 232.

[49] Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, *Theologizing en Espanglish: Context, Community, and Ministry. Studies in Latina/o Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 1–20.

[50] Sánchez, "Hispanic," 233.

> companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.[51]

O'Connor's fictive prose communicates the truth more powerfully than any logical formulation could ever hope to manage. One would imagine that this is what Sánchez envisions as interculturality, an eschatological hope, a "not yet," to which the church nevertheless bears witness in the present, in the "now."

It is precisely because the term "catholic" necessarily entails all the manifold variations of particularity that Frank Burch Brown initially casts doubt on the classification "classic," as in a classic painting, or piece of music. He wholeheartedly rejects the typical use of this term as it tends to smack of ethnocentrism and imperialism. All aesthetic sense is *communally* (thus culturally) formed to some extent, he argues. Or to use the language consistently employed thus far, all aesthetic sense is, to a certain degree, formed by our *coram hominibus* reality. Thus, Brown says, we may *commend* an artifact to those outside our cultural context for their contemplation and hope that they may come to see the beauty that we see. Nevertheless, we may not *command* classics. That is, we must not demand that everyone react in an identical manner to our commendations, or assume that they are necessarily possessed of an inferior sense of taste because a work fails to strike them with the same power as it strikes us. After all, it is certainly the case that classics are not appreciated consistently over time even within their culture of origin. That is, some works of art may instantly resonate within the artist's culture. In other cases, it may take years, perhaps decades or even centuries for the genius of an artist to be

[51] Flannery O'Connor, *Revelation*, in *An Introduction to Fiction*, ed. by X. HJ. Kennedy and Dana Gioia (New York, Pearson Longman, 2005), 457.

appreciated.[52] Therefore, writes Brown, "The idea of a perfectly stable classic is an illusion."[53]

In isolation from the rest of the text, this line would seem to completely countermand the evidence provided above by Iain McGilchrist. Brown, however, does not end his comments there. He continues:

> Nonetheless, the idea of a classic is not itself illusory, and neither is the idea that there can be relatively adequate appreciation and appraisal of any work or object having aesthetic excellence. This is because the aesthetic standards of a community are rooted in human nature, which for all its variety and mutability maintains certain fundamental desires and needs that persist through change.[54]

That is, the aesthetic tastes of a certain culture both shape and are shaped by the values of that culture. Many of those values, however, are "potentially perceptible and intelligible beyond that community," precisely because those outside the community participate in human nature.[55] For that reason, it is possible for an "outsider" to become at least conversant with a culture's taste. Perhaps in rarer cases, an outsider may even develop the appreciation of an "insider." There is also the intriguing realization that the culture of origin may not grasp the full significance of an artifact natively produced! That is to say, a non-native (whose imagination has been formed differently) may well uncover layers of meaning and aspects of beauty not obvious to those from whose culture a work originated, such as the appreciation of Bach's music in Japan, for example.

In summary, we may say the following. A sense of beauty has a catholicity to it, just as a sense of morality possesses a kind of catholicity. There are common *contours*. And therefore, we should not in any way be alarmed to discover that people from a culture radically different from our own may find similar aspects of being to be beautiful. That extends even to those artistic

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[52] I am thinking here especially of J. S. Bach, many of whose works had been neglected until they were rediscovered by Mendelsohn and brought to the fore by Felix Mendelsohn.

[53] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 149.

[54] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 149.

[55] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 149.

artifacts that are highly particular to our culture (as the above examples by McGilchrist illustrate). We do, after all, share a common human nature, a common groove. That groove, however, does *not* manifest identically across time or place. There is a groove, but that groove is also modulated according to the particular circumstances in which God has placed us. Therefore, we should not be surprised to discover that those circumstances open some cultures to aspects of the beauty of being not immediately obvious to us, and vice versa. This accounts for varying taste across cultures, and shows the plenitude, the superabundance, the ever-fecund extravagance of God's *pro nobis* work, such that no one culture may presume to have exhausted its riches, or to have "heard" *every* instance of God's variegated rhetoric. When apprehension gives way to comprehension, when the *ratio* yields to the *intellectus*, when manipulation dissolves of its own meanness in the face of contemplation, when passivity descends and the beauty of being manifests to us as a gift received, as a word of God *to* me and *for me,* then descends to us the true meaning of God's transcendence. God's transcendence is not, first and foremost, a matter of unknowability, of inscrutability forcing us into nothing but a black hole of apophaticism. Rather, to confess the transcendence of God is to declare the truth that concerning God's creative and salvific work for me, *more* can always be said, *more* can always be seen.[56] But only when it is received as a *gift*, and not grasped for self-serving utilitarian purposes, will that transcendence begin to manifest.

The Scandalous Particularity of Christian Perception

The above discussion serves as a very helpful reminder that the church has a particular collective sense of perception. As was mentioned, we should not at all be surprised to find that

[56] Jeremie Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 6.

people from various cultures perceive beauty in the same manifestations of being. That is simply an anticipated consequence of sharing human nature, of sharing a common groove. The reverse side of that catholicity is the reality of particularity, that our cultural circumstances have shaped our perception to a degree which both opens and closes us to various manifestations of beauty. We may certainly argue that the church also has a kind of culture, if we define "culture" according to Arbuckle's definition (encountered above) as a "pattern of meanings encased in a network of symbols, myths, narratives and rituals." As is the case with all societies, the church's culture "tells [its] members . . . how to view the world, how to experience it emotionally, and how to relate to one another and to people of other societies."[57] Thus, while the church may find a great deal of common ground with those outside the church regarding beauty, there is also a perception unique to the church that the "uninitiated" would find very difficult to appreciate, perhaps even impossible. I am speaking, of course, of nothing other than that message of folly, of both the foolishness and the weakness of God—the awful beauty of the cross (see 1 Cor. 1:18–20).

The incarnation (along with everything entailed in the life of Jesus) was God's decisive act within human history. It was the act by which He would re-place human beings into their beautiful place once more. Now, if God uses beauty to accomplish this task, one would expect every aspect of the incarnation to be overwhelmingly, compellingly, perhaps irresistibly beautiful. And yet there is the cross. There is that dreadful and hideous moment which caused the Prophet Isaiah to write concerning Him that

> he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted

[57] Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians*, 17.

> with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.[58]

There is nothing about the cross that immediately commends itself to be contemplated either agapically or erotically (again, defined as a desire for participation). As Drs. Arand and Hermann so succinctly put it, "there is no 'pulchram' in the fulcrum of sin and redemption."[59] The image of a tortured, mutilated, and dying man certainly would not seem to participate in any catholicity of beauty. A Viladesau says, at the cross "divinity seems to be found, not in what is beautiful and world-affirming, but in association with powerlessness and death," features hardly consonant with the concept of a catholicity of beauty, hardly features that would elicit *agape*, let alone *eros*.[60]

Viladesau also suggests a second reason that that the cross does not immediately commend itself to human aesthetic appreciation. It can represent the Anselmian atonement theory of satisfaction. "This is easily extended to the notion that the cross is the manifestation of God's wrath against sin, which Christ takes upon himself in our stead."[61] For Viladesau, if the cross is seen as the locus of God's wrath outpoured, there is no possible way for it to be considered beautiful. It becomes, rather, a matter of pure horror and dread, a matter of cruelty only.[62]

What, then, are we to make of the following statement of by St. Augustine?

> He then is 'beautiful' in Heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb; beautiful in His parents' hands: beautiful in his miracles; beautiful under the scourge: beautiful when inviting to life; beautiful also when not regarding death: beautiful in "laying

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[58] Isa. 53:2b–3.

[59] Charles P. Arand and Erik Herrmann, "Attending to the Beauty of Creation and the New Creation," *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 321.

[60] Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 194.

[61] Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 194.

[62] I will argue in favor of seeing the cross in light of God's wrath later on. For now, however, I am simply laying out the standard reasons given for the hiddenness of the cross' beauty.

> down His life"; beautiful in "taking it again": beautiful on the Cross; beautiful in the Sepulchre; beautiful in Heaven.[63]

Certainly, Augustine is not the only Christian to have held this rather strange perspective on the cross.[64] That is why crosses and crucifixes adorn nearly all church buildings, from the small, white-washed chapels of rural America, to the soaring, gilded cathedrals of renaissance Europe. That is why Christians ornament crosses and crucifixes with gold and jewels, and often hang them around their necks. Augustine's opinion, then, is clearly not an outlier. So, in what way may the death of Jesus be considered beautiful? Briefly, only when gifted with a particular kind of sight.

The typically repulsive figure on the cross becomes attractive, becomes beautiful, becomes God's persuasive rhetoric, only when couched within the Christian narrative. It is only when viewed in light of what God is actually *doing* in and through the crucified Jesus that this scene of apparent dereliction manifests as beautiful in our eyes. What we behold is not so much a beautiful "thing" as a beautiful "action." And as we will see, that beautiful action corresponds exactly with our thoughts concerning beauty thus far.

Let us begin by speaking about the beauty of the cross from the aspect of Christ's human nature. As Jesus willing suffers crucifixion, He perfectly fills the beautiful place, the groove carved out for human beings. In His *coram Deo* reality, Jesus entrusts all things into the hands of the Father, declaring in His haunting Gethsemane prayer, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 2:42b). According to His human nature, Jesus is satisfied with the *imago Dei*. He does not seek (again, according to His human nature) to become *sicut Deus*. In His *coram*

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[63] Quoted in Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 31.

[64] It must be noted that this appreciation of the cross as a symbol was certainly not universal. It was not until roughly 100 years after crucifixion was outlawed by Emperor Theodosius II in 382 that the church began to adopt it as a symbol more widely as a visual symbol. See Kent J. Burreson, "*Ad Fontem in Crucem*: The Formative Function of the Cross as Artistic and Ritual Sign," *Concordia Journal* 45, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 40.

hominibus reality too, Jesus perfectly inhabits the beautiful place for humanity, namely the *kenotic* self-outpouring, the giving over of His life entirely for the sake of the other.

But what of Christ's divine nature? Amazingly, what we witness in the act of the passion proves no radical departure from God's *modus operandi*. To the contrary, what we behold in the cross is God doing what God has always done, only to a degree not previously conceived. Ben Quash captures well Balthasar's sentiments in this regard: "God's is the divine dynamism of a love utterly possessed because utterly donated, and most manifestly so on the Cross."[65] That is the out pouring of God's love in creating, His ongoing love in sustaining, or (as we have been referring to it) His kenotic *pro nobis* work, was embodied in the Word made flesh and "acted out" before us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The fact that God's Son "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men . . . and humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross," is ultimately consistent with the way God had always acted toward human creatures, which is to say, in love and self-offering (Phil. 2:6–8). As Natalie Carnes argued above, the cross is beautiful, because it is exceedingly fitting for the God of love.

Viladesau argues, however, that the superabundant beauty of Good Friday is only fully manifested in light of Easter morning, the light of which shines back on Golgotha.

> The cross is not beautiful or good in itself: it is beautiful only insofar as it represents Christ's ultimate faithfulness and self-gift to God, even to the point of death, and insofar as this act is given eternal validity by God's overcoming of death itself. That is, the cross only has beauty as the expression of an act of love; and love is "beautiful," theologically speaking, precisely because it is finally not defeated, but victorious. Love is godly and therefore in itself the participation in and anticipation of the divine form of life. The fulfillment of that anticipation by God is revealed

[65] Quash, "*Theo-drama*," 155.

> historically and in definitive form in Christ's resurrection as the sign that confirms the validity and shows the final victorious nature of all human self-giving in love.[66]

It is true that even outside of its completion by the resurrection, Christ's submission to the Father's will is beautiful in that it manifests creaturely trust, creaturely disponibility, which simply *is* the beautiful place *coram Deo*. Furthermore (and this is where Viladesau lacks), the cross is beautiful because it is the means through which Jesus loves His *fellow human creatures*. No doubt His love of the Father is clearly manifested here. But equally His love of sinners shines forth as He suffers in their stead the damnation, the separation from the Father, that their sins merited. This love also *is* the beautiful place *coram mundo*.

Nevertheless, Viladesau is certainly on to something. The *full* beauty of Christ's offering only reveals itself in God's *vindication* of the life defined by kenosis. By raising Jesus from death, He definitively declares that, in fact, the life constituted by self-outpouring love *is* the *sine qua non* of human life. It *is* the intended shape (from the beginning), the groove, the beautiful place, and that precisely because it is the *imago Dei*, the image (and the means) of God's own self-giving love toward us. All this may only be perceived, however, when viewed through the lens of the Christian narrative.

It is by the same token that Christians may contemplate the beauty of the martyr who lays down his life to share the Gospel with his enemies.[67] His life is itself a word from God, because his love for the neighbor *is God's love* for His rebellious creature. And though that love leads to

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[66] Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 197.

[67] Consider, for example, the following excerpt from the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp: "The fire, making the appearance of a vault, like the sail of a vessel filled by the wind, made a wall round about the body of the martyr; and it was there in the midst, not like flesh burning, but like [a loaf in the oven or like] gold and silver refined in a furnace. For we perceived such a fragrant smell, as if it were the wafted odor of frankincense or some other precious spice." J. B. Lightfoot, trans., "Medieval Sourcebook: The Martyrdom of Polycarp," Fordham University, last modified September 1, 2000, accessed December 20, 2023, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/martyrdom-polycarp-lightfoot.asp.

the martyr's death, it is not, in the end, a tragic death. For the Christian, the beauty of the martyr's sacrifice lies not only in the kenotic love there displayed, but also in the promise of the Author of being (and thus of beauty) to give being again on the last day. Thus, the Christian imagination is not one which must disown the horror and ghastliness of the cross. Rather, it perceives a beauty made manifest within the horror and ghastliness, precisely by the promise of the One who sits on the throne and declares, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5)

Summary

In this chapter, we have been concerned with the matter of perception. We have wrestled with the question of how human beings are able to perceive beauty at all. We also came to grips with the question of whether the perception of beauty ought to be considered catholic or particular. That is, we asked whether we could expect similarities in the appreciation of beauty among humans across time and space. While we answered the question in the affirmative because of the reality of the beautiful place, the groove carved out for human beings by God, we also acknowledged that a person's particular culture both reveals and conceals various aspects of beauty, aspects which may be *commended* though not *commanded* of those whose particular *coram hominibus* reality discloses things not visible to us. For Christians enculturated into the church, our perception has been particularized by God's narrative of creation, redemption, and restoration, which enables us to view even the crucifixion of Christ as beautiful, especially when seen in conjunction with resurrection. In the following chapter, we turn to the last of our three perspectives on beauty, that is, the matter of participation.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARTICIPATING IN BEAUTY

In the preceding chapter, we contended with the Christian perception of beauty. We saw that perception is a matter of that particular exercise of the imagination called contemplation. We further saw that Christian perception is unique, indeed, *scandalous*! Our perception is altered not only by God's story, but also our belief in that story. We behold the exceeding fittingness of a thing not merely in relation to some cosmic harmony, as important as that is. We behold its exceeding fittingness, the degree to which it fills its *telos*, and from that *telos*, in that particular manifestation of being, we see the beauty, truth, and goodness of being (of creation, as a whole). In this being, Christians receive sensual confirmation of what we believe, teach, and confess—that ours is a *pro nobis* God, a God who made me for the creation and the creation for me.

This unique perception, however, enables Christians to see the most profound beauty in precisely that place toward which most react with nothing less than abject horror and profound disgust—the cross. Here, the Christian sees two beauties simultaneously on account of the two natures of Christ. On the one hand, we behold the beauty of the human creature living in His groove, in faith toward God and in kenotic love toward the neighbor. On the other hand, we see the unspeakable beauty of God, who in utter condescension gave Himself over to death and hell to win back His fallen creatures. The cross, therefore, is beautiful to Christians because ours is a contemplation governed by a kind of love. And, as we have already stated above, *ubi amor, ibi oculus*, where there is love, there is vision.

This chapter is concerned with participation in beauty. As we already noted earlier, David Bentley Hart reminds us that mere perception and contemplation of beauty stops short of the goal. When beauty is truly witnessed, a *cold* manner of disinterested contemplation is

unimaginable. After all, the central theme of this dissertation is that beauty moves us into the beautiful place. If the term "disinterested" is employed correctly, it signifies a self-forgetfulness in contemplation. When we attend to it, beauty *coram mundo* does not leave us as we are. It draws us. Yes, it stirs in us an agapic love, a love that would see such beauty preserved. But it does more than that too. Beauty stirs an eros in us, that is, a desire to participate in the beauty that draws us, to immerse ourselves in it, to become (as it were) one with it. Roger Scruton strikes a similar note when he claims that, "In the experience of beauty the world comes home to us, and we to the world."[1] Although it was already quoted earlier, Scruton's following comment bears repeating:

> The experience of beauty . . . tells us that we are at home in the world, that the world is already ordered in our perception as a place fit for the likes of beings like us. But . . . beings like us become at home in the world only by acknowledging our 'fallen' condition . . . Hence the experience of beauty also points us beyond this world, to a 'kingdom of ends' in which our immortal longings and our desire for perfection are finally answered.[2]

It is perhaps for this reason that after having watched a beautiful film, or after having listened to a beautiful piece of music, we are left simultaneously with a sense of fullness, and a sense of longing. This longing does not simply arise because the experience has come to an end (though that is no doubt part of it). That sense of yearning arises because the communion with the beautiful experience has come to an end. It is, in some sense, a sickness in the heart caused by a yearning to commune, to participate, to be caught up in the beauty, to be drawn into the symphonic nature of it all, just as listening to an orchestra sometimes moves children to tootle as if they themselves were playing a trumpet. Or, to employ our familiar nomenclature, beauty stirs in us the desire to be in our groove as well, while simultaneously being in our *coram Deo*

[1] Scruton, *Beauty*, 56.

[2] Scruton, *Beauty*, 145.

groove.

There are, however, two possible ways to take Scruton's comments. One interpretation we would have to reject is as follows. If by "beyond this world," Scruton is proposing something like a Platonic ideal, or else a heavenly sphere essentially separate from this one, we could not accept his claim. If, on the other, he is referring to a difference in *time*, to the world *as it will be* when Christ ushers in the new creation, then his claim would be perfectly amenable. The longing inspired by beauty is one precisely for *this world*, but for this world to be even *more* itself, for this world as it *ought* to be, and a yearning to find and inhabit our exceedingly fitting place in it. Thus, the longing we experience is not a longing for something unearthly, or unworldly. Rather, it is a longing for this world to exist as God intended, a longing for shalom.

Noted philosopher and Calvinist theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff captures remarkably well the sense of that familiar word: "To dwell in shalom is to find delight in living rightly before God, to find delight in living rightly in one's physical surroundings, to find delight in living rightly with one's fellow human beings, and to find delight even in living rightly with oneself."[3] This is precisely what it is to live in beauty as creatures.

What Scruton says concerning natural beauty, Viladesau corroborates, only regarding beauty in the arts: "the beauty of art, like all beauty, not only tells us of the nature of our final horizon and goal but also evokes its gratuitous presence, drawing us to that goal and giving us already the taste of its reality."[4] Here, Viladesau emphasizes the teleological and eschatological aspect of beauty, such that when we attend to it appropriately, we receive, in some sense, a "foretaste of the feast to come," whetting our appetite for the fullness and consummation yet to

[3] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, ed. Clarence W. Joldersma and Gloria Goris Stronks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 23.

[4] Viladesau, *Religious Aesthetics*, 149–50.

come.

The question arises, however, *how* does one participate? Can and by what means might we be able to participate in beauty? In this chapter, I will lay out the answers to these questions provided by Balthasar and Hart. By means of Mark Mattes, however, we will discover that their proposals are not fully satisfying precisely because their theological commitments prevent them from speaking in terms of the two kinds of righteousness. Next, it will become clear that Mattes' work too has a rather significant deficiency. While he provides a masterful account of beauty *coram Deo*, his conception of *coram mundo* participation falls short. We will adopt Joel Biermann's proposal of a third kind of righteousness ("conforming righteousness") to amend this shortcoming, thus arriving at a clear concept of participation in beauty in both the *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* aspects of human existence.

It is true, however, that the desire for participation is but one possible reaction to an encounter with the beautiful. And, as we will see, it may not even be the most common reaction. Precisely because we do *not* perfectly inhabit the nexus of our *coram mundo* and *coram deo* realities as fallen human beings, because we do *not* fill our beautiful place, the beauty that we encounter in the world often acts as a mirror, reflecting to us our own ugliness. One possible way to respond, then, is to do something, not about ourselves and our own ugliness, but about the mirror. There are at least three responses that fall into that category. Indifference, cheapening, and desecration are all methods sinful human beings employ to address, not the thing that is ugly, but the thing that reveals ugliness. It is to these which we now turn.

Three Adversarial Responses to Beauty

The first adversarial response we engage comes to us by way of Frank Burch Brown. Although he deals specifically with religious aesthetics and not beauty *per se*, his comments here

prove very valuable. Brown lists four categories of what he calls "sinful taste." These categories include the aesthete, the philistine, the intolerant, and the indiscriminate. Essentially, these function as boundary markers aimed at steering Christians clear of certain common and dangerous traps. The aesthete appreciates art for its own sake, which becomes a form of idolatry. It is nothing less than the deification of creation. On the exact opposite end of the spectrum is the philistine, who cares nothing for aesthetics at all. The philistine discounts the value of aesthetics and beauty entirely. So, whereas the aesthete *deifies* creation, the philistine *denigrates* creation, finding no real goodness in it. The intolerant is a form of imperialism and ethnocentrism. Reaching back to the previous chapter, we might say that the intolerant person is one who brooks no departure from the manifestation of beauty opened to him by the particularity of his circumstances. Only the beauty perspicuous to him actually exists. Again on the other end of the spectrum lies the indiscriminate. This is the Christian who essentially opens the floodgates to anything and everything without any consideration as to how a particular work of art or hymn might be shaping people. Again, Brown is speaking to aesthetics in general and not to beauty *per se*, yet we might transpose his comments slightly. The indiscriminate essentially denies the existence of any contours of beauty.[5]

It is the second of Brown's four categories that constitutes the first of our adversarial responses to beauty, namely, the philistine. As we noted in the beginning of this dissertation, the role of beauty in the life of the Church had been, at least in the West, almost completely ignored of late. By fixating on the other two transcendentals of goodness and truth, the church regarded beauty as little more than ornamentation at best and a potentially idolatrous distraction at worst. Having disregarded beauty, the church also failed to take note of the innate suasiveness of the

[5] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 151.

true and the good.

In *The Merchant of Venice,* Shakespeare captures well the idea of the philistine through his character Lorenzo: "The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils. The motions of his spirit are dull as night, And his affections dark as Erebus."[6] Thus, the philistine is not simply the person who has "poor taste." Rather, he is the one who denies either beauty's power or beauty *per se*.

The second adversarial response to beauty is by far the easiest to see. Roger Scruton refers to this response as desecration, a tendency he discerns in our contemporary culture, namely the willful destruction or uglification of that which was once considered beautiful. Many contemporary artists have made "debunking" the beautiful their life's work. Marcel Duchamp painted Davinci's "Mona Lisa" with a mustache. Why? It may be, as some have argued, that he was simply rebelling against those who fall under Brown's category of the "intolerant." His intent, along with that of many of the early Moderns, such as Schoenberg, was to loosen the constricting confines of the established standards. As Scruton observes,

> You may find the result impenetrable, unintelligible or even ugly—as many do in the case of Schoenberg. But that is certainly not the intention. Schoenberg, like Eliot, sought to *renew* the tradition, not to destroy it, but to renew it as a vehicle in which Beauty, rather than banality, would once more be the norm.[7]

The mission of the early Moderns, then, was to "break open," not to annihilate entirely. "Modernism," says Scruton, "was not conceived as a transgression but as a recuperation: an arduous path back to a hard-won inheritance of meaning, in which beauty would again be honoured, as the present symbol of transcendent values."[8]

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[6] Shakespeare, William, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by William Lyon Phelps (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 88.

[7] Scruton, *Beauty*, 171.

[8] Scruton, *Beauty*, 172.

Unfortunately, it appears that at least the most significant contemporary artists have trodden precisely that transgressive path of desecration. Any number of such examples would serve to make the point, but Scruton himself provides one sufficiently vivid for our purposes. In 2004, the Comic Opera in Berlin staged a performance of Mozart's *Die Entführung*. Without delving into unnecessary detail, suffice it to say that Mozart here expresses his belief in the existence of genuine disinterested love. This staging of the opera, however, presents an image at *absolute* variance with the music and libretti. "Even during the most tender music, the stage was littered with couples copulating, and every excuse for violence, with or without a sexual climax was taken . . . At one point a prostitute is gratuitously tortured and her nipples bloodily and realistically severed before she is killed."[9] This is not merely an indifference toward beauty as one might see in the philistine. This is a hatred of beauty, a yearning to "unmask" it as false, and thus destroy it. If a beautiful thing is not true, neither can it be truly beautiful nor truly good, for all three transcendentals (as aspects of being) "hang together," as it were.

To what can we attribute this drive to destroy beauty? Scruton rightly asserts that one cause for the current obsession with desecration lies at the feet of unbridled narcissism. Self-obsession cannot abide beauty because "beauty makes a claim on us: it is a call to renounce our narcissism and look with reverence on the world."[10] This renunciation rubs against the grain of fallen human nature which has rightly been described as *incurvatus in se*, turned in on itself, a corruption which considers the self the only truly beautiful thing.

Later, Scruton adds another layer of complexity to the cause of desecration. "Reverence," he notes, is associated with the "sacred," and desecration can function as "a kind of defence

[9] Scruton, *Beauty*, 173.

[10] Scruton, *Beauty*, 145.

against the sacred, an attempt to destroy its claims. In the presence of sacred things our lives are judged and in order to escape that judgement we destroy the thing that seems to accuse us."[11] But there's another aspect as well. Not only is the beautiful disturbing because it essentially demands a kind of self-forgetfulness, but also because it generates guilt. Beauty may also function as a mirror such that by its exceeding fittingness, my own ill-fittedness is made manifest. The manner in which the beautiful thing occupies its groove reveals the degree to which I fail to occupy mine. Beauty, Scruton says,

> imposes an intolerable burden, something that we must live up to, a world of ideals and aspirations that is in sharp conflict with the tawdriness of our improvised lives. It is perched like an owl on our shoulders, while we try to hide our pet rodents in our clothes. The temptation is to turn on it and shoo it away. The desire to desecrate is a desire to turn aesthetic judgement against itself, so that it no longer seems like a judgement to *us*. This you see all the time in children—the delight in disgusting noises, words, allusions, which helps them to distance themselves from the adult world that judges them, and whose authority they wish to deny . . . By using culture as an instrument of desecration they neutralize its claims: it loses all authority, and becomes a fellow conspirator in the plot against value.[12]

Just as there is a delight in the right perception of beauty and in the participation in beauty, so too, there is a form of delight in desecration. It is a delight not in the thing beheld, but rather in my *very act* of desecration.

It is not only in deep philosophical circles that such thoughts are expressed. In the 1994 hit novel *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk put the following words in his main character's mouth.

> I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd never have. Burn the Amazon rain forests. Pump chlorofluorocarbons straight up to gobble the ozone. Open the dump valves on supertankers and uncap offshore oil wells. I wanted to kill all the fish I couldn't afford to eat, and smother the French beaches I'd never see. I wanted the whole world to hit bottom. I really wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every endangered panda that wouldn't screw to save its species and every whale and dolphin that gave up and ran itself aground. I wanted to burn the Louvre. I'd do the

[11] Scruton, *Beauty*, 147.

[12] Scruton, *Beauty*, 153.

> Elgin Marbles with a sledge-hammer and wipe my ass with the Mona Lisa. This is my world, now.[13]

Here, the main character is not only interested in desecrating beautiful art, but *anything at all* that is beautiful. Some might dismiss it as "only a work of fiction" without any grounding in the real world. Unfortunately, nothing could be farther from the truth. Examples of the desecration of the "real world" *abound*.

There is, for instance, the kind of desecration found in slaughterhouses. It is true that God permits the eating of animals. In spite of that allowance, however, God never gives His human creatures license to treat His animal creatures in whatever way they choose. He commands that animals as well as people participate in the Sabbath rest (see Exod. 20:8–11). God commands the Israelite oxen to be unmuzzled as they tread out the grain, so they too may have something to eat (see Exod. 23:5). Solomon goes so far as to assert that, "Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel" (Prov. 12:10). These are specific commands given to the Israelites, opening their eyes to their *coram naturae* reality and obligation. There is, however, a kind of cruelty that is no stranger to slaughterhouses.

Jonathan Foer reports that one slaughterhouse employee (a former Marine) reported experiencing outbursts of rage after the day's work. It wasn't the "blood and guts" that bothered him. Rather, "it's the inhumane treatment. There's just so much of it."[14] Another slaughterhouse worker shared her experiences to the BBC.

> As I spent day after day in that large, windowless box, my chest felt increasingly heavy and a grey fog descended over me. At night, my mind would taunt me with nightmares, replaying some of the horrors I'd witnessed throughout the day. One skill that you master while working at an abattoir is disassociation. You learn to become numb to death and to suffering. Instead of thinking about cows as entire beings, you separate them into their saleable, edible body parts. It doesn't just make the job easier

[13] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club: A Novel* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 124.

[14] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 232.

> – it's necessary for survival. . . . A few months after leaving, I heard from one of my former colleagues. He told me that a man who'd worked with us, whose job was to flay the carcasses, had killed himself. . . . And at night, when I close my eyes and try to sleep, I still sometimes see hundreds of pairs of eyeballs staring back at me."[15]

There are two particularly noteworthy elements in this passage. Firstly, the workers must atomize the animals. It is a mental trick designed to short circuit the proper functioning of perception. If they were to use their perception properly, a "whole" would emerge from the parts, and with that whole, beauty, and with beauty, obligation. But atomization is not the only defense mechanism.

At one particular facility in North Carolina, a video recording revealed some workers "administering daily beatings, bludgeoning pregnant sows with a wrench, and ramming an iron pole a foot deep into mother pigs' rectums and vaginas."[16] Other horrendous details have been recorded, but this is sufficient for our purposes. Is it too far a stretch to conjecture that these violent and utterly inhuman actions are, in fact, desecration, the destruction of beauty precisely because of that beauty's power of accusation? I do not think that it is. In each of the above cases, we see a hatred of beauty, a delight *in* the destruction of beauty, a deliberate smashing of what became to these characters a mirror, laying bare before them their own ugliness.

Now we turn to the third adversarial response to beauty. This category might strike some as rather surprising, and that for two reasons. Firstly, it is not at all immediately obvious that it is adversarial precisely because it deals with what is generally considered "pretty" and "appealing." That is to say, it in no way hints of the kind of desecration mentioned above. Secondly, it may come as a surprise simply because it is ubiquitous. I am speaking here of kitsch.

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[15]Ashitha Nagesh, "Confessions of a Slaughterhouse Worker." *BBC*, January 6, 2020, accessed January 7, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-50986683.

[16] Foer, *Eating Animals*, 183.

Kitsch is everywhere. It hangs on the walls of hospitals and hotels. I hazard a guess that it sits on the mantles of most homes (I say this only from my personal experience). Entire stores and product lines are dedicated to it. Public television stations broadcast programs teaching you how to create it. And certain productions of kitsch sell for staggering sums at auction.[17] For many, identifying kitsch is remarkably easy. It is an immediately and painfully obvious thing. They know instantly that what confronts them is kitsch. Nevertheless, it is a notoriously difficult category to define clearly.

According to Roger Scruton, kitsch is a close relative of desecration. It offers "sugary stereotypes, permitting us to pay passing tribute to love and sorrow without the trouble of feeling them."[18] As was seen above, beauty threatens egotism. The proper response to beauty kills self-absorption. Such is the case because beauty requires sacrifice, because love requires sacrifice. One must give up on one's own goals and self-centered aspirations when drawn out of oneself by that which is loved. Beauty "demands" this kind of love in so far as humans innately know they *ought* to love it. Kitsch, on the other hand, "is the great lie that we can both avoid [sacrifice] and retain its comforts."[19] That is, kitsch lies to us. It does not present true beauty which will *always* beckon us onward, always function to some degree as a mirror. Kitsch tells us that everything is fine.

The work of Thomas Kinkade provides an excellent example of kitsch. Especially popular are his paintings of cottages. Rich, golden light cascades from the windows and lampposts, regardless of how brilliantly the sun may be shining outdoors. Slender wisps of smoke rise from

[17] Although he was a beloved television personality and unquestionably brought joy to countless viewers, no critic ever considered Bob Ross' work as serious art. Truly, there was no "depth" to his landscapes. Nevertheless, earlier this year (2023), a 1983 painting by Bob Ross sold for nearly 10 million dollars.

[18] Scruton, *Beauty*, 159.

[19] Scruton, *Beauty*, 161.

the chimneys. Vibrant and fecund flowers practically tumble from their beds. If the yard surrounding the cottage happens to be fenced in, the gate is always left open in a way that seems to invite the viewer in. If a stream wends through the scene, potentially cutting the viewer off from the cottage, one need not be anxious. The stream turns out to be shallow, and a series of ample, perfectly spaced rocks form a picturesque bridge leading to the home's cobblestone path. Despite how charming, idyllic, and idealistic a description of his paintings may sound, they utterly fail to present an ideal. There is nothing in the prettiness that inspires, nothing that challenges, nothing that surprises, nothing that in any way calls into question the manner in which I am currently inhabiting (or failing to inhabit) my beautiful place. The paintings seem to say in a rather sticky and saccharine voice, "I am OK, and you are OK." Hence Frank Burch Brown's claim that in its most destructive form, kitsch is akin to cheap grace.[20] It tells us that we *are already* at home by ignoring that we live a tension, the tension of the now and not yet. Kitsch, therefore, is ultimately purely therapeutic.

Yet the above excoriation of kitsch provides only a partial view of the matter. Brown also argues that while a diet consisting primarily of kitsch is unhealthy, it is nevertheless the case that God can (and *has*) used kitsch to accomplish His purposes. As much as Christians with elitists tendencies are loathe to admit it, God can use kitsch. It is, Brown says, "forever immature" and "cannot often carry one very far" toward the "ideals" it claims to represent. Nevertheless, that it can "carry one" at all ought not to be totally dismissed. Therefore, Brown advocates a Christian taste that is both "charitable and discerning," that is, an approach that does not condemn well-intentioned Christians for the kinds of things they consider beautiful.[21] Rather, we acknowledge

[20] Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste*, 146.

[21] Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste*, 25.

that God may speak to others where we do not hear Him. That is the charitable aspect. The discerning aspect continues to commend (but, again, not command), that which attends more deeply to the beautiful, and thus also to the true and the good.[22]

The above three adversarial approaches to beauty (the last being *potentially* adversarial, but also potentially *perniciously* adversarial) share a common goal. They all seek to disarm beauty, but employ different methods of accomplishing that end. The philistine simply tries to deny beauty. The desecrator tries to destroy beauty. The producer of kitsch provides an "idol," a false substitute for beauty which ultimately disappoints, or (at its very worst), deforms. All three, then, reject participation in beauty, kitsch offering participation in a false beauty that ultimately fails to stir a kind of love that generates a kenotic motion. Now that we have seen these adversarial approaches, it is time to turn to various attempts at genuine participation in beauty.

Three Approaches to Participation in Beauty

In order to arrive at this stage in the argument, we have borrowed from Balthasar and Hart, among others, even though they hail from traditions other than Lutheranism. This borrowing has been necessary for purely practical reasons, namely the scant literature produced by Lutherans concerning theological aesthetics. Having said that, over the last several chapters, we have seen broad agreement with our primary interlocutors, especially with Balthasar and several others from the Roman Catholic tradition, such as Viladesau and Pieper.

It is in this chapter, however, that differences in theological tradition and perspective will become more pronounced. Since we have described the beautiful as that which moves us into our beautiful place, we are fundamentally dealing with the question of how broken sinners become

[22] Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste*, 149.

fully human in their *coram mundo* and *coram Deo* realities.[23] Sharp distinctions arise between the Lutheran and non-Lutheran positions in the *coram Deo* category because we are essentially broaching the issue of justification. I will first present the theologies of Balthasar and Hart respectively. I will not offer a critique of either until I present the work of Mark Mattes who provides an excellent Lutheran response. Following Mattes, however, we will revisit Joel Biermann's presentation of three kinds of righteousness in order to highlight the shortcomings of Mark Mattes regarding *coram mundo* righteousness. The summary at the end of this chapter will then offer a broad summary of the argument up to this point.

Prior to engaging each author, however, a word concerning the manner in which I have strategically ordered them is in order. We will begin with Balthasar because, as we have already noted, he constitutes more or less the touchstone of the work produced in theological aesthetics since the 1980's. Furthermore, Hart considers his own project an extrapolation on the foundation already laid by Balthasar. The significance of this claim should not pass us by unnoticed. Weaknesses in Balthasar's approach *begin* to emerge, weaknesses which could lead one to a conclusion at variance with what the Athanasian Creed refers to as "the catholic faith." I am speaking here specifically about the extent to which sin has corrupted human nature and, concomitantly, the possibility of universal salvation. Hart takes the impressions and shadows and "hopes" glimpsed in Balthasar and essentially hangs his entire theological project on them. That is, Hart renders unavoidably perspicuous the dangers latent in Balthasar. I will then conclude with Mattes because his presentation of participation unmasks these aforementioned deficiencies, and provides us with an alternative formulation of human participation.

[23] It should be noted that the phrase "fully human" refers to a relational and not an ontological condition. That is, even when human beings are not fully inhabiting their beautiful place in relation to God and all creation, they are nevertheless ontologically human.

Participation in Beauty According to Balthasar

Balthasar's work on participation is remarkably compelling. As we have already seen, Balthasar is especially concerned with the category of "form." It is not only *through* form, but *in* form that beauty is seen, such that the beauty of being does not lie somehow behind and outside of the material and the observable. Rather, existents (as manifestations of being) unavoidably participate in beauty to one degree or another. Thus, he shows himself to be far removed from any gnostic tendencies. The significance of form for Balthasar becomes perhaps most apparent with reference to participation.

According to Balthasar, participation in beauty is inextricably bound up with *conformation*, because beauty is inextricably bound up with form. That being the case, says Balthasar, this form has definable contours.

> To be a Christian is precisely a form. How could it be otherwise, since being a Christian is a grace, a possibility of existence opened up to us by God's act of justification, by the God-Man's act of redemption? This is not the formless, general possibility of an alleged freedom, but the exact possibility, appointed by God for every individual in his existence as a member of Christ's body, in his task within the body, in his mission, his charism, his Christian service to the Church and to the world. Considered in all its dimensions, what could be more holistic, indissoluble, and at the same time more clearly contoured than this form of being a Christian?[24]

Here Balthasar takes direct aim at that variety of Christianity which envisions the Christian as the one who, first and foremost, holds a set of intellectual propositions to be true. That is, Christianity as a set of truth propositions that may or may not impinge upon her concrete existence. A second target would appear to be that kind of Christianity which gives rise to licentiousness. This is precisely what Bonhoeffer countered in *The Cost of Discipleship* when he wrote that "cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner."[25] It

[24] von Balthasar, GL I: 28.

[25] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York:

is justification "without discipleship."[26] That is, he, along with St. Paul in Romans 6, condemns the idea that the gospel frees the sinner to keep on sinning.

The Christian "form" envisioned by Balthasar is in no way distinct from God's saving work in Christ, however. Nor is it a form available to fallen human beings outside the work of the Holy Spirit.

> But the Christian form is structurally a part of the miracle of the forgiveness of sins, of justification, of holiness, the miracle that transfigures and ennobles the whole sphere of being and which in itself guarantees that a spiritual form will thrive as the greatest of beauties. The image of existence is here illuminated by the archetype of Christ, and set to work by the free might of the Creator Spirit with all the sovereignty of one who need not destroy the natural order to achieve his supernatural goal.

The Holy Spirit aims to move us beyond mere contemplation and into participation. For, as we have mentioned before, it is in participation that contemplation finds its consummation, its *telos*. Therefore, Balthasar writes that the incarnation's "end is the perfect following of Christ, the faith and loyalty which lead to the cross (counter to human will)."[27]

In this previous quote, the precise form Balthasar has in mind begins to take shape. It is not a life one would typically describe with words such as glory or power. Some other form of glory is manifested in the incarnation.

> The arresting thing in Christ is not that he is more powerful than other men . . . but that he is 'meek and humble of heart' . . . and desired to be so 'dispossessed in spirit' . . . that absolute love might shine through his human love and be made fully present in him. Ultimately that loving attitude can only be determined (i.e., conceived and achieved) by absolute love. When Christ thus makes room for God, he is not revealing his sovereignty, but his obedience to God, fulfilling the commission of the 'Father who is greater than I'.[28]

MacMillan, 1979), 3.

[26] Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 9.

[27] von Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 113.

[28] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 81.

In brief the greatness of Christ's life is precisely the greatness of becoming as nothing, as becoming completely at the disposal of the Father's will. As John Sachs helpfully summarizes it, "The human life of Jesus is the form in which and from which the glory of God shines forth as self-surrendering, saving love."[29]

Essentially, participation in beauty for the Christian is the assumption of the form of Christ's life, characterized by *kenosis* and openness to the working of the Father. This kind of life is epitomized by the cross. *That* is the Christian's mission.

> For this reason, however, it is clear that in any age . . . the Christian will realise his mission only if he truly *becomes* this form which has been willed and instituted by Christ. The exterior of this form must express and reflect its interior to the world in a credible manner, and the interior must be confirmed, justified, and made love-worthy in its radiant beauty through the truth of the exterior that manifests it. When it is achieved, the Christian form is the most beautiful thing that may be found in the human realm. The simple Christian knows this as he loves his saints among other reasons because the resplendent image of their life is so love-worthy and engaging.[30]

For Balthasar, Mary epitomizes the proper stance, the proper response the Christian must adopt before God's call. She exhibits disponibility, the receptivity which allows her to place her "I" at the Father's disposal more clearly than any other, save Christ Himself. Nevertheless, it is not Mary herself who does this. Were Balthasar to argue in this vein, he would have fallen into a kind of Pelagianism. No, for Balthasar, Mary's openness to the Father is totally and absolutely grace. "Doubtless this will not be done by Mary herself but by the Spirit, who is also the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit who, in anticipation, fashioned the Mother and her consent after the pattern of the Son's 'Not my will, but thine be done."[31]

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[29] John R. Sachs, "The Holy Spirit and Christian Form," *Gregorianum,* 86, no. 2, 381, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23581691.

[30] Von Balthasar, GL I: 28.

[31] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory,* vol. III, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ,* trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 352. From this point forward, I will cite this work as TD III.

What, then, of Christian shortcomings? Clearly, the vast majority of us do not attain to the kind of disponibility exhibited by Mary. What does our recalcitrance, our lack of love come to? Balthasar explains it this way.

> The deeper God's justifying love penetrates our being as 'sanctification', the more it evokes and strengthens our freedom to love; it is a kind of 'primal procreation' that awakens in us the response of love which may be hesitant and inchoate in us but attains to its full stature through the mediation of the Son's love (and therefore through complete faith in him). For in the Son human and divine love correspond perfectly, and this correspondence, as we have seen, he confers upon the Church in such a way that she can give birth to the Son and his brothers in the world . . . We are incorporated into this 'full measure' . . . and to that extent our deficiencies are overcome; we are made able through sanctifying grace to bring to life through Christian action in faith, what we have seen we ought to be in God's loving sight.[32]

The quote is lengthy, but necessarily so, for it shows that for Balthasar, our loving work, as immature and incomplete, nevertheless is completed by Christ's work. Thus, Balthasar is able to label as "grace" both the initial call to mission and also Christ's love added to complete our own first steps in love.[33]

Here, a brief summary is in order. For Balthasar, participation in beauty is a matter of conformation to the form of Christ. This conformation, however, is not available to fallen human beings. Rather, it is enabled by the work of the Holy Spirit who makes us receptive and disponible. To apply the terms employed by this dissertation, we might say that the Holy Spirit enables us to make a response that is beautiful, to make a response that fills the groove. A perfect response does not happen immediately, however. Rather, human beings "must grow into it."[34] As he grows into it, however, the love of Christ is added to his own inchoate love, thus making him perfect.

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[32] von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 85.

[33] von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 85.

[34] von Balthasar, TD III: 267.

Participation in Beauty According to Hart

As mentioned above, Hart essentially brings to logical completion some of the elements witnessed in Balthasar. At times, his perspective can be difficult to grasp. Therefore, a brief review of his understanding of beauty will be beneficial. The following quote, though not brief, summarizes nicely his conception of the relationship between God's beauty and created beauty, a relationship Hart understands according to the *analogia entis*.

> A God whose very being is love, delights in the glorious radiance of his infinite Image, seen in the boundlessly lovely light of his Spirit, and whose works are then unnecessary but perfectly expressive signs of this delight, fashioned for his pleasure and for the gracious sharing of this joy with creatures for whom he had no need (yet loved even when they were not), is a God of beauty in the fullest imaginable sense. In such a God beauty and the infinite entirely coincide, for the very life of God is one of . . . infinite form; and when such a God creates, the difference between created beauty and the divine beauty it reflects subsists not in the amphiboly of multiplicity and singularity, shape and simplicity, finitude and indeterminacy, but in the analogy between the determinate particularities of the world and that always greater, supereminent determinacy in whose splendor they participate.[35]

As was discussed above, Hart envisions beauty as God's infinity. Rather than swallowing up the particular in some apophatic black hole of the infinite, God's infinity graciously makes space for the existence of all finite particularities. Beauty, it would then seem, is the appearance of *shalom*.

The question to which we now turn is participation. To unpack Hart's position, we must attend to his soteriology, for it is by this means that participation is opened to creatures. For him, the means of salvation is, without question, the Paschal event. "Easter unveils the violence of history, its absolute ungodliness, its want of any transcendent meaning; the meaninglessness and tyranny of death is made absolutely clear in the Father *having* to raise the Son for the sake of his love."[36] Indeed, it is not the cross' beauty, but the beauty of the crucified—the One who does not

[35] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 131.

[36] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 392.

feel compelled to establish His own "identity" *apart* from God, but who knows that in Himself He has no center, no personal ontological ground—*that* One, is what God vindicates by the empty tomb.[37] Notice, here, the similarity between this account of Jesus and that of Balthasar. In both cases, it is the self-emptying of Jesus, His disponibility, that makes Him beautiful. Jesus does not seek to establish Himself as an "existent" outside of (and in competition with) God. That is what constitutes His beauty.

According to Hart, this is what separates the account of Christ from a Greek tragedy. The Greeks attempted to adduce meaning from death, from submission to the necessity of death, that is, they tried to redeem death itself as something intrinsically valuable. The Paschal event does not end in death, but rather progresses on to Easter, and in this way renders sacrifice both meaningless and ineffective in so far as it is considered a necessary mechanism for the stabilizing of a reality constituted by the violent contention of beings.[38]

> Between life and death there is no longer any reconciling gesture, any profitable commerce; the death of the other affords one no illuminating spectacle, but cries out instead for redemption—offers no glimpse into the mystery of fate that would allow one to arrive at serenity or the peace of a wise pathos, but constitutes a permanent derangement of the surface, something rent in the fabric of being. In the light of Easter, the singularity of suffering is no longer tragic . . . but merely horrible, mad, everlastingly unjust; it is the irruption of Thanatos into God's good creation.[39]

The cross *in itself* is ugly, Hart states. But the sacrifice of the cross is God's *kenotic* self-giving which overcomes and outstrips the sacrifice of violence for the purpose of appeasement. In other words, it is the beauty of Jesus' entire life with its constitutive *kenotic* movement that culminates in His self-donation on the cross. This beauty attracts one away from the false narrative of a

[37] Hart *Beauty of the Infinite*, 390.

[38] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 391: "God's infinity embraces death by passing it by as though it is nothing at all and by making it henceforth a place of broken limits." See also p. 346.

[39] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 393.

reality comprised of violence and into a metaphysics of peace, which is to say, beauty. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus means that "the cross . . . is shown to be meaningless in itself."[40]

Not only so, but the resurrection

> requires of faith something even more terrible than submission before the violence of being and acceptance of fate, and forbids faith the consolation of tragic wisdom; it places all hope and all consolation upon the insane expectation that what is lost will be given back, not as a heroic wisdom (death has been robbed of its tragic beauty) but as the gift it always was. The finality of Christ's death on the cross— which, left to itself, could be so soothing to us, in the somber glow of our wisdom and tragedy's pathos—has been unceremoniously undone, and we are suddenly denied the consolations of pity and reverence, resignation and recognition, and are thrown out upon the turbid seas of boundless hope and boundless hunger....[W]e may cling now only to an "impossible" hope rather than to some dark but clarifying vision of necessity. [41]

Hart argues that the Greek tragedy seeks to justify its presupposition of ontological violence, such that the death of Jesus was "necessary," willed by the fates, just as are the deaths of each of us. The resurrection, then, denies death's necessity, because it denies that ontological violence is constitutive of reality. On the contrary, life, generated from God's kenotic love, is constitutive of reality.

All of the preceding is wonderfully compelling and rhetorically beautiful. But where does it all lead concerning participation? For Hart, it leads inevitably and joyfully to universalism. Indeed, he is an avowed apologist for universalism and a ferocious critic of any theory of atonement that smacks however faintly of vicarious atonement. He minces no words, labeling as morally demented those who subscribe to vicarious atonement as *a* legitimate way of speaking about the paschal event. Hart presents a strawman of this soteriology in the following quote, which is lengthy, but necessary to for our purposes. He sees vicarious atonement as a theory

[40] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 391.

[41] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 392.

proposing that

> on the cross of Christ, God poured out his wrath on sin, or that the Son was discharging a debt humanity owed the Father, or that Christ's blood was shed as a price paid by the Son to the Father to secure our release from the burden of that debt. And, supposedly, this was all inevitable not simply on account of sins we have individually committed, but because we have inherited a guilt contracted by the first parents of the race (which, of course, must be purely imputed guilt, since personal guilt is not logically heritable). All of us, we are told, have been born damnable in God's eyes, already condemned to hell, and justly so. And yet God, out of God's love, races to rescue (some of) us from God's wrath, because God would otherwise be technically obliged to visit that wrath upon us, if lovingly, on account of that ancient trespass that bound us helplessly and damnably to sin before we ever existed; at the same time, however, God also lovingly grants us the capacity freely to love, even if he lovingly withholds the conditions that would allow us to recognize him as the proper object of our love . . . (and so on). In the end, somehow, justice is served, love is vindicated, God is good; of that we can be sure. Happily, all of that is degrading nonsense.[42]

For example, the idea of an everlasting hell "should," in Hart's opinion, "be a scandal to any sane conscience."[43]

Hart argues that "the Christian metaphysical tradition . . . asserts that God is not only good, but goodness itself, not only true and beautiful but infinite truth and beauty . . . thus everything that comes from God must be good and true and beautiful."[44] Therefore, it ultimately does not make logical sense to speak of human action and willing as pursuing *anything other than* the good. In one way or another, he concludes, sinners are in fact aiming for *some* good, and thus for the *ground* of that good, namely God. God is, then, the unavoidable end or *telos* of all human willing, such that "even an act of apostasy . . . traced back to its most primordial impulse, is motivated by the desire for God."[45] For that reason,

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[42] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 24–25.

[43] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 168–69.

[44] David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 54–55.

[45] Hart, *That All May Be Saved*, 185.

> you cannot reject God except defectively, by having failed to recognize him as the primordial object of all your deepest longings, the very source of their activity. We cannot choose between him and some other end in an absolute sense; we can choose only between better or worse approaches to his transcendence. As I have said, to reject God is still, however obscurely and uncomprehendingly, to seek God.[46]

Thus, for Hart, sin appears to be an *accident* (to use Aristotelian categories which Hart is not opposed to employing as he finds helpful). To put an even finer point on the matter, sin registers in some real sense as *ignorance*. That is, sinful human beings *are* aiming at the good. They just don't know that if they were to aim at God, all the hopes and dreams they fail to fulfill via lesser "goods" would all be satisfied by the Good in which all other "goods" have their being, namely God.

The above comments have been shot through with the term "good" or "the good." It is helpful here to remember that the transcendentals are convertible. Each represents a particular grammar we employ when speaking of being (and also the Source of being) from a particular aspect. Therefore, what has been said concerning participation in the good may likewise be said concerning participation in the beautiful. That is, human beings *will* pursue the beautiful because it is in their nature to do so. One must conclude that even those humans who aim at desecration cannot but simultaneously aim at beauty in *some* sense.

> The eschatological . . . functions as a promise that the verdict of God is on the side of the particular, the name and face of the one lost, that his justice is not a transcendental reconciliation between chaos and order, violence and rest, but a reconciliation of infinitely many sequences of difference. Which is to say that it is the promise that justice will never forget the other, that the other will always be blessed with an infinite regard and charged with an infinite worth: not because the other belongs to an abyss of the ethical, but because the other belongs to the infinite beauty of the surface; because, as this eschatology insists, the entire weight of the infinite in which

[46] Hart, *That All May Be Saved*, 185.

> *all things share*[47], this infinite and infinitely various music, rests upon each instance, requires every voice.[48]

Participation in beauty is not one possibility among many. Participation is an *inevitability,* just as is participation in the good and the true. The eschaton, for him, will include *all things* in a peaceful relationship between infinity and the finite, and between the multitude of finitudes. In the critique below, we will discover that while Hart gives us truly excellent prose concerning the contingency of creation and the gratuity of beauty, he ultimately fails to account adequately both for the brokenness of the world and for God's subsequent wrath. Mattes' presentation below represents a manner of reckoning with participation that acknowledges both human brokenness and God's wrath, thus paying homage to the entirety of Scripture and remaining faithful to the Lutheran confessions.

Participation in Beauty According to Mattes

Without question, Mattes' work proves exceedingly helpful, and that on at least two fronts. Firstly, as mentioned above, his trenchant criticism of various aspects of the theologies of Hart and Balthasar will prove invaluable below. Secondly, his assessment of Luther's theology of beauty *coram Deo* is both comprehensive and compelling. The weakness of his work is the thinness of his description of beauty *coram mundo*. As with the other authors we will withhold criticism for the next section.

Mattes first examines Luther's view of beauty before offering some considerations for its appropriation toward contemporary thought. To begin with, Luther affirms creaturely beauty. His constant rejection of anything that hints at the denigration of the physical, of anything that tends

[47] Italics added.

[48] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 410–11.

toward Gnosticism, is clearly visible regarding beauty as well. As was mentioned earlier, Luther does not seem to have any qualms about embracing Aquinas' threefold description of it: proportion, brightness, and integrity.[49] Consider, for example, the following description of a prelapsarian Adam.

> Both his inner and his outer sensations were all of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward –all in the most beautiful tranquility of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety. To these inner qualities came also those most beautiful and superb qualities of body and of all the limbs, qualities in which he surpassed all the remaining living creatures. I am fully convinced that before Adam's sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears, whose strength is very great; and he handled them the way we handle puppies. Both the loveliness and the quality of the fruits he used as food were also far superior to what they are now.[50]

One can rightly question whether Adam really needed such remarkable physical capabilities in order fill the groove God carved for him. Would such keen eyes and brute strength be necessary for embodying the *imago Dei*? Such speculative questions are not of primary concern. What *is* rather enlightening, however, is the degree to which Luther seems to have absorbed and substantiated the prevailing views concerning *coram mundo* beauty. His presentation of Adam *coram mundo* does not strike one as radically different from the kind of description we might find of an "ideal man" from a philosopher or theologian working from a Platonic frame of reference. Indeed, Mattes argues that for Luther, "integrity (perfection), proportion, and clarity or light" do apply as standards of beauty within creation.[51]

Where Luther differs *profoundly* with his contemporaries, however, is in the sphere of beauty *coram Deo*. Luther *vehemently* objects to any human presumption to speak of one's

[49] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 111.

[50] Quoted in Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology,* 106.

[51] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 193.

"own" beauty. That is, he will brook no theology that ignores the origin of beauty as a pure *gift*. On the contrary, he asserts that the only source of the sinner's beauty *coram Deo* is Christ, is grace, is the gospel.[52]

Throughout his book, Mattes leans heavily on the *Heidelberg Disputation*. It represents one of the few places in which Luther addresses beauty *per se*. Secondly, the contrast he draws between his own position and that of his opponents could not be clearer. Over and again, Mattes emphasizes that God does not *seek out* what is beautiful in order to love it. That is, there is no innate quality within the sinner that elicits *desire* on God's part. "At their core," Mattes writes, humans both as created and as deformed by sin are nothing, not only in relation to God but also ontologically, at the core of their being, because human existence is wholly sustained by God."[53] Any presumption to an *autonomous* beauty, a beauty *over against* God's gift, actually renders a person ugly.[54]

What, then, constitutes the beautiful *coram Deo*? It is precisely that person who recognizes her ontological contingency, and who, furthermore, agrees with God's condemnation of her own sin. "Such self-accusation takes away anything sinners might attempt to offer God and in fact gives God his due by agreeing with him in his accusing judgment on sinners."[55] To draw on Bonhoeffer's account of the fall which we encountered above, it is fair to say that the ugly person is the one who desires and strives to be *sicut Deus*, like God. That person wishes to establish a goodness, a truth, a beauty *on their own* and *outside* of God. Thus "it is the humble

[52] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 111.

[53] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 82.

[54] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 83.

[55] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 84.

person forgoing all attempts at spiritual pride who can receive God's grace—and beauty."[56] In essence, only the creature who accepts his creatureliness can be beautiful, because only a creature owns his contingency and is thus capable of receiving a gift from the singular ontologically self-sufficient beauty, namely Christ.[57]

What has this to do with participation *coram Deo*? Especially true for Aquinas and his disciples was "assumption of an entelechy, in which a thing has more goodness and beauty when it achieves a higher level of perfection of its form," which would entail gradual progress in beauty concomitant to a gradual conformation to "perfect order, or law."[58] For Luther, beauty is a gift given by God forensically, not a target which must first be reached. Such is the case because of the depth of human brokenness. There is no salvageable part of sinful human beings, no aspect untouched by sin, no latent ember simply waiting for God to ignite it. On the contrary, God must perform His "alien work of breaking down self-righteousness and self-centeredness" as a precondition to His ultimate goal "to remake people anew."[59]

This concept of "remaking" is central to the presentation of the doctrine of the will set forth in the Solid Declaration. It states that

> in spiritual matters, the mind, heart, and will of the unreborn human being can in absolutely no way, on the basis of its own natural powers, understand, believe, accept, consider, will, begin, accomplish, do, effect, or cooperate. Instead it is completely dead to the good—completely corrupted." This means that in this human nature, after the fall and before rebirth, there is not a spark of spiritual power left or present with which human beings can prepare themselves for the grace of God or accept grace as it is offered . . . Nor do they have the ability, on the basis of their own powers, to help, act, effect, or cooperate—completely, halfway, or in the slightest, most insignificant way—in their own conversion . . . Therefore, according to its own

[56] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 84.

[57] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 85.

[58] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 87–88.

[59] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 88.

> perverted character and nature, the natural free will has only the power and ability to do whatever is displeasing and hostile to God.[60]

As the last sentence above indicates, participation in beauty *coram Deo* is no mere matter of inability. That is, it is not as though fallen human creatures still naturally *desire* unity with God, but simply do not have the capacity to act upon that desire. Quite to the contrary, "through original sin they have also been tragically perverted, poisoned through and through, and corrupted," with the result that "by character and by nature they are angry with God, rebellious against him, hostile to him, and far too energetic, vigorous, and active in everything that is displeasing and repugnant to God."[61] Sinful human beings simply have nothing to offer God. For that reason, the Solid Declaration reaffirms that "we are justified on the basis of sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness."[62]

That Luther shares this dismal view of fallen humanity's ability to please God of its own efforts becomes clear in his reinterpretation of medieval bridal mysticism. The Scholastic position held that beauty before God was a matter of progress in *caritas*. One's beauty was "on the way" as one grew in the love of Him. The saints (and especially Mary) were particularly and undeniably beautiful, because their *caritas* had reached levels uncommon among "ordinary" Christians. This mode of thinking Mattes labels an "aesthetics of perfectibility." Luther, however, advocated for what Mattes calls an "aesthetics of freedom"[63], as his reinterpretation of bridal mysticism indicates. The bride *only* becomes beautiful via the joyous exchange, *only* in so far as what belongs to the bride becomes the groom's, and what belongs to the groom becomes

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[60] SD II, 7, in Kolb and Wengert, 544.

[61] SD II, 17, in Kolb and Wengert, 547.

[62] SD III, 9, in Kolb and Wengert, 563.

[63] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 187. See this page for both terms.

the bride's. The bride is a prostitute, poor, unfaithful, indebted, and spiritually ugly. She is like ancient Judah, whom God represented by Gomer the harlot. Yet, in the marriage, the Groom takes all these liabilities into Himself, and gives to the bride what belongs to Him, all His goodness. Thus, there is no beauty, goodness, or truth proper to the bride herself that draws the Groom to her. All the beauty she has is given as a gift, and thus frees her from the hopelessness of trying to secure her own beauty.[64] Thus, "Christians are in no position to claim beauty for themselves; rather they can claim beauty only as it is *imputed* to them by Christ."[65]

This and *this alone* constitutes beauty before God. While Luther maintained the Thomistic categories of *integritas*, *claritas*, and *consonantia* for beauty *coram mundo*, Mattes argues that Luther rejected them regarding beauty *coram Deo*. Quite to the contrary, "there the gospel subverts such standards: Christ who is beauty itself became ugly by identifying with sinners so that those made ugly through sin might become beautiful in God's eyes."[66] Thus, "to be justified by faith is to be made beautiful."[67] What is this faith, however? It is not a mere intellectual comprehension. Rather Christ Himself *is* the form of faith. It is *His* beauty, *His* perfection that gives us form *coram Deo*. This is a far cry indeed from the standard Scholastic formulation, *fides caritate formata* (faith formed by love). Whereas the latter hinges on a kind of entelechy in which *greater* goodness and beauty may be achieved, the former speaks to a beauty which is given *fully* and *instantly*. [68] Furthermore, unlike beauty *coram mundo*, it is not visible to the

[64] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 89. As we will see in the next section, it is not only the imputation that is unique, but rather the fact that the Christian's beauty *coram Deo* is *always* and *only* grounded in imputation, precisely because man remains completely a sinner.

[65] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 94.

[66] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 91.

[67] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 98.

[68] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 100–101.

reason or to the senses.

Ultimately, however, Luther holds that the beauty we receive as justification *coram Deo* will one day become proper to our nature once more. Imputed beauty does not *destroy* humanity's creatureliness, but restores it to its former glory, which, Luther insisted, had not only physical, but spiritual implications. For Adam and Eve, "nature and grace were not external to each other, as they are since the fall, but instead interpenetrated each other."[69] Thus, it was *natural* for Adam to fill the groove God had carved for him. In Adam, the two kinds of righteousness coincided completely. This is the future to which Christians may also look forward.

Mattes insists that the proper distinction between law and gospel does not unavoidably terminate in eschatological amorphism. Indeed, Mattes speaks of the *contours* of the new life in Christ. This new life is nothing short of a form like God's, or, to remain consistent with the rest of the dissertation, a form in the *imago Dei*. But that does not mean that humans will once more be subjected to the law. To the contrary, Mattes says, "Christians receive their identity from Christ, not from the world, not from the law, not from the accuser. But that identity orients and resituates them, makes them to live like Christ."[70]

This being the case, Mattes lists the only kind of progress he will countenance as the following.

> It is not primarily that we get more of God but . . . that God gets more of us. In trusting Christ, we discover more and more on a daily basis just how much we need Christ and his forgiveness and love. Hence, whatever progress or growth in love that is accomplished in this life remains a matter of faith and not empirical observation (as if praying longer each day translated into greater holiness).[71]

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[69] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 109.

[70] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 186.

[71] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 194.

What then is the purpose of the law? It has a time and place, says Mattes, which is to "lead sinners to Christ." But beauty is given only forensically, and "in God's own way and time, sinners' lives are transformed into the image of the crucified."[72]

That does not mean, however, that matters of taste within the creation are purely subjective, it is not purely in the eye of the beholder. That form exists within creation grants us the warrant for "rational inquiry into the nature of beauty."[73] But we should not be limited to mere data collection or the distillation of general laws. Thus, we must be prepared for the reality that not everyone shares the same tastes, or agrees concerning the depth or even the presence of beauty in a particular existent.

Balthasar, Hart, Mattes, and Biermann

As can be seen clearly above, Mattes' presentation of participation in beauty strikes a strong contrast to that of both Balthasar and Hart. In what follows below, I will draw these differences to the fore. One shared deficiency is a failure to appreciate the profundity of human brokenness. In the case of Hart, this manifests in an inability to account for the wrath of God against sin. We will also note a tendency on Balthasar's part to collapse the *Coram Deo* and the *coram mundo*, such that security of salvation becomes a rather tenuous thing. Finally, I will employ Joel Biermann's work to highlight Mattes' defective view of the law. At the end of this chapter, I will posit the contours of beauty in light of Biermann's notion of conforming righteousness. Often, what follows deals specifically with the second transcendental, namely the good. It must be remembered, however, that the transcendentals are essentially *aspects* of being, three different perspectives on the same thing. Hence, the convertibility of the transcendentals.

[72] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 194.

[73] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 203.

Nevertheless, I will strive to draw out the implications of the following deficiencies specifically for beauty.

Deficiencies in Balthasar and Hart

Let us begin this section with the question of human brokenness. Both Hart and Balthasar take for granted that even fallen human beings are (to one degree or another) already "pointed" toward God. Indeed, in terms of metaphysics, nothing else is even a possibility. No matter what human beings do, no matter how intentionally, narrowly, and ferociously they aim at desecration or evil, they cannot help but participate in the beautiful, the true, and the good, at least to some small degree. Even those who have committed the most heinous atrocities in human history can be found to be aiming at *some* kind of good, *some* kind of beauty, no matter how misguided it might be. This is necessarily the case because evil has no substance in itself. Indeed, it cannot, because all that exists does so because God created it. To claim that evil has a substance of its own is to suggest that God is the author of evil. Instead, evil is the *privation* of the beautiful, the true, and the good. If, then, human beings aim at *some* beauty (simply because they cannot logically do otherwise), it makes sense to suggest that they are inevitably "aimed" toward God because God (as the ground of being) is the source of the beautiful (along with the true and the good). All that need happen, then, is a kind of turning, or, as we witnessed with Hart, a reeducation.

Lumen Gentium, one of sixteen documents to emerge from the Second Vatican Council, propounded the following position concerning the disposition of fallen humanity toward God.

> Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for

> salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.

Briefly, the document claims that even those who do not know the Gospel of Christ may nevertheless move toward Him. They may genuinely seek fellowship with Him, and, moved and aided by divine grace, such fellowship is not beyond the realm of possibility.[74]

Scripture too seems to support this position. Take, for example, the well-known example of Paul's presentation at the Areopagus. Drawing from the Greek philosophical tradition and from a local altar designated for the "Unknown God", Paul makes the following claim.

> And [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26–27)

This passage clearly seems to support the claims made by *Lumen Gentium*, not only in suggesting that a natural knowledge of God is possible, but also that human beings (even in their fallen state) desire fellowship with Him in their heart of hearts.

Another passage often cited in favor of a natural knowledge of God is the following assertion from St. Paul in his letter to the Romans.

> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19–20)

This passage was referenced by Thomas Aquinas, for instance, in response to the question of whether or not God can be known by natural reason. Building from Paul's comments, Aquinas argues that,

> The knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just so far as it can be led by sensible things; from these, however, our understanding cannot

[74] Although he was not invited to take part in the proceedings, his thoughts were well represented by others who, like Balthasar, were part of the *resourcement* movement. Thus we may say that he would have endorsed *Lumen Gentium*.

> reach to the divine essence. Sensible creatures are effects of God which are less than typical of the power of their cause, so knowing them does not lead us to understand the whole power of God and thus we do not see his essence. They are nevertheless effects depending from a cause, and so we can at least be led from them to know of God that he exists and that he has whatever must belong to the first cause of all things which is beyond all that is caused.[75]

Thus, the position maintained by Hart and Balthasar seems to be substantiated by such giants of the faith as Aquinas, and, more importantly, by Scripture as well. As compelling as this might seem, however, certain difficulties surface upon closer scrutiny.

Let us begin with the Romans text cited above. Significant in that passage is the fact that God did not hide His existence. God's omnipotence and divinity ought to be plain to anyone who troubles to observe creation openly. Therefore, is a natural theology of God theoretically derivable from the natural world? Perhaps so. The problem lies, however, not in the invisibility of God, but rather in humanity's refusal to acknowledge Him in order that they might pursue their own sinful aims. Exegetical professor Michael Middendorf helpfully summarizes the situation for us. "'The truth' . . . is apparent, Paul asserts . . . [People] actually have to hold the truth down to avoid it." God gives "ample evidence which ought to prevent" humanity's freefall into depravity, yet they plunge headlong down the road of perdition. Yet "in order to do so, people must first suppress 'the truth.'"[76]

Gustav Wingren takes this line of thought even further in his interpretation of the same passage. According to his reading of Rom. 1:18–32, Paul was not engaging in apologetics at all. Rather, "the conclusion of [Paul's] argument . . . is not that God exists, but that man is guilty, and has no defence before God. This guilt would exist, even on the basis of God's works in

[75] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3: *Knowing and Naming God*, q. 12, a. 12, 41.

[76] Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans: 1-8*, ConC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 130.

Creation."[77] That is, Wingren claims that this passage is not primarily an apologetic argument. Rather, it is a declaration of the status of fallen humanity before God and a subsequent call to repentance.

A similar interpretation is appropriate for Paul's speech at the Areopagus. Here two significant points arise. The first is an issue of translation. The ESV renders the Greek word "ψηλαφήσειαν" as "feel". Yet the term "grope" is perhaps more fitting. The same word is used in the Septuagint with reference to Isaac's examination of his son Jacob, and also with reference to blind fumbling more generally (See Isa. 59:10; Deut. 28:29; and Job 5:13). Paul's audience would have been very familiar with the term by means of Homer's *Odyssey*. It was the blinded Cyclops who (unsuccessfully) "felt for" or "groped after" Odysseus.[78] Here again, the point being driven home by Paul is not apologetic in nature. Neither does it appear to be an argument for some deep-seated desire or longing for God in the sinner. The point Paul seems to be driving home is that sinners have *not* found the true God, nor are they capable of finding God precisely because they grope around like the blind.

God's providence certainly was "designed to provoke people to 'seek' Him and know Him", exegete Robert Smith writes. This entails "the very practical business of turning from unrighteousness to trusting the living God," and therefore "relinquishing trust in men and in all that is not God."[79] That, of course, is where the problem lies.

Let us return to Romans to hear Paul's description, not of God's intentions regarding humanity, but rather the state of the fallen human creature. Just a few verses beyond the text we read earlier, Paul makes the following claim concerning those who are born in slavery to sin.

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[77] Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 53.

[78] Robert H. Smith, *Acts*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 263.

[79] Smith, *Acts*, 263.

> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Rom. 1:30–33)

It would be a remarkable feat to read this passage and come away with the idea that Paul is arguing that fallen human beings secretly seek God. And yet that is precisely what Balthasar and Hart seem to suggest. One gets the impression from their writings that human beings do not *really* hate God after all. Sinners love *some* aspect of being, they would argue, and since being owes its existence to God, that must indicate that they love some aspect of God. They are, therefore, already "on the way"! In the above passage, however, Paul seems to be making precisely the opposite claim. Sinners are *not*, by nature, essentially already "on the way," by virtue of their having any desire for communion with God.

In chapter three of Romans, Paul manages to accomplish the seemingly impossible; he adds an even finer point to the claims made in chapter one.

> "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Rom. 3:10b–18)

Human beings are not, says Paul, secretly seeking God, at least not the *true* God. Since human beings hate God, as we saw in the previous quote, they *do not* seek Him. Indeed, they run and hide from Him as did Adam and Eve in the Garden! Therefore, as Mattes rightly notes, "sinful humanity has no natural ability to love God. Quite the opposite."[80] Neither Hart nor Balthasar would be willing to own the claim in so far as the *core* of fallen humanity is concerned.

[80] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 104.

Scripturally, sinful humans *do not* desire God deep down beneath all the layers of sin. Deep down beneath all those layers is still hatred, hatred because even their most noble virtues, when offered to God as a means of self-justification, are regarded as a rebellion, as a means of securing one's own standing before God rather than receiving it as a gift, and therefore a breach of the first commandment.

In the Lutheran Confessions, we find the Scripturally faithful view of the sinner's natural orientation toward God that is absent in Hart and Balthasar. Note, for instance, how the Augsburg Confession puts the matter.

> But before people are enlightened, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn back to God by the Holy Spirit, they cannot in and of themselves, out of their own natural powers, begin, effect, or accomplish anything in spiritual matters for their own conversion or rebirth, any more than a stone or block of wood or piece of clay can . . . [The unregenerate] behave in this case worse than a block of wood, for they are rebellious against God's will and hostile to it, wherever the Holy Spirit does not exercise his powers in them and ignite and effect faith and other God-pleasing virtues and obedience in them.[81]

Sinners not only do not already love God or seek God in some hidden way. They overtly and vehemently hate God and hide from Him. The adherents of *Nouvelle Theologie* run "roughshod over the fact that sinners' primary mode of dealing with God is conflictive and not contemplative."[82] Still, it is certainly the case that evil has no substance in and of itself, but rather is a privation of the good. It is further the case that sin does not compose the *substance* of fallen human nature (as some of the early Lutherans argued).[83] Thus, while it is possible to speak of original sin as an *accident* of human nature, one must do so tentatively and only within certain parameters, that is, within the parameters of the first article.

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[81] SD II, 24, in Kolb and Wengert, 549.

[82] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 179.

[83] SD I, 1, in Kolb and Wengert, 531.

The formulators are adamant that the use of the term in no way minimizes the effects of original sin. Sin is no mere blemish on the surface of human nature. Rather, it "is an indescribable impairment and a corruption of human nature so deep that nothing pure and good remains in it or in any of its internal and external powers." Indeed, fallen human beings are "so deeply corrupted because of this original sin that [they] are truly spiritually dead in God's sight, having died, with all their powers, to the good."[84]. Because of the high probability that "accident" and "substance" with respect to sin will be misinterpreted, the Formula advises that "the churches should best be spared these terms in public preaching."[85] When it is employed among academic circles, it ought to be "explained on the basis of God's Word." Furthermore, it should *only* be used for the purpose of highlighting "the difference between God's handiwork . . . and the devil's handiwork."[86] That is, the term "accident" is in no way a commentary on the *profundity* of sins' impact on the sinner.

This may account, in part, for the fact that God's wrath is seldom mentioned in Balthasar and painstakingly avoided in Hart. Balthasar's downplaying of God's anger at sin can be noted in his book *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved*, where he argued that Scripture presents two distinct pictures of the eschaton. On the one hand, there is the picture of judgment and eternal damnation. On the other, there is the image of final and *total* restoration which excludes exactly *no* one. Nevertheless, while Balthasar *hopes* that all will be saved, he clearly never assumes it, nor takes it for granted.

As we saw above, however, Hart does not *hope* for a final and universal reconciliation. He takes it for granted as a logical *necessity*. Indeed, those who claim that there is an eternal hell

[84] SD I, 60, in Kolb and Wengert, 542.

[85] SD I, 54, in Kolb and Wengert, 540.

[86] SD I, 61, in Kolb and Wengert, 542.

"are aware . . . that they have acquiesced to an irrational and wicked tenet of the creed. They think themselves bound by faith to defend a picture of reality that could not be true, morally, or logically, in any possible world."[87] In brief, Hart refuses to let God be God, and subjugates Him to what he construes to be rational necessities. While we may certainly concur with and appreciate the overwhelming consideration that "[created] *vestigia* are divine locutions in an endless and bewildering array of different inflections" and that "from their beauty one receives an image of, share in, and impulse toward that delight that belongs to God"[88], we finally discover that Hart is overly confident in his *personal* description of the infinity which is God because he downplays God's wrath against sin. God's is not one that will finally absorb all things. The cross demonstrates this fact. Jesus' death is not (as Hart claims) "meaningless" apart from the resurrection. It shows forth God's wrath against sin, wrath which was poured out on the Son precisely because the Son *became sin* for us, which *does,* in fact, make the crucifixion meaningful in itself (see 2 Cor. 5:21). Hart's soteriology cannot account for this.

From one perspective, the cross not only shows the depth of God's hatred for sin and sin's ghastly ugliness, but it also serves as the place where He finally and ultimately devastates and destroys sin in the person of His Son. While it is true that the cross is most certainly not a calculated payment that satisfies a tit-for-tat divine leger of accounts, it *is* true that on Golgotha, Jesus ends God's *wrath* against sin. This wrath, however, is not born of some slight against God's honor. It is not the wrath of an insecure tyrant whose interest in his subjects is limited to the esteem they show him. To the contrary, God's wrath is the obverse of His love.[89] That is,

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[87] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, xviii.

[88] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 309.

[89] Gerhard O. Forde, "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ," in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 94.

God's wrath against sinners is wrath against their rejection of Him as their creator and redeemer. It is wrath against unbelief. Jesus, however, satisfies both the wrath and the love of God. On the one hand, as a human being, He renders to God the trust and the faithfulness God has always desired from His creatures by fully commending Himself into the Father's hands in death (Luke. 23:46). On the other hand, this death of God's *pro nobis* turns the hearts of sinners, as it is *here* that sinners finally see what the will of God is toward them, that God is actually worthy of our trust because He *raised* Jesus from death. Outside of faith in the proclamation of His death and resurrection for us, sinners remain inescapably under the wrath of God, precisely because they refuse to let God be God for them.[90] That wrath is real and it condemns, because it refuses the love extended in Christ. Hart seeks to dismiss this wrath through a grand philosophical system, and not through the proclamation of the end of God's wrath in the paschal event, which turns out to be yet another refusal to let God be the God He declares Himself to be in the Scriptures.[91]

This brings us to the shortcoming unique to Hart, namely that of authority. He writes that if he became convinced that Christianity required a "belief in a hell of eternal torment," he would leave the church. He readily admits that if the existence of eternal damnation were proven to him scripturally, he would refuse to "assent to a picture of reality that [he regards] as morally corrupt, contrary to justice, perverse, inexcusably cruel, deeply irrational, and essentially wicked." Were there indeed such a place, he would argue that Christianity should "be dismissed as self-evidently morally obtuse and logically incoherent." "[For] me," writes Hart, "it is a matter of conscience, which is after all only a name for the natural will's aboriginal and constant orientation toward the Good when that orientation expresses itself in our conscious motives."[92]

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[90] Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 124.

[91] Mattes, *Matin Luther's Theology*, 159.

[92] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 208.

Hart assumes his own conscience is (again) already pointed in the right direction. Therefore, if his conscience tells him that there cannot be an eternal hell, either Scripture itself must be in error, or else the translation is in error.[93]

Scripture is replete with examples of God's wrath against sin, such as the death of Egypt's firstborn, the wholesale slaughter of certain inhabitants of the promised land, the near-instant deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, and the instant death of Uzza. Hart takes refuge from this blazing wrath in at least two ways. Firstly, he seeks asylum in the notion that Scripture is simply employing anthropomorphic terminology or speaking merely symbolically. Secondly, he looks for safe harbor in his metaphysical interpretation of infinity. But there is no lasting comfort to be found in either place. Drawing on Luther, Mattes asserts, "it is clear that outside of or apart from Christ, infinity is ambiguous; it is not clear that it is good or beautiful."[94] Only in Christ does the infinity, which is God, reveal Himself to be *pro nobis*. Only when Christ has dealt with our sin *in its entirety* are we able to accept the reality of God's wrath.

For Hart, then, there really can be no threat of *not* participating in beauty eternally. There really can be no serious admonition to repent, other than arguing that *this* life would be better were it lived beautifully. While it is true that an "ugly" life *may* be less pleasant in this fallen world, there is no lack of Biblical witness to the paradox that the righteous suffer while the wicked often prosper. In Ps. 73, for example, Asaph laments that those who willfully disregard God and their neighbor often live lives of great comfort and consolation. Indeed, it is not until he goes to God's sanctuary that he "discerns their end," which consists of destruction (Ps. 73:17).

[93] It is noteworthy Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved* was written to coincide with his own translation of the New Testament, in which he offers alternative wording to more standard English versions so as to justify his avowal of universalism.

[94] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 158.

Throughout both Old and New Testaments, the threat of damnation was used as one means of persuasion. Paul, for instance, writes that those who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (1 Thess. 1:9). Without this threat of what is to come, those who enjoy a "good life" while utterly flouting the beautiful place *coram Deo* (and *coram mundo*, for that matter), will see no cause to repent. After all, God will simply make them beautiful in the eschaton anyway. That is, they will not be encouraged to grow in their beauty *coram mundo*.

Balthasar's take on participation in beauty is less obviously problematic, but problematic nonetheless. He quite rightly blasts the crude interpretation of forensic justification which would leave the sinner unchanged. "[Forensic] justification is untenable," he writes, and "is only valid in so far as it recognizes that God's love makes us into the person we are for him in the light of Christ."[95] The Formula of Concord makes it clear that this much, at least, is consonant with the Lutheran position, for

> As soon as the Holy Spirit has begun his work of rebirth and renewal in us through the Word and the holy sacraments, it is certain that on the basis of his power we can and should be cooperating with him, though still in great weakness. This occurs not on the basis of our fleshly natural powers but on the basis of the new powers and gifts which the Holy Spirit initiated in us in conversion.[96]

The Lutheran distinction between justification and sanctification is just that, a distinction, not a division. Sanctification follows upon justification *logically*, not *chronologically*. Where there is justifying faith, there sanctification will also be. Where beauty is imputed to the Christian through Christ's death and resurrection, she begins to will for a beautiful life *coram mundo* also.

[95] von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 82.

[96] SD II, 65, in Kolb and Wengert, 556.

Thus, the imputation of beauty and the desire to *live* beautifully are distinguishable but not separable.

Balthasar even very clearly operates with the notion that human participation in beauty is *only* possible as a grace from God.

> It is certainly true that God's revelation implants the answer of faith in the creature addressed in love—in such a way that it really is man who answers with his whole nature, with all his natural ability to love. But he can only do so through grace, i.e., because he was granted the power to make an adequately loving response to the love of God.[97]

Fallen human beings in no way have the ability to respond to God's self-gift of love in Jesus Christ. Only God Himself can give to us as a gift the response He desires from us, namely, the response of love. Balthasar's position seems to correlate well with Fergus Kerr's interpretation of Aquinas which we encountered earlier.

Kerr argues that Aquinas' doctrine of double causality rules out any notion of competition or the "picture of two rival agents on a level playing field." Rather, Aquinas insists that "it is another implication of the doctrine of creation that God wills to communicate his likeness to things not only so that they simply exist but that they might *cause* other things."[98] This applies not only to humanity's work within the creation, but also toward a person's growth toward the likeness of God. Indeed, it is within the principle of double agency that sinful human beings may undergo the "transformation from the state of injustice to the state of justice."[99] For Aquinas, it is truly *by grace* that sinful humans are transformed. Therefore, it is false to suggest that either Balthasar or Aquinas were guilty of the Pelagian heresy. They insisted that grace was absolutely

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[97] von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 65.

[98] Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 143.

[99] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 30, *The Gospel of Grace*, trans. by Cornelius Ernst (New York: Black Friars, 1972), q. 113 a. 1, 165.

necessary for salvation, and it was toward this end that the entire sacramental system was oriented.[100] But that grace is the God-given progress in a *process*. It is always "on the way," as it were. It is always a greater realization of that Balthasarian concept of disponibility, in which the human creature increasingly gives way to the Spirit's work, in which the creature's cry of "*fiat*" crescendos over time and is spoken over an ever-increasing domain of her life. This is nothing other than the incremental beautification of that form of the Christian life which, as already noted in Balthasar, "is the most beautiful thing that may be found in the human realm."[101]

Although we have already encountered the following quote, I repeat it here because of its centrality to Balthasar's perspective on participation.

> The deeper God's justifying love penetrates our being as 'sanctification', the more it evokes and strengthens our freedom to love; it is a kind of 'primal procreation' that awakens in us the response of love which may be hesitant and inchoate in us but attains to its full stature through the mediation of the Son's love (and therefore through complete faith in him).[102]

This faith, however, does not mean for Balthasar what it means for Lutherans. He writes,

> Faith in the full Christian sense can be nothing other than this: to make the whole man a space that responds to the divine content. Faith attunes man to this sound; it confers on man the ability to react precisely to this divine experiment, preparing him to be a violin that receives just this touch of the bow, to serve as material for just this house to be built, to provide the rhyme for just this verse being composed. This was the reaction already envisaged when the Covenant was made on Sinai: "Be holy, because I am holy.[103]

For Balthasar, faith is the readiness to be moved along in the process by grace. It is entirely *indistinguishable* from faithful*ness*, which manifests as love for God. Again, it is a matter of

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[100] Regin Prenter, *Creator Spiritus*, trans. by John Jensen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 39.

[101] von Balthasar, GL I: 28.

[102] von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 84.

[103] von Balthasar, GL I: 220.

"more and more" and therefore entirely a matter of the "not yet." Mark Mattes makes clear why this is problematic.

For Luther, faith clings, not to the hope that God will continue us along a process, but rather to the righteousness of Christ that God imputes to us "*now*." Mattes, then, argues that participation in beauty *coram Deo,* is not a process, but a gift, such that we may assert that we are *already* beautiful before God through Jesus Christ. It cannot but be this way, for just as creation always hangs on God's creative Word, so too does the justification of the sinner hang on God's grace in Christ. Mattes favorably quotes Luther: "God rejoices in making light out of darkness, out of nothing . . . So he helps the forgotten, justifies the sinners, brings the dead to life, saves the condemned."[104] Or, as relates to beauty *coram Deo*, "the Son of God was made ugly just so that he might remake those uglified by sin beautiful to God."[105]

The difference between Mattes and Balthasar is not insignificant. When no distinction is made between faith and faithfulness, when the "more and more" is emphasized to the total exclusion of the "already," there arises the temptation to fixate on one's own actions, on one's own conformity to the groove. This is a dangerous game to play, for in this way we "fix our eyes" on *our conformity* to the beautiful place, and not on the Christ who imputes beauty to us. When the Christian loses sight of the beauty given as a gift, at least two possibilities may result. On the one hand, her guilt may prevent her from receiving and rejoicing in the beauty around her because she knows herself to be unworthy of it.[106] Alternatively, she may finally resort to one of the three adversarial responses to beauty referenced above, namely the indifference toward

[104] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 174–75.

[105] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 89.

[106] See Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 176–77 for a more detailed account of how the gospel opens us to receive the beauty of the world around us.

beauty, or the cheapening or desecration of beauty. Ultimately, then, we may confidently draw the following conclusion. Balthasar and Hart run into serious challenges because they fail to distinguish between beauty *coram Deo* (which is a matter of faith), and beauty *coram mundo* (which is a matter of faithfulness).

Deficiencies in Mattes

As was mentioned in the above section on understanding beauty, we saw that Mattes does indeed maintain that beauty has contours even in this created world, though, he suggests, the traditional transcendental categories fall woefully short of capturing the true fecundity of beauty, even in the world's brokenness. Furthermore, we observed that Mattes claims that there *will* be contours of beauty in the new creation as well. Nevertheless, he makes that claim with a rather startling caveat.

> Hence—in spite of the fact that creation is marred by sin—proportion, clarity, and integrity still apply as criteria by which to discern beauty in creation, although they do not apply to the strange beauty of Christ or the beauty of the new creation that clothes believers in the righteousness of faith.[107]

Mattes nowhere thoroughly defines Aquinas' criteria, at least not to the degree this dissertation has done via Umberto Eco. Neither does he adequately present the symphonic majesty of being toward which Balthasar gestures so articulately. These inadequacies render his verdict on Aquinas' criteria premature.

Mattes does indeed claim that the cross is beautiful, but precisely because it transgresses what is typically considered beautiful. But surely this is not the case. It is possible to see that *even the crucifixion* is beautiful according to the standard criteria for beauty encountered above, provided one contemplates it far as one sees it through the eyes of faith. It is a fitting act, and

[107] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 181.

indeed a *gratuitously* fitting one. When viewed from this perspective, the cross becomes unspeakably beautiful. Such is the case because we see in Jesus the kind of responsive trust God intended for all His human creatures. But the cross is beautiful according to the divine nature also. Indeed, the crucifixion is *exceedingly* beautiful because God, precisely because He is in the form of *not*-God, truly reveals Himself in all of His kenotic, redeeming, restoring glory. Only *here* are even the gentiles persuaded of Jesus' divinity (see Matt. 27:54). Thus, we may say that the cross infinitely *exceeds* our standard expectations of beauty, but not that it transgresses or subverts them.

If the beauty of the human being in the new creation *does*, in fact, have contours but not those sketched by the law, one wonders what constitutes them. Mattes does provide an answer. In the new creation, God's redeemed human creatures will transform fully into what they are already (inchoately) becoming, namely, like Christ, or "nothing less than a 'form of God'."[108] The form of God is known chiefly through the incarnation, which, according to Mattes, reveals that God is "beyond or other than Law, God, then, is sheer love and mercy."[109] When juxtaposed, these two comments suggest that God intends the life of the Christian to conform to something "beyond or other than Law." What then does the Law do? "God gives the law its place and time," says Mattes. "Its place and time is to lead sinners to Christ."[110] Here, the first and third functions of the Law appear to fall away. The job of the law is to accuse. Therefore, Thomas' three-fold criteria of beauty, which function quite well for assessment of beauty within creation, act as a kind of mirror, revealing our guilt and ugliness. For this reason, if they are to be redeemed, the Christian must receive her identity "from Christ, not from the world, not from the

[108] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 185–86.

[109] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 202.

[110] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 202.

law, not from the accuser."[111] And so the law falls away. In this life, while the law does still perform its accusatory function, it no longer serves as the means by which sinners become beautiful before God, nor as the criterion for participating in beauty *coram mundo*. And in the new creation, the law simply vanishes.

As I have argued above, however, the annihilation of the law would be tantamount to the annihilation of the groove, *precisely* the annihilation of the beautiful place! At this stage, we welcome Joel Biermann into the conversation once again, who argues that justification is not, in fact, an end in itself, but rather a means to an end.

Biermann and Conforming Righteousness

Through a thorough investigation of the Lutheran confessions, Biermann demonstrates that the reformers in *no way* viewed the Law as something valuable for the Christian *only* in so far as its second function is concerned. Quite to the contrary, Biermann argues that "the working assumption of the confessions seems to be that the Christian is justified in order that his newly created faith will lead and empower him to keep the law." In even *stronger* terms, Biermann claims that "the believer is justified so that one might fulfill the law."[112] Clearly this line of thought regarding the law is at variance with what we encountered in Mattes, who argues that justification effectively leads to the dissolution of the law, partially in this life, fully in the eschaton. Biermann substantiates this claim with significant evidence. Although a comprehensive review of his work is not possible, a few examples will provide sufficient evidence that his is the correct understanding of the law.

Martin Luther himself provides one of the clearest examples. In justifying his organization

[111] Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 186.

[112] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 76.

of the catechism, he writes that the creed ought to follow the commandments because

> it teaches us to know [God] perfectly. It is given in order to help us to do what the Ten Commandments require of us. For, as we said above, they are set so high that all human ability is far too puny and weak to keep them. Therefore, it is just as necessary to learn this part, as it is the other so that we may know where and how to obtain the power to do this.[113]

Luther does not place the creed immediately following the commandments in order to show us that the commandments ultimately do not apply. Rather, the creed follows *so that we may know how to keep them*. He reiterates the point toward the conclusion of the creed, insisting that through knowing it "we come to love and delight in all the commandments of God because we see here in the Creed how God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments."[114] The creed declares that *coram Deo*, we are indeed (as Mattes rightly notes) beautiful through Christ's salvific work. *Coram mundo*, the law remains in effect precisely because it describes the nature of creation. Justification does not remove us from creation, but re-places us in it. Biermann's lucidity is extremely helpful here.

> As [the reformers] understood the Christian faith, justified people are those who delight in the grace of the gospel and live lives being conformed to God's will as revealed in the Decalogue. While the Spirit prompts good works, the Decalogue gives those works their direction, content and shape. A Christian whose works are shaped by the Decalogue, then, must know the Decalogue.[115]

Justification is freedom from condemnation. Through it, we receive the beauty, the righteousness of Christ as a gift. Nothing more need be or even *can* be added to it. Mattes is quite right to suggest that any attempt to "do more" would actually make one *ugly* before God, because our works (no matter how pious) are tainted with sin. Indeed, offering good works to God as a means of justification creates that deadly, self-willed gap between Creator and creature, the same

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[113] LC II, 2, in Kolb and Wengert, 431, quoted in Biermann, *Case for Character*, 76.

[114] LC II, 69, in Kolb and Wengert, 440, quoted in Bierman, *Case for Character*, 77.

[115] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 78.

separation introduced by Adam and Eve's taking of the fruit, stirred by the desire to be not less, but *more* excellent than God had made them.

Where Mattes falls short is in the *coram mundo* realm. Essentially, he concurs with Carter Lindberg who argued that "The Christian life is not a progress from vice to virtue but a continual starting anew by grace, *simul iustus et peccator*."[116] Again, regarding our righteousness *coram Deo,* Lindberg puts the matter supremely well! What his comment does *not* account for, however, is the Christian's *coram mundo* reality. Perhaps it is the case that when discussed in exceedingly practical terms, the failures of the radical Lutheran position become especially obvious. After all, do we really want to suggest that the alcoholic mother should not be expected to become sober because she is *simul iustus et peccator*? Do we really want to say that the adulterous husband ought not to repent of his extramarital affairs because sanctification is really nothing more than an ever-greater reliance on grace? Obviously not, and, to be fair, Mattes does not want to say that either. In fact, he strikes a remarkably "conservative" stance toward many contemporary social issues.[117]

Although there is much to be commended in Mattes' work on beauty, it would have been a more compelling and comprehensive work had he incorporated Biermann's adaptation of Luther's proposed *third* kind of righteousness. Luther refers to the first category as a "civil" righteousness. At its bare minimum, this is the kind of goodness that prevents society from devolving into a Hobbesian *Bellum omnium contra omnes*, a war of all against all.[118] At its best,

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[116] Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification But Whisper Sanctification," quoted in Biermann, *Case for Character,* 117.

[117] To explore this comment further would lead us too far off course. For evidence supporting the claim, see Mark Mattes, *Law and Gospel in Action: Foundations, Ethics, Church,* ed. by Rick Ritchie (Irvine, CA: 1517, 2018).

[118] Thomas, Hobbes, *De Cive or The Citizen*, ed. by Stephen P. Lamprecht (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), 13

it may in fact produce remarkable acts of mercy and self-sacrifice, as is often seen among non-Christians. Here, Luther's thoughts are well represented in the Apology.

> Because human nature still retains reason and judgment concerning things subject to the senses, it also retains the ability to choose in such matters, as well as the freedom and ability to achieve civil righteousness. For Scripture calls this the righteousness of the flesh, which carnal nature (that is, reason) produces by itself apart from the Holy Spirit.[119]

This kind of righteousness, however, is performed without regard for God *at all*. And for that reason, it is a (partial) fulfilling of the *coram mundo* groove.[120]

The second kind of righteousness Luther calls "original" because it relates to essential or original sin. It is imputed to the sinner through baptism and acquired through faith, a righteousness not established through the law, but given by grace.[121] This is the alien beauty emphasized by Mattes in response to his non-Lutheran interlocutors who envision the beauty of the Christian only in terms of progress (even if progress aided by grace). At this point, however, nothing new has been added to the conversation. We are still left with a righteousness *coram Deo* and a righteousness *coram mundo*.

Biermann then proceeds to include a *third* kind of righteousness, one which relates to actual sin. "The third kind of righteousness, actual righteousness, flows from the faith characteristic of the second righteousness and so is unique to believers, as they alone possess faith."[122] Although his terminology differs somewhat from Luther's, Melanchthon also included the concept of a third kind of righteousness which bears a markedly clear resemblance to

[119] AP XVIII, 4, in Kolb and Wengert, 234.

[120] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 123–24.

[121] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 124.

[122] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 125.

Luther's.[123] Both men maintained a clear distinction between righteousness before God which is granted as a gift by grace through faith and other kinds of righteousness that deal with matters related to living within creation. Relevant to our discussion, however, is the fact that both reformers also delineate between two kinds of *coram mundo* righteousness. "One is achieved by pagans seeking to live uprightly before others, and the other that is manifest in those who are justified by Christ and by faith living according to the dictates of God's revealed law."[124] Essentially, this is nothing other than, for example, the efforts of the newly converted Christian to live into God's will. She knows that she has been granted Christ's righteousness, and now she desires her lived life to correspond to that gift. It is a "conforming righteousness" which corresponds to the third article of the creed, whereby we confess the Spirit's work of "sanctification" within us.[125]

Without question, the first and third kinds of righteousness will overlap, often to a significant degree. Nevertheless, divergences will emerge, sometimes *radical* divergences. The first kind of righteousness is entirely disconnected from the second, alien, imputed righteousness. Thus, it does not (indeed, *cannot*) take into consideration such things as the fear, love, and trust of God. The third kind of righteousness, on the other hand, arises from the second, and therefore *cannot* be separated from the fear, love, and trust of God.

In his famous novel *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck describes our memory of time in a most intriguing way.

> Time interval is a strange and contradictory matter in the mind. It would be reasonable to suppose that a routine time or an eventless time would seem interminable. It should be so, but it is not. It is the dull eventless times that have no duration whatever. A time splashed with interest, wounded with tragedy, crevassed

[123] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 124–25.

[124] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 125.

[125] Biermann, *Case for Character*, 125–26.

> with joy—that's the time that seems long in the memory. And this is right when you think about it. Eventlessness has no posts to drape duration on. From nothing to nothing is no time at all.[126]

This final analogy works quite well regarding the law also. Christians are given a new nature in baptism. We are called to live new lives, lives that are conformed to the life of Christ Himself. The law, then, becomes the "posts" on which we drape that new nature. It provides the concrete description of what that new life ought to look like.

In the above chapter on perception, I argued that Christians, in fact, perceive beauty somewhat differently from their non-Christian peers because they see the world through the lens of a different story. The same argument may be made for divergences between the practical implications of the first and third kinds of righteousness. For the sake of making the point, consider this extreme example.

For a non-Christian parent-to-be, the thought of following through with the birth of a child who stands no chance of survival may seem like pure madness. Why not terminate the pregnancy and avoid all the inevitable trauma of witnessing the death of the child brought into the world through the agony of labor? For a Christian, however, continuing with the pregnancy and birth may provide the chance for the child to be baptized. In no way does it minimize the agony associated with such a horrendous situation. Nevertheless, the Christian is willing to endure the hardship because her life is lived in light of the story of Easter morning and the resurrection of the body and life everlasting promised through it. In this way, it is beautiful, because the human creature is inhabiting her groove, her beautiful place. The perspicuity of this beauty is available only to those whose eyes have been shaped by the particularity of the Christian narrative. It is a beauty as far removed from kitsch as possible, a beauty which does not ignore the brokenness of

[126] John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 54.

the world, but which incorporates the brokenness by sublating it into the beautiful hope to which Christian's cling.

While this work of conforming righteousness does not establish one's standing before God, it is nevertheless pleasing to God, precisely because it accords with the creaturely groove. The mother's decision is grounded in the love of the neighbor (her child) and trusts on the promise of God delivered in baptism. It is precisely this concept of conforming righteousness that would have provided Mattes with a more robust account of beauty. Without it, Christians tend to stray into essentially the same error, but one which plays out in two distinct ways. Balthasar collapses the two kinds of righteousness *downward* onto the horizontal plain, as growth in beauty is indistinguishable from beauty *coram Deo*. Mattes collapses the two kinds of righteousness *upward* onto the vertical plain so that the law which ought to govern our creaturely life in this age is valued only in so far as it condemns, and, in the age to come, not at all.

In order to represent Mattes fairly, however, it is important to recall that he vehemently rejects any idea of a Christian life that is somehow amorphous. We are, he claims, to become like Christ. The form of Christ *is* the goal. On this score, he is in complete agreement with Biermann who affirms Bonhoeffer's claim that "what matters in the Church is not religion but the form of Christ, and its taking form amidst a band of men . . . The only formation is formation by and into the form of Jesus Christ."[127] Ultimately the two ways of thinking are not at odds.

Christ is the one who perfectly fulfilled the law, the groove. He inhabited flawlessly that beautiful place, the nexus of the *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* human reality. Therefore, we may confidently say that *Christ is the beautiful form* who embodies right relationship between God and all creation, a notion shared by both Balthasar and Hart. Contrary to Mattes' thought, the law

[127] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 21.

is nothing other than a description of that place. Jesus ended the *curse* of the law by imputing to Christians His own righteousness. But Jesus did not subvert the law. Were that the case, the Solid Declaration would hardly have urged that "although Christians who believe faithfully have been truly converted to God, and have been justified are indeed freed and liberated from the curse of the law, they should daily practice the law of the Lord." After all, the law "accurately depicts the will of God and what pleases him."[128] Here again we encounter the very simple notion of the law as God's will for His creatures. This way of understanding the law gives us a new way of reading the conclusion to this same article. It states that in the resurrection,

> they will need neither the proclamation of the law nor its threats and punishment, just as they will no longer need the gospel, for both belong to this imperfect life. Instead, just as they will see God face-to-face, so they will perform the will of God by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God spontaneously, without coercion, unhindered, perfectly and completely, with sheer joy, and they will delight in his will eternally.[129]

That is, the *proclamation* of the law will no longer be needed because humanity restored by the gospel will already be busy doing God's will, which, again, is synonymous with the law. *That* is the truly beautiful eschatological place.

Conclusion

Having reached the conclusion of my argument, I would like at this point to indicate various fields upon which this dissertation may shed some light. First, however, a review of the major components of this dissertation's argument is in order. In the first chapter, we reviewed beauty's rather checkered past. Both within the church and outside of it, beauty has been alternately idolized and rejected, praised and denigrated. Some have argued that beauty is mere decoration, vain, hollow, and essentially meaningless. Others have suggested that it is merely the

[128] SD VI, 4, in Kolb and Wengert, 587–88.

[129] SD VI, 24–25, in Kolb and Wengert, 591.

attractive (and therefore disarming) façade of various attempts at the acquisition of power, a justification for the imposition of a particular social hierarchy. Still others have proclaimed that beauty will, in the end, prove to be the salvation of the world. Within the church, beauty all but disappeared as a theological category for quite some time, having given way to a near exclusive emphasis on either truth or goodness. As we noted, however, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of beauty once more, a development which can be attributed almost exclusively to the mammoth output of von Balthasar. One truth we did gain from our brief (though not comprehensive) historical survey is this: beauty is powerful. This is the one point upon which everyone ought to agree, for it could never have generated such antithetical and hyperbolic opinions otherwise.

This dissertation's argument is essentially grounded in a particular anthropology, one which highlights the utter contingency of all creation in general and of human creatures in particular. In this regard, the efforts of *Nouvelle Theologie* were on the right track. Certain forms of Thomism had arisen (largely due to the writings of Thomas de Vio, otherwise known as Cardinal Cajetan) which essentially attributed to creation ontological independence from God. Although it manifested in many iterations, the core thought remained constant—that creation was somehow inherently separate from God. Without rehearsing the entire argument presented above, the following two consequences demonstrate the enormous (and massively deleterious) impact of this development. On the one hand, the transcendence of God was essentially lost, such that He was no longer the One in whom all things "live and move and have [their] being" (Acts 17:28). He became one being among other beings, the top of the ladder, but still on the ladder. Although it took centuries to unfurl, the flower that finally came to full bloom was the gray, colorless, immanentized, disenchanted world of modernity.

Some accused Luther of at least escalating (if not begetting) disenchantment. As we saw with the help of Mark Mattes, however, the blame is mislaid. Luther's world was far from disenchanted. Nature is not separate from God in the least. Quite to the contrary, God can be seen literally everywhere in creation! This is the upshot of what Frank Burch Brown referred to as Luther's "transcendent immanentalism."[130] Luther's argument that all created realities are words of God, His rhetoric, seems to corroborate Brown's interpretation. But these words of God do not consist in the mere conveyance of information about God. They are not the divine equivalent to human verbal truth propositions. To the contrary, God's words are the means through which He cares for all creation. In other words, we may say that all manifestations of being are God's means of providing for His creatures. In this way, we come to see that ours is a thoroughly *pro nobis* God.

Following that discovery, we accepted and adopted as our own the philosophical tradition in which Luther was steeped, in which being (that is, *coram mundo* reality) may be seen from three aspects known as the transcendentals, namely the beautiful, the good, and the true. Ultimately, the transcendentals are not separate qualities. They are, rather, merely three aspects of being, three ways at which to look at and speak about being, and thus are "convertible." Each transcendental implicates the other two, such that when we say that something is true, we are also in some way saying that it is beautiful and good, and so forth.

I have argued that both Aquinas and Gregory of Nyssa are essentially correct in their descriptions of beauty. It is the gratuity of fit, in Gregrory's case, that renders a thing particularly beautiful to us. According to Aquinas, beauty consists of *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas*. Again, without recapitulating the entire argument, we saw that Aquinas and Gregory were

[130] Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 129.

essentially proposing a theory of beauty governed by teleology. That is, beauty is determined by the extent to which a thing fulfills its God-given role and the degree to which such fulfillment is conspicuous. Therefore, a thing is beautiful when it fills the groove God has given to it, the place within creation for which it was designed. When brought into conversation with our above discussion about the *pro nobis* purpose of God's creation, we may say that a thing is beautiful when it embodies its *pro nobis* God-intended purpose.

But what is God's purpose for us? God created us to be His *imago* in the world, to be *larvae Dei*, the masks of God. Human beings are the "words" of God who steward His creation. They were designed to inhabit their own groove which exists at the nexus of their *coram Deo* and *coram mundo* realities. This intersection we have labeled "the beautiful place." This nexus is nothing other than the Law (God's will for His human creatures), a very clear summary of which was presented in the Decalogue. Finally, I argued that it is primarily through the suasiveness of beauty that God ushers human creatures into their own beautiful place. The love we receive and the obligations we are given within our *coram hominibus* and *coram naturae* reality mold and shape us into particular kinds of human beings. The needs of my neighbor and that neighbor's unique perspective of me, far from being tangential, actually are the means through which I find my groove. The relationships into which God has placed me (both with other humans and non-human creation), are His *pro me* words, defining me as His creature, conforming me to my "beautiful place." It is the other's beauty that draws me also to be beautiful! Beauty, then, is the manifestation of the symphonic nature of creation, such that all things harmonize in the biblical vision of shalom.

The question naturally arising from the previous discussion concerns perception. That is, how are we able even to behold that which entices us into our beautiful place? We noted that the

twentieth century all but lost a particular kind of vision, usually called contemplation, which is a way of seeing the world empowered by the imagination. It is the imagination's capacity to see the "whole" that enables us to speak of a "world" at all. For more than a century, the West has focused rather on atomization (the dismantling of "wholes") for the purpose of manipulation. Rather than granting greater perspicuity, however, we saw that such atomization actually leads to a loss of vision, and (occasionally) a radical deviation from reality.

Imagination arises in the brain's right hemisphere capacity to perceive "wholes," to form a Gestalt from what the left hemisphere considers isolated and atomistic things. This capacity of the human mind proves essential not only to the arts, but also to the sciences and mathematics. Essentially, it is the imagination that enables us to perceive being as fundamentally symphonic. This view of the world hangs on comprehension, rather than apprehension. Comprehension requires self-forgetfulness and agapic love, defined by a greater interest in the other than in the self. When the symphonic whole presents itself in the three-fold aspect of the transcendentals, an eros emerges. This eros goes beyond the agapic in that the eros longs not only for the thriving of the other, but also for a participation in the other, the desire to find one's own part in the symphonic whole—one's groove, one's beautiful place.

How, then, do we account for cultural differences or differences in taste? I have argued that we should not be surprised to find a "catholicity" of perception, such that certain natural and human artifacts are appreciated almost universally for their beauty. On the other hand, because each person's beautiful place is unique, I also argued that a person's particular culture both reveals and conceals various aspects of beauty. For this reason, we may commend (but not command) those things in which we find beauty to others whose *coram hominibus* reality reveals and conceals aspects of being not visible to us. Christians are enculturated in the church. Our

perception has been particularized by God's narrative of creation, redemption, and restoration, which enables us to view even the crucifixion of Christ as beautiful, the fulness of the beauty being manifested in the resurrection.

The perception of beauty stirs in us a desire to participate in it. It is precisely in this question of participation that we parted ways most obviously from our primary interlocutors. I have argued that beauty *coram Deo* is received wholly as a gift through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Through faith in Him, we are counted righteous, beautiful before God, such that His beauty is granted to us. We are the passive (and by nature ugly) bride that receives all the beauty Christ brings to the relationship. We can add nothing to it, and indeed any attempt to make ourselves "more beautiful" before God would, in fact, render us ugly, for it would constitute nothing less than a drive toward *autopoiesis*, no matter how well-intentioned.

Coram mundo, on the other hand, Christians most certainly are active. The Holy Spirit does indeed begin in us that inchoate new creature who strives to live as the creature God designed him to be. He strives to inhabit the beautiful place carved out for him by God. In the resurrection, when God has brought to completion that which He has begun in him, the Christian will occupy the groove perfectly, because the ugly sinful nature will have been finally and forever put to death. That is, he will be living within the law. Until that time, the law, which is nothing other than God's will for His creatures, provides him with concrete directions as to the contours of his beautiful place. The particularity of his context (the specific time, culture, and relationships in which God has placed him) give even greater clarity to that place. This particularity grants different perspectives on being, and thus different nuances concerning beauty. Far from reducing beauty to amorphous relativism, it rather shows the plenitude of God's beauty refracted through all being's manifestation. And so, we return to the beginning, the thesis presented at the start of

this dissertation. Beauty is that which moves us into the nexus of our *coram mundo* and *coram Deo* reality, our beautiful place.

This way of looking at beauty could be brought to bear on practically every sphere of human existence, because beauty is merely one way of looking at all reality. Everything from the arts to Christian worship, ethics to witness and apologetics, is implicated. As an occasional instructor of liturgical practice, it is my particular hope that the framework above could prove useful in navigating some rather delicate and controversial issues. It will not, of course, "solve" the worship wars. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this dissertation could be a useful piece of the puzzle in fostering greater charity among those affected by such disputes. These investigations, however, lie outside the scope of this dissertation. It is my hope to attend to at least a few such aspects in subsequent writings. Otherwise, I leave it to others with greater expertise, talent, and intelligence to draw out the implications of what has been argued here.

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