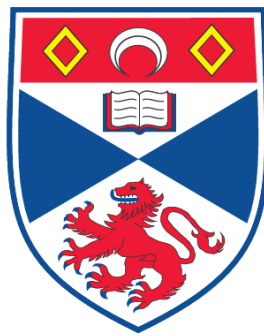


**THE POETICS OF EVIL : A STUDY OF THE AESTHETIC THEME
IN THEODICY**

Philip Tallon

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews**



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UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

THE POETICS OF EVIL

A STUDY OF THE AESTHETIC THEME IN THEODICY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF DIVINITY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ST MARY'S COLLEGE

BY

PHILIP TALLON

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ABSTRACT

This work proposes to look at the role of aesthetics within Christian theodicy. Though the recent theodicy literature has often displayed suspicion toward the inclusion of aesthetic criteria, I will argue that theological aesthetics can enrich the theodicy discourse and therefore should be used as a resource in responding to the problem of evil. In Part I, I will attempt to lay a foundation for an aesthetically informed theodicy by examining some of the philosophical frameworks that lie behind Christian theodicy, and seeking to illuminate a framework that allows theological aesthetics to helpfully contribute to the task of theodicy. By offering a preliminary account of theological aesthetics, I will aim to further lay a foundation for how the two areas of theology can interact. In Part II, I will look at three distinct aesthetic motifs or “themes” as they are developed by three different theodacists (one ancient and two contemporary): Augustine, Wendy Farley, and Marilyn McCord Adams. Each of the themes developed by these theodacists offers a different example of how aesthetics can reorient and enrich our perspective on theodicy. Though each, in and of itself, is incomplete, I will argue that they complement and critique one another in helpful ways, and therefore that all of them are useful for Christian theodicy.



THE POETICS OF EVIL:

A STUDY OF THE AESTHETIC THEME IN THEODICY

PHILIP TALLON

DECLARATIONS

I, Philip Tallon, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 107,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2003 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in Theology in May 2005; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2003 and 2009.

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INSCRIPTION:

Beauty is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it.

ARTHUR C. DANTO
The Abuse of Beauty

DEDICATION:

To my wife, an argument for theological aesthetics in the unity of her beauty and goodness. And to my mother, who has endured many agonies with patience and love.

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INTRODUCTION:

1. Musical Prelude: *Mozart and the Shattenseite*

What role does the artist play in the world of theology? What can art show us about God's goodness in the midst of evil? In the small print of *Church Dogmatics III, 3* Karl Barth takes time to focus on a *part* of this larger query, in reflecting on the role of Mozart in theology. His question:

Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology, especially in the doctrine of creation and also in eschatology, although he was not a father of the Church, does not seem to have been a particularly active Christian, and was a Roman Catholic, apparently leading what might appear to us a rather frivolous existence when not occupied with his work?¹

Barth's answer to his own question is this,

In the face of the problem of theodicy [the Lisbon earthquake], Mozart had the peace of God which far transcends all the critical or speculative reason that praises and reproves... He heard, and causes those who have ears to hear, even to-day, what we shall not see until the end of time - the whole context of providence.²

Barth's appraisal of Mozart's music here is striking. Through Mozart, Barth proclaims, those with ears to hear can get an auditory sense of God's providential master plan. If this were so, if we could hear in Mozart God's providence, even in the midst of evil, then this would indeed give Mozart a very prominent place within theology!

Given this, it is worth looking a little more closely at Barth and Mozart, to hear what both are 'saying'. First we must ask: What is the problem of theodicy Mozart faced, and what peace does Mozart pass on to us as we face it as well?

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, vol III, 3, The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 297-8.

² *Ibid.*, 298.

The virtual destruction of Lisbon in 1755 was no mere natural cataclysm, but a catastrophe of—as they say—biblical proportions. Lisbon first shook with the earthquake, then flooded with a tsunami, then burned in a raging fire. That so many died in church, celebrating All Saint’s Day mass, further added to the confusion about the significance of the event. The Lisbon earthquake was the great disaster to which minds as diverse as Rousseau, Kant, and Voltaire turned their attention. As Susan Neiman writes, “The eighteenth century used the word Lisbon much as we use the word Auschwitz today.”³

Naturally, philosophers found different meanings in the event. Rousseau, characteristically emphasizing the goodness of uncorrupted nature, suggested, in a letter to Voltaire, that nature herself is not to blame for the catastrophe but rather the close proximity in which the citizens were living.⁴ Kant, uncharacteristically still in the thrall of rationalism, attempted a justification of earthquakes fitting with Leibniz’s optimism.⁵ Standing apart from both thinkers, Voltaire rejected any attempt to see the good in Lisbon’s destruction. Writing poetically, he penned these words,

Leibniz can’t tell me from what secret cause
In a world governed by the wisest laws
Lasting disorders, woes that never end
With our vain pleasures, real sufferings blend.⁶

³ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

⁴ Hence, Rousseau: “Without departing from your subject of Lisbon, admit, for example, that nature did not construct twenty thousand houses of six to seven stories there, and that if the inhabitants of this great city had been more equally spread out and more lightly lodged, the damage would have been much less and perhaps of no account.” (Roger D. Masters, and Christopher Kelly, eds. *The Collected Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, vol. 3* [Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2004], 110).

⁵ Martin Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press US, 2000), 74–76.

⁶ Ben Ray Redman, ed. *The Portable Voltaire* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1949), 567.

These thinkers all tried to make sense of this catastrophe, each within their philosophical frameworks. ‘Lisbon’ challenged God’s goodness by calling into question the good order of creation. Each resolved the problem by fitting the destruction of Lisbon into what they believed about the world, though with far different conclusions. It was into this philosophical world - a world dominated by ‘Lisbon’ - that Mozart was born in 1756. As Barth notes, it was a time when God was “under attack and well-meaning folk were hard put to it to defend him.”⁷ But, Barth indicates that in the face of such disaster, and surrounded by a host of minds agonized to understand Lisbon’s place within God’s good creation, Mozart had “the peace of God which far transcends all the critical or speculative reason that praises and reproves”.⁸ These are strong words indeed, and it is worth looking more closely at why Barth believes this is so.

In an effort to make the connection between Lisbon, Mozart’s music and Barth’s theology, it is first important to note the context in which Barth deals with Mozart. In his *Doctrine of Creation*, in the section “God and Nothingness” Barth distinguishes between “nothingness” (*das Nichtige*) and the negative or “shadow” side of creation (*Schattenseite*). He writes, “this negative side is not to be identified with nothingness” but rather, “this negative side also belongs to God’s good and perfect creation.”⁹

The shadowy side is often identified as “finitude”, or traditionally, “metaphysical evil.” Having been created out of nothing, Barth notes, the Creature is “not ‘nothing’ but ‘something,’ yet ‘something’ on the very frontier of nothingness, secure, and yet in jeopardy.”¹⁰ With his own terminology, his Yes’s and No’s, Barth seems to stand in the tradition of

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol III, 3, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 297-8.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 299.

¹⁰ Ibid.

thinkers such as Augustine who have seen finitude as part of God's good creation. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his analysis of Barth's view of evil, agrees with Barth's approval of finitude (and its attendant shadow):

It's part of our design plan, part of being a properly-functioning human being, that we should dislike pain, suffering, loss, failure, infirmity - that we should experience them negatively... It's well-nigh inevitable that experiences which are in fact negatively valorized would come our way. About all this, there is, as such, nothing bad. These negative experiences are not, as such evils. To creatures of our sort, living in a world of this present sort, experiencing these sorts of things, and experiencing them negatively, God said Yes.¹¹

For Barth, Mozart's music exemplifies this very goodness of this creation which yet has a negative side: "he heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow also belongs, but to which the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat".¹² Barth hears in Mozart a sadness, yet not a sadness which turns into despair. For Barth, the darkness included in the shadowside includes death and thus even the destruction of Lisbon may be included in the scope of God's providence: as he writes, "Life does not fear death but knows it well. *Et lux perpetua lucet* (sic!) *eis* - even the dead of Lisbon."¹³ Thus, Mozart's music here may then serve as an auditory example of a large, metaphysical premise: *that creation, with all its fragility and shortcomings may still be harmonious and beautiful*. As Jeremy Begbie notes, "Mozart's music is presented in this context as articulating the praise of creation in all its aspects, it sings the praise of the cosmos in its 'total goodness', including its shadowside."¹⁴

Key for Barth's appreciation of Mozart is that Mozart accepts God's creation as is proper to a creature. Accepting the limits of creatureliness

¹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Barth on Evil" *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (October 1996): 585-608.

¹² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol III, 3, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 298.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 95.

and materiality, Mozart “offered himself as the agent by which little bits of horn, metal and catgut could serve as the voices of creation”.¹⁵ These diminutive descriptors for Mozart’s orchestral tools highlight the finitude and physicality of musical instruments. In place of ethereal descriptors for Mozart’s music, Barth begins by drawing attention to the corporeality of these revered instruments.

In his address entitled “Mozart’s Freedom”, Barth invests Mozart’s creative process with theological significance. Where the modern artist often seeks to rise above moral, societal, or material restrictions, Mozart’s freedom is described, rather, as a form of “*sovereign submission*” to “Frau Musica.”¹⁶

Mozart practices moderation, makes music from “a mysterious center, and so knows the limits to the right and the left, above and below.”¹⁷ Barth’s notion of “*sovereign submission*” is echoed in Mozart’s own words, when he wrote that, “passions, violent or not, may never be expressed to the point of revulsion... i.e. music must always remain music.”¹⁸ This center from which Mozart makes music, is, however, not “a matter of balance, neutrality, and finally, indifference.”¹⁹ Rather, Barth notes,

What occurs in Mozart is a rather glorious upsetting of the balance, a turning in which the light rises and the shadows fall, though without disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yea rings louder than the ever-present Nay.²⁰

Tellingly for Barth, a theologian who emphasizes the necessity of obedience in human freedom, Mozart’s musical freedom arises out of his submission as a creature to the forms of creation. That Mozart’s music, “always

¹⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol III, 3, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 298.

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1956), 51.

¹⁷ Ibid, 53.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 55.

achieved this consoling turn”, that without forcing himself upon his work the light of the music still managed to break forth from the shadow— suggests a fundamentally “triumphant” quality of music itself, and creation itself.²¹ “Mozart’s music always sounds unburdened, effortless, light,” Barth writes, “This is why it unburdens, releases, and liberates us”.²² This seems to be, for Barth, *Mozart’s special quality*.

George Steiner, in *Real Presences*, comments that “All serious art, music and literature is a *critical* act... Be it realistic, fantastic, Utopian or satiric, the construct of the artist is a counter-statement to the world.”²³ But Barth here does not so much see Mozart as making a conscious counter-statement, as much as a statement about the world as it is. Perhaps it is “critical” in some sense, but Barth is keen to insist that it is not an *artificially imposed* critique.

That Mozart suggests musically, through horn, metal and catgut, that there can be a “shadow that is not darkness, deficiency that is not defeat, sadness [that] cannot become despair” and so on, embodies a truth about the presence of badness (often referred to, in German as *das Übel*) within the good, and an ultimate “consoling turn” in God’s creation. But it embodies this truth *truthfully*, so I take Barth to suggest, not because Mozart imposed his will on the materials and aesthetic forms of music, but because Mozart served music submissively, hence freely, and in the process communicated intrinsic truths about the good structure of creation.

Thus, Barth is ultimately pointing to *music* itself as a medium which may enable us to hear God’s providence in the midst of evil. Mozart is therefore a kind of “natural theologian” (as Barth himself once called him) who

²¹ Ibid, 55-6.

²² Ibid, 47.

²³ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 11.

speaks, through bits of horn, tin and catgut, theological truths. David Bentley Hart makes a similar point regarding Bach. “Bach is the greatest of Christian theologians,” Hart writes, “the most inspired witness to the *ordo amoris* in the fabric of being”.²⁴ Using Bach’s Goldberg Variations as a prime example, Hart focuses on Bach’s continual ability to find amazing beauty within even the simplest of chord progressions. As such, this is analogy for the infinite differentiation within the divine work, which yet remains peaceful and beautiful. As Hart writes, “It is in Bach’s music, as nowhere else, that the potential boundlessness of thematic development become manifest.”²⁵ Whether or not Mozart or Bach is the greater theologian I will leave for others to debate. Perhaps what is significant, though, about both Barth’s and Hart’s claims for this study is that they *both* find deep connections between creation’s beauty, human artistry, and theological truths. For Hart, like Barth, the ultimate focus is not on the composer himself, but on the truths within music which he tunefully demonstrates. For Hart, Bach *makes audible* the beauty of the infinite and the infinity of beauty. For Barth, Mozart’s music *makes audible* the place of the shadowside within God’s good creation, as we hear a “Yes” which rings louder than, but does not eliminate, the ever-present “No”.

Yet, as compelling as Barth’s discussion of Mozart is, most readers will likely be left with only a vague suggestion of how Mozart allows us to *hear* the goodness of creation despite the presence of chaos, sadness, death and destruction. In discussing Mozart, Barth often seems to assume that we understand the gravity and lightness of the music, and can make these connections on our own. Thus the musical amateur must turn to the

²⁴ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2003), 282.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 283.

compositions Barth explicitly mentions in hopes of an auditory glimpse of the scope of God's providence.

Barth writes of Mozart's 1788 Symphony in G-Minor (what we call 'No. 40'), that in this work we get a sense of both the light and dark sides of creation coexisting as a part of God's creation. Barth writes, "he heard the negative only in and with the positive. Yet in their inequality he heard them both together".²⁶ Indeed, in No. 40, we can hear a soft sadness which tempers joy, it affects its quality but does not over ride it. Likewise in The Magic Flute, Barth hears a continual breaking forth of the light from the shadow.²⁷ Light always triumphs over darkness. The two are not equals.

Reviewing the works Barth references in his writings on Mozart (Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, the Clarinet Concerto of 1791 (k. 622), The Magic Flute, and the Requiem), it is possible to hear this "twofold yet harmonious praise of God" of which Barth speaks, in that the music contains somber and joyful notes which hold together. There is a restrained quality to the music's exuberance, and also a continual turning toward joy which is certainly not frivolous, because it is consonant, musically, with a present melancholy. But it is difficult to hear in any of these works (even the Requiem) the deep sadness of the events at Lisbon. The destruction of Lisbon was a truly terrifying and horrific event, which Mozart's music does not, to my ears, capture in its fullness. Thinking of Lisbon, one is reminded, rather, of Krzysztof Penderecki's ear-blistering lament "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima"—in which the terror of the annihilation of a city is more fully felt through string instruments which 'scream' in agony. That Mozart's music gives us a deeper understanding, as Barth indicates, of the goodness of creation cannot be denied, but it does

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol III, 3, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 298.

²⁷ Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 55.

not, from my perspective, allow us to hear the “whole context of providence.”

Yet, the significance of Barth’s theologizing about Mozart is not perhaps ultimately hampered by an initial inability to hear the truths of which Barth speaks. If in Mozart we might fail to ‘hear’ the whole context of providence (as I confess I fail to do), we can certainly understand what Barth is trying to affirm: creation’s beauty can suggest a deeper confidence and trust in God’s providence than we might have without it; artists can show us something of God’s goodness to his creation which we might otherwise overlook. That Barth finds connections between the problem of metaphysical evil and music, as well as between the work of the theologian and the work of the artist, even if these connections are slightly more modest than Barth suggests, remains inspiring for our task. At the very least, the affirmation of this great theologian must stand as an initial encouragement to explore the power of artistry and beauty to testify to God’s goodness in the midst of evil. There is an energizing confidence with which Barth affirms the power of music to resolve the problem of theodicy. If many of us do not have ‘ears to hear’ all of what Barth claims Mozart’s music can provide, this does not mean that we should abandon paying close attention to the arts, but instead, we should explore other areas of aesthetics which may give us similar ‘glimpses’ into God’s care for us in the midst of evil.

2. Aesthetics and the Task of Theodicy

Expanding our scope, then, beyond Barth, Mozart, the *shadowside* of creation, and music in general, we will seek out other points of contact between theodicy and aesthetics. What else can aesthetic works, values and categories show us about the scope of God’s providence? How can artistic

works illuminate the problem of evil question, and deepen the theodicy discussion?

2.1. *Theodicy*

To begin to explore these questions, first let us turn to the question “What do we mean by theodicy?” *Etymologically* speaking, I take theodicy to mean an attempt to make sense of God’s justice despite the existence of evil.

Leibniz coined the term (*theos* ‘god’ + *dike* ‘justice’) to indicate roughly this.

Practically speaking, I see the task of theodicy as helping to resolve the *prima facie* tension between the idea of God and occurrent evil, with the goal of resolving the tension in God’s favor. This *prima facie* tension can take a number of forms, be it logical, evidential, or existential.²⁸ While the focus here will be on the intellectual side of the issue (the logical and evidential side), there are no clear borders between these areas, as experience, emotion,

²⁸ And regardless of what some theodacists or their critics have said, there is no clean line between the academic and pastoral practice of theodicy. An air-headed but compassionate pastor will be unable to provide any intellectual comfort, and may likely give facile answers to hard questions. As Thomas Oden writes, “The parishioner has a right to expect that the pastor has thought deeply about the coalescence of God’s power, love, and human suffering” [Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 223]. On the flip side, a cold and cloistered academic, even with patience and study, if he cannot *empathize* with those who suffer, will produce stillborn and useless theories.

and critical reflection inform one another.²⁹ Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, wrote of a desire to “assert th' Eternal Providence / And justify the wayes of God to men”. Justifying the ways of God to man has often been taken to be the goal of theodicy, but in practice few theodicies have so grand a vision. More likely, a theodicy will arise in response to some specific question or attack on God’s goodness, power or purposes. The goal of the theodacist is usually *responsive*, rather than *assertive*, and thus the field of theodicy is not so much defined by reflection on either providence or evil as

²⁹ A word here about *prima facie* in this context. I intend here to convey the idea, first, that we must take this contradiction seriously, as, in the philosophical usage, “correct until proven otherwise”. When the specter of evil arises and raises the very natural question of why God would allow it to occur, the theodacist must do *something* to respond, either by dismissing, or answering the question. But there is another sense in which the theologian believes that this *prima facie* tension is based upon “first impressions” and, drawing on its Latin origins, superficial. This does not imply the apparent logical mismatch is superficial in the pejorative sense, but rather to emphasize the point that since the Christian (I assume) believes both in the occurrence of evil and the reality of God’s perfect goodness, power and so forth, any contradiction between the two must be a contradiction arising from our limited perspective.

Resolving this contradiction may involve any number of factors. Though we may need to think carefully and critically, we must also often expand the scope of our perception in order to see how apparent contradictions are actually compatible. Perhaps the best example I could give for an analogous sort of problem might be a lateral thinking puzzle, where a paradox seems to exist, but only because of faulty (if natural) preconceptions. Example:

Responding to an anonymous tip, the police raid a house to arrest a murder suspect. They don't know what he looks like but they know his name is John and that he is inside the house. Inside, the police find a carpenter, a bus driver, a mechanic and a fireman playing poker. Without hesitation or communication of any kind, they immediately arrest the fireman. How do they know they've got their man?

The puzzle presents a 'prima facie' conundrum, but only because our natural assumption is that poker-players with these given professions are all *men*. If only one is a man the police can easily identify the murderer. In more serious and complicated ways, the problem of evil may present to us challenges which require 'lateral thinking'. Innovative shifts in perception must often aid critical reflection. Perhaps an even more relevant example is as follows:

You are driving down the road in your two-seater car on a wild, stormy night, when you pass by a bus stop and you see three people waiting in the rain for the bus:

- An old lady who looks as if she is about to die.
- An old friend who once saved your life.
- The perfect partner you have been dreaming about.

Knowing that there can only be one passenger in your car, whom would you choose?

This solution requires mild cleverness and moral astuteness. To sort out one’s obligations and desires for a variety of people requires a bit of critical thinking. To properly value true love over retaining temporary safety and comfort is a small, if significant, moral insight. The problem is crafted to create for us an apparent dichotomy which must be overcome through a small act of selflessness. Once we have broken through with an 'aha' solution, however, the answer seems obvious. Before this breakthrough is made, however, the solution (you give the car to your old friend to drive the old woman to the hospital, and stand in the rain with your perfect partner) can seem unfathomable.

Though this analogy is surrounded by pitfalls, it helps to clarify how we can be befuddled by a problem and yet be confident that a solution exists, even if we cannot yet see it.

much as driven by a perennially arising conflict within theology, which takes a multitude of forms.

My definition of the task of theodicy as “helping to resolve the *prima facie* tension between the idea of God and occurrent evil” is therefore intentionally broad, as it includes both full blown theodicies like Richard Swinburne’s or John Hick’s, as well as more modest “defenses” like Alvin Plantinga’s “logically possible” free-will defense, and even unhelpful attempts to resolve the tension by denying any apparent contradiction - say, by denying that evil events actually occur.³⁰ The term theodicy, then, is not designed to be exclusionary. There are *good* theodicies and *bad* theodicies, or, at least, ones that are more successful than others.

The test of a Christian theodicy, however, goes beyond its ability to resolve the tension between the idea of God and the fact of evil. Christian theodicy must also fit with our other affirmations about God and creation. A dualistic theodicy succeeds in resolving the tension (by saying that this world embodies the never-ending conflict between Good and Evil) at the expense of the Christian doctrine of creation and our affirmation of God’s sovereignty.

2.2. *Aesthetics*

The second question is: “What do we mean by aesthetics?” This question is even more difficult to answer than the question of the meaning of theodicy. The word ‘aesthetics’ denotes *perception* (coined by Alexander Baumgarten from the Greek *aisthetikos* or ‘perceptibles’), and connotes anything from

³⁰ Notably, this definition still retains the kernel of what is most repellent in theodicy to many contemporary theologians. So much as any theodicy tries to “reconcile” intellectually or otherwise, God and evil, there will remain the unshakable sense that we are attempting to justify evil itself. The caveat which I hold out to such criticisms is that theodicy, at its most basic level, seeks to alleviate the contradiction between the ‘idea’ of God, and the occurrence of evil, but does not necessarily imply that God is not in conflict with evil in many meaningful ways. Not all conflicts imply contradictions.

philosophical reflection on beauty, to *the study of art* (and attending theories about it), to the wider range of reflection on *human creativity*, *taste*, *imagination* and *sense experience*. Monroe Beardsley, in attempting to write a brief history of the subject calls for “a certain measure of generosity in conceiving [aesthetics] scope” and notes that “it is probably not necessary to be extremely scrupulous in marking the boundaries of the subject.”³¹ For the purposes of this study, I will generally be focusing on philosophical reflection on beauty (which has traditionally taken pride of place in aesthetics) and the range of surrounding aesthetic values such as ugliness, intensity, and complexity, as well as a number of theories about artistic genres and styles, and the way that artistic works (e.g. plays and paintings) and genres (e.g. comedy, tragedy, horror) can affect the way we see the world.

2.3. *Aesthetic Theodicy*

Aesthetic theodicy, then, seeks to relate the task of theodicy to aesthetic works, criteria, or values. Following Richard Viladesau’s definition of aesthetic theology, *aesthetic theodicy* “(to varying degrees) depends on the aesthetic realm for its language, content, method, and theory”. Despite Hans Urs von Balthasar’s reservations about “aesthetic theology” as the degraded form of “theological aesthetics”, I mean to use and adapt the former term to imply, not a theology slavishly dedicated to an “inner-world theory of beauty” (Balthasar’s worry), but the application of theologically-informed aesthetics to the task of theodicy.³²

The varying aesthetic theodicies I will examine are multiform (as probably is anything with ‘aesthetic’ attached to it). And though aesthetic theodicy may

³¹ Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics From Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1966), 13.

³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 37-8.

certainly consist in, as Viladesau distinguishes, “theopoiesis” (aesthetically-excellent discourse as in Anselm or Julian of Norwich) as well as “theopoetics” (discourse about aesthetics), it is this latter mode that I intend to examine and enter into.³³ The writers whom I will examine are involved more in *thinking after*, rather than creating, aesthetic value. A study of the way that aesthetic works (novels, paintings, music) may function *as* theodicy is, as far as I can tell, still warranted.

My study will begin by attempting to deflect objections and suspicions of aesthetic theodicy, while seeking to carve out a place for such reflections in the theodicy conversation. I will continue by examining three attempts to do aesthetic theodicy (theodicy informed by aesthetics), in an effort to show that there is more to God’s providence than simply the moral dimension.

My thesis is this: that aesthetic considerations play a valuable role in the task of theodicy, and, hence, theodicists should seek to highlight aesthetics as part of their goal to attempt to resolve the *prima facie* tension between the idea of God and the fact of evil. In my thesis I will argue this by first laying the philosophical and aesthetic foundations for such an attempt, and second by looking at three aesthetic themes within theodicy which I think would be helpful for Christian theodicy to incorporate. But this is not to say that all elements of an aesthetic theodicy are wholly positive. By opening the door to beauty, we must also admit ugliness. By straining to hear the harmony of creation, we must also attend to the discordant clashes which seem to echo throughout the world. Aesthetics deepens and enriches theodicy as a discourse by giving us more to hear, both of God’s goodness *and* of human suffering. However, as I will suggest, though aesthetic

³³ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.

considerations disrupt the discourse at their first arrival, they also leave deeper and more substantial resources behind for us to utilize.

3. A Word on the Thesis

At the outset, two caveats must be made. First, in structuring my thesis in the first part a methodological investigation, and in the second part a comparative inquiry, I have invariably done injustice to the excellent work of Marilyn McCord Adams, whose theodicy *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, investigates skillfully and brilliantly the relationship between aesthetics and theodicy. Injustice is done, I believe, because though I devote a chapter to Adams' aesthetic theme (and to a lesser extent, theodicy) at the end of the thesis, her book is foundational for this thesis. Adams paves the way, by attempting to invest in the discussion and the aesthetic dimension, harvesting many valuable benefits and noting some major challenges. Though most of Adams' reflections occupy only a single chapter of her work, she nevertheless introduces many suggestive and helpful concepts. In an effort to catalogue as many aspects of Adams's theodicy as I can, I have been forced (because of the structure of this thesis) to handle separately some of the issue she raises, so as to properly note her various contributions to the discussion.

Second, the recent thesis by Hohyun Sohn, "Evil and Beauty: Theological Aesthetics and Theodicy in Augustine, Whitehead, and Hegel" must go underdiscussed in these pages.³⁴ Sohn's thesis mirrors my own in several respects, in that it owes to Adams significant debts in insights and criteria, and that he attempts to chart the use of theological aesthetics in theodicy, and provide the first full-length academic treatment of the subject. The surprise and initial chagrin with which I discovered Sohn's work has largely

³⁴ Hohyun Sohn "Beauty and Evil: Theological Aesthetics and Theodicy in Augustine, Whitehead and Hegel", Ph.D. diss. December 2004, Vanderbilt University.

been ameliorated, however, by the significant differences between our theses. “Evil and Beauty” is comparative in its task, seeking to juxtapose, not only the aesthetic details of Augustinian, Whiteheadian, and Hegelian theodicies, but much more so the larger project of those theodicies themselves, and the varying theologies which they represent.³⁵ As such, Sohn’s study is rather open to the differences in theological viewpoint, a trait which my thesis, for worse or better, does not share. Navigating classical theism, process theology and Hegelian idealism (all rich with aesthetic motifs), Sohn opens his study to the differing interpretations of omnipotence, personal immortality, and divine passibility. Though his focus is often on the aesthetic dimension of these theodicies, the conversation between these theologians and the import for his thesis is primarily theological, rather than aesthetic. By contrasting Augustine, Whitehead, and Hegel, for instance, Sohn concludes that Augustine’s emphasis on divine impassibility and personal immortality is unhelpful for theodicy, and thus embraces process and Hegelian notions of divine development and person immortality only within God’s being.

By contrast, my intention is to look at organizing aesthetic motifs within varying theodicies, and to seek to discover if these motifs (or “themes”) are compatible with a classical Christian theism (e.g. a more Augustinian conception of the Divine perfections) and the contemporary task of Christian theodicy. That Sohn’s study, and the work of Whitehead and Hegel could inform my study even in this sense is beyond doubt, and I think that many of the insights therein are significant, but I have neither the desire nor the space to discuss seriously the metaphysical claims of Hegel or the process theologians. The main overlap shared by Sohn’s thesis and my own

³⁵ As Sohn writes, “even though classical theism has functioned as the major theoretical framework of the Christian tradition,” he believes that “there are some irresolvable problems within this classical model” (Ibid., 38) and therefore he moves outside of classical theism in formulating his theodicy.

is in the area of Augustine (whose aesthetic theodicy has also been discussed by others, often negatively), and it is here alone that I will reference his thesis, albeit briefly. Otherwise, our projects share only in the more general task of charting an area of theological discourse which has been over neglected, and so I must acknowledge my gratitude to him as a fellow traveler and scholar.

My intention in choosing what may seem to be an asymmetrical triad of motifs (harmony, tragedy, horror) has been to find three well-developed aesthetic themes which seem to be 'live options' within the literature.

Harmony, tragedy and horror, are helpful to compare and contrast, for, though it may seem that harmony is oddly-matched with tragedy and horror because the former is more of an aesthetic canon or value, where the latter two are more like poetic genres, as aesthetic themes they represent the three most prominent aesthetic themes within the theodicy discussion.

Augustine's aesthetic of harmony is still alive and well (I dwell on one recent advocate, C. S. Lewis); Tragedy has been often invoked and used in the 19th- and 20th-century; and Horror is, perhaps more than ever, a category for reflection (especially by atheistic philosophers). To complete the poetic triad, comedy would seem to be a better fit than harmony, but perhaps understandably, comedy has rarely been invoked as a major motif in theodicy. In attempting to take evil seriously, theodacists rarely try to be funny. That these three do fit together, however, is more than a simple observation of the literature. The underlying principle (though I do not reflect overmuch on this in the thesis itself) is a simplistic diagram relating beauty and justice (the latter, the traditional concern of theodicy; the former, the perennial if oft-ignored concern of theological aesthetics). Though this diagram is in need of some defense and much nuance, I believe that it nevertheless helpfully elucidates some of the underlying structures.

Harmony	Beauty	Justice
Tragedy	Beauty	~Justice
Horror	~Beauty	~Justice

Specifically, each of the examined theodicies seek to find fitting aesthetic categories for their reflections on evil. Though they differ in many respects regarding their conclusions on evil, there is a consonant methodology in their aesthetic reflections. There is also a historical movement between the categories, as the dominant Medieval Christian aesthetic theme of Cosmic Harmony (which affirms both ultimate beauty and ultimate justice) is gradually critiqued by a new theme of Tragedy (which denies justice, but also finds some fleeting beauty or poetic nobility in the midst of suffering). Finally, the latest aesthetic theme to develop, Horror, presents the darkest and most nihilistic vision of evil, critiquing both Harmony and Tragedy by denying even the vestiges of justice or beauty to certain kinds of evil. Because of these connections, the dialogue between these theodacists is illuminating for a more developed aesthetic theodicy.

PART I: THE FOUNDATIONS OF AESTHETIC THEODICY

John Hick on the Aesthetic Theme

At the outset of this thesis, it is helpful to first look at criticisms of the kind of project I want to undertake. Since aesthetic considerations in theodicy have recently met with a fair amount of opposition, it is easy to lay hands on critical opinions. However, not all such critiques, fortunately or unfortunately, are fully developed. One major exception, however, that appears in one of the best works of theodicy over the last fifty years, gives an extended treatment to the aesthetic theme, which, through close examination, will help to clarify the idea and the discussion of its usefulness.

John Hick's book, *Evil and the God of Love*, is, to quote Rowan Williams, a "near-classic" survey of the history of Christian theodicy, and diachronically traces two different 'types' of theodicy, the Augustinian and Irenaean.³⁶

Anyone remotely familiar with Hick's work will know which type he favors in constructing his 'soul-making' theodicy. The Irenaean type is, for Hick, more clearly in the right, and on many points the opposing Augustinian type is clearly in the wrong, specifically the way that Augustine utilizes what Hick calls the "aesthetic theme". The running dichotomy in Hick's book necessitates that, before looking at Hick's critique of Augustine, it is first helpful to understand Hick's own interpretation of Irenaean theodicy.

1. No Paradise Lost.

³⁶ Rowan Williams, "Insubstantial Evil" in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honor of Gerald Bonner*, eds. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), 105.

Central to Hick's theodicy is the distinct Irenaean emphasis on the process of maturation and perfection God intends for humans.³⁷ Among other places, we see this in Irenaeus' notion of an Edenic immature fall from grace. Irenaeus, writing *Against Heresies*, assumes that while God can do anything, His human creation was "infantile, and untrained in the perfect discipline, [and so] could not have received [moral] perfection owing to his weakness, just as a babe cannot receive stronger nourishment than milk."³⁸

Hick highlights the contrast between Augustine and Irenaeus here:

Instead of [following Augustine] the doctrine that man was created finitely perfect and then incomprehensibly destroyed his own perfection and plunged into sin and misery, Irenaeus suggests that man was created as an imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his Maker.³⁹

Here Hick ties the Irenaean doctrine of the fall to the purpose of human life, which is to be perfected gradually into the likeness of Christ. Besides taking time, this gradual perfection also requires, according to Hick, "a world with rough edges, a place in which man can live only by the sweat of his brow, and which continually presents him with challenges, uncertainties, and dangers".⁴⁰ In short, growing from infantile immaturity into the likeness of Christ is not an easy process. It will hurt. It is *these* features of the world which, according to Hick, "paradoxically underlie the emergence of virtually the whole range of the more valuable human characteristics."⁴¹

³⁷ Hick's movement away from traditional Christian theology is well documented in his works, and makes any uniform statement about his beliefs difficult to maintain without careful documentation. However, the shape of Hick's theodicy has remained roughly the same, from *Evil and the God of Love* (1968), through his essay in *Encountering Evil* (1981, 2001), on to "Response to Mesle" (2004). The reader will note some changes across his career, for instance, Hick's discussion of reincarnation in his more recent work. But while his position toward God has changed, Hick still finds the "soul-making theodicy" to be "mythically true" in that it evokes a proper disposition toward ultimate reality; so it is still therefore, as Hick says, "a valid guide for life" (*Encountering Evil*, ed. Stephen T. Davis [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 66).

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, trans. F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock (London: SPCK, 1916), 79.

³⁹ John Hick. *Evil and the God of Love*, Revised ed. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978), 220.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 362.

⁴¹ Ibid., 362-3.

Hick's Irenaean theodicy therefore immediately embraces some measure of suffering as simply part of the warp and woof of God's plan for us. Hick therefore finds little reason, unlike many Augustinian theodacists, to locate the source of human suffering in sinful decision making.

The advantage of the Irenaean trajectory from immaturity, through suffering, to perfection is, for Hick, tied to his methodological requirements for theodicy. Elsewhere, he writes:

The two main demands upon a theodicy hypothesis are that it be (1) internally coherent, and (2) consistent with the data both of the religious tradition on which it is based, and of the world, in respect both of the latter's general character as revealed by scientific enquiry and of the specific facts of moral and natural evil.⁴²

Though a historical fall from Edenic grace and subsequently worldwide punishment may fit with the Biblical witness, Hick finds the notion problematic on three fronts: scientific, moral, and logical.⁴³ Since scientific findings generally show the world to have been in much the same state of difficulty and danger before the existence of humans and hence before any human fall from grace, it seems unlikely that the Genesis account can be taken as literal. Morally, Hick finds fault with the notion of inherited guilt for Adam's sin, describing it as "unjust".⁴⁴ And logically, Hick takes issue with the possibility of a finite creature being both perfect and also capable of sinning. In order for humans (or angels) to be able to sin, Hick writes, "There must have been some moral flaw in the creature or in his situation to set up the tension of temptation".⁴⁵

On the whole, Hick labels the Pauline and Augustinian "cosmic drama" of historical fall and historical redemption as "mythological". This statement,

⁴² John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy" in *Encountering Evil*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 38.

⁴³ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 285.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 286.

however, is not entirely pejorative, as Hick finds some good in the mythic power of the “great cosmic drama”, specifically its clarity in communicating the central role of Christ in the universal story.⁴⁶ But the illuminating power of the Augustinian myth pales next to the more scientifically coherent, logically consistent, and morally excellent soul-making theodicy.

Certainly, Hick’s theodicy does have its strong points. Specifically, a soul-making theodicy of Hick’s variety is situated to counter the *a priori* argument that this world is not of the sort that we would expect God to design.

David Hume famously compares the world to a house where the “windows, doors, fires, passages, stairs, and the whole economy of the house were the source of noise, confusion, fatigue, darkness, and the extremes of heat and cold”.⁴⁷ In other words, Hume questions the world’s effectiveness of design for the sorts of purposes a good God would have. Hick, however, challenges the notion that this world is poorly designed, and therefore unlikely the work of a benevolent designer. Of the world, Hick writes, “its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making.”⁴⁸ He continues:

Such critics as Hume are confusing what heaven ought to be, as an environment for perfected finite beings, with what this world ought to be, as an environment for beings who are in the process of becoming perfected. For if our general conception of God’s purpose is correct the world is not intended to be a paradise, but rather the scene of a history in which human personality may be formed towards the pattern of Christ.⁴⁹

Without intending to sound pejorative, it is difficult to overestimate the ‘anthropocentric’ nature of Hick’s theodicy. Siding (on this one point) with

⁴⁶ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 283-4. Hick does not, here, deny the historical passion and resurrection of Christ

⁴⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 68.

⁴⁸ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 295.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 293-4.

Hugh of St Victor, who believed that “Adam and Eve, for the sake of whom all other things were made” are the center of creation, Hick is intent on tying everything into the purpose of soul-making, even, for instance, animal pain. Hick writes, “If, then, the animal kingdom plays its part in this indirect way in the forming of man as a child of God in this ‘eighth day of creation’, the process must be justified by its success. The problem of animal pain is thus subordinate to that of human sin and suffering”.⁵⁰

It is beyond my task to attack or defend Hick here, though I do find much of his work compelling and helpful to the task of theodicy. For now it is enough to note the emphasis and tenor of his theodicy, which, contrary to free-fall theodicies such as Augustine’s, dispenses with the ‘Paradise Lost’ scenario, placing his main focus on a ‘Paradise Future’ for which this world’s sufferings exist to prepare us⁵¹ and further centers our understanding of the wider world around the purpose of soul-making.⁵²

2. Augustinian Theodicy and the Aesthetic Theme.

Having set the context for Hick’s theodicy, we can now approach the critique of the “aesthetic theme” laid out in *Evil and the God of Love*. As mentioned above, Hick’s book is dominated by a comparison between these two trends in theodicy, and as Hick’s critique of the Augustinian type is quite lengthy, I will merely try and highlight those elements of the Augustinian theodicy which are relevant to the aesthetic theme.

The Augustinian “aesthetic theme”, for Hick, is definable as an “affirmation of faith that, seen in its totality from the ultimate standpoint of the Creator, the universe is wholly good; for even the evil within it is made to contribute

⁵⁰ Ibid., 352.

⁵¹ For instance, Hick: “The good that outshines all ill is not a paradise long since lost but a kingdom which is yet to come in its full glory and permanence” (*Evil and the God of Love*, 297).

⁵² Notably, Hick writes, “Nature has a permanent significance; for God has set man in a creaturely environment, and the final fulfillment of our nature in relation to God will accordingly take the form of an embodied life within ‘a new heaven and a new earth’” (*Evil and the God of Love*, 296).

to the complex perfection of the whole.”⁵³ In other words, in the big picture, all good *and* evil is integrated in the perfect work of art. One example of this is Augustine’s discussion of *antitheta*, or the rhetorical use of opposites, in discussing the world’s aesthetic value. Referring to the rhetorical contrapositives of St Paul, Augustine writes, “*Thus as these contraries opposed do give the saying an excellent grace, so is the world’s beauty composed of contraries, not in figure but in nature.*”⁵⁴ Sin and righteousness, pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness all fit into a larger, lovely totality.

This affirmation of beauty in totality can be traced through Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas and on to Leibniz. Boethius writes of God,

You draw out all things, and being yourself most fair, A fair world in your mind *you* bear, and forming it In the same likeness, bid it being perfect to complete itself In perfect parts. *You* bind its elements with law, so that the cold Come together with flames, the dry with liquids... *You*, binding soul together in its threefold nature’s midst, Soul that moves all things, then divide it into harmonious (*consona*) parts.”⁵⁵

Jacques Maritain describes Aquinas’ theology in this way, “St. Thomas considers reality from a particular point of view, from the point of view of the order of nature, of the universe as a work of art made by God”.⁵⁶

Commenting on Leibniz, Hick writes, “[T]he principle which accommodates these evils into the best possible world is the aesthetic principle that a good whole may contain parts that would in isolation be bad”.⁵⁷ For an example, he cites Leibniz’s comparison of the contrast of evil with how “shadows enhance colors; even a dissonance in the right place gives relief to harmony”.⁵⁸ The Augustinian aesthetic theme, as echoed here in other

⁵³ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 88.

⁵⁴ CD, 11.18. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Boethius *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. S. J. Tester, in *Boethius* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973), 271-3.

⁵⁶ Quoted in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 103.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 158.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 158-9. cf. G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1993), 130.

thinkers, connotes a sort of *perspective*, a stepping back to appraise the canvas of creation from an aesthetic vantage to appraise its totality.

Within Augustinian theodicy, three alliterative ideas particularly embody this view: *privation*, *punishment*, and *plenitude*. The concept that evil is merely a privation of the good, that misused free will is justly punished, and that the universe is arranged according to a scale of being from lowest to highest (all concepts I will cover in my chapter on Augustine), for Hick, are all “embraced” by the aesthetic theme, in that each seeks to secure the harmony of the whole against possible disruption.

Through his discussion of *punishment* and *plenitude*, Hick mounts his critique on the Augustinian aesthetic theme:

The Augustinian theodicy, especially in Thomist thought and in the Protestantism of the eighteenth-century ‘optimists’ (as distinct from that of the Reformers and of twentieth-century neo-Reformation theologians), sees God’s relation to His creation in predominantly non-personal terms. God’s goodness is His overflowing plenitude of being bestowing existence upon a dependent realm; man has accordingly been created as part of a hierarchy of forms of existence which would be incomplete without him; evil is traceable to the necessary finitude and contingency of a dependent world which however exhibits an aesthetic perfection when seen from the divine standpoint; and the existence of moral evil is harmonized within this perfect whole by the balancing effect of just punishment. These are all ideas to which the category of the personal is peripheral.⁵⁹

Hick renders the same verdict on *privation* when he writes, “The notion of evil as non-being is essentially an impersonal conception.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 262-3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 200.

In chapter 3, we will discuss this more fully, but for now it is enough to note why Hick reacts against the aesthetic theme.⁶¹ It is not that he *simply* takes issue with Augustine's version. As a point of fact, Hick notes a similarity between the Augustinian and Irenaean conception of the aesthetic perfection of the universe. Both thinkers offer similar aesthetic reflections on the universe. Though Hick rightly describes how the Augustinian conception is continually balanced (displaying moment-to-moment justice and harmony), while the Irenaean conception is eschatological in focus, looking to a future resolution. Redrawing the Augustinian aesthetic sketch of creation, Hick describes an eschatologically focused alternative to the Augustinian atemporal aesthetic:

Some music includes unfulfilled beginnings and even an element of clash and disharmony at one stage of the musical development in order to make possible a later triumphant resolution in which the dissonant notes are worked into a complex harmony that would not be possible without them. On this analogy the aesthetic perfection of the universe is no longer that of its state at any one moment.⁶²

Yet, Hick warns, "even this improved version of the aesthetic theme, making use of the added dimension of time...is still open to a fundamental objection which, since it operates against other aspects of the Augustinian tradition of theodicy as well, will be presented in a separate section."⁶³ The "fundamental objection" Hick intends to bring in the following section is this: the Augustinian picture of the universe is fundamentally flawed because it draws our attention away from the personal dimension of Christian theology. Hick then concludes his formal critique of the

⁶¹ Hick's repetition of this critique makes it clear what he thinks of the aesthetic theme. Elsewhere in the book:

The whole aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic understanding of the perfection of the universe is sub-personal in character. The universe, including the finite personal life within it, is seen as a complex picture or symphony or organism whose value resides in its totality, and whose perfection is compatible with much suffering and sin in some of the constituent units. (Ibid., 201)

⁶² Ibid., 198-9.

⁶³ Ibid., 199.

Augustinian type (though he continues critiquing it throughout the book), perhaps ironically, with excellent rhetorical employment of *antitheta*. “[I]f God is personal,” Hick writes, “we must see man as standing in a quite different relationship to Him from that in which the material universe stands to its Creator”. A number of propositions follow: “construing evil [not] as metaphysical non-being” but rather as “a failure of personal relationship”; seeing “human life [not] as a link in the great chain of being” but rather as central to God’s intention for fellowship; “upholding [not] the perfection of the universe as an aesthetic whole” but rather as “suited to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for it”.⁶⁴ Hick’s explicit critique of the previously described Augustinian aesthetic theme, then, amounts to a systematic rejection of the impersonal nature of all these theological conceptions.

Thus, it is not so much the nature of the aesthetic picture which is presented, so much as the presentation of creation *as a picture*, which is a problem. “[T]he medium is the message”, Marshall McLuhan famously stated; for Hick, the medium of the aesthetic theme cuts against the message of God’s personal intentions for his creation.⁶⁵ So, ironically, given this argument, even an Irenaean “eschatological” aesthetic theme will not properly do for a *truly* Irenaean theodicy. As focused on the importance of persons, Hick’s ‘Irenaean’ theodicy seeks to relate the wider world to God’s purposes for humans, rather than relating humans to the wider fabric of creation, which then reflects its creator in its totality. The importance of Hick’s objection to both an Augustinian and an Irenaean aesthetic theme must again be re-emphasized. Hick is explicit that *any* kind of emphasis on global aesthetic analogies depersonalizes our perception of the universe, and hence distorts our vision for God’s purposes and the nature of sin, no

⁶⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁶⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1964), 11.

matter how effective the theodicy behind the picture. His argument must ultimately end in the conclusion that theodicy cannot be complemented, let alone supplemented, by aesthetic categories. If even his favored theodicy cannot be rendered as art, then all such attempts must be ultimately ruled out.

3. Meta-Theodicy and the Aesthetic Theme.

Hick's analysis of the "aesthetic theme" is a helpful starting point, as it brings into focus several issues. First, Hick begins to clarify what we may call the *aesthetic theme* in theodicy. Regarding the Augustinian tradition, as cited before, Hick uses this to mean that "seen in its totality from the ultimate standpoint of the Creator, the universe is wholly good; for even the evil within it is made to contribute to the complex perfection of the whole."⁶⁶ Tyron Inbody, likewise commenting on Augustine's theodicy, echoes Hick's definition of the aesthetic theme as an attempt to see creation in its totality, including evil, as an "aesthetic cosmic harmony."⁶⁷

For Augustine, Aquinas, and others in this strain of the Medieval tradition, the undefeated perfection of the universe was seen through the lens of the aesthetic. Even when considering hell, John Scotus Eriugena writes,

Thus, what in part seems discordant, in the whole is found to be not only not discordant, but an addition to its beauty... not only does [hell] show forth the severity of the most just of all judges and the irrevocability of his judgments but it also adds to the glory and embellishes the beauty of the blessed state of the angels and the Saints.⁶⁸

This is the Medieval mind at work, seeking to unite all aspects of heaven, hell and the cosmos under a single, beautiful aesthetic.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁷ Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 42.

⁶⁸ John Scotus Eriugen, *Periphyseon*, quoted in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, Gesa Elsabeth Theissen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 73.

But the Augustinian tradition does not represent the only manifestation of the aesthetic theme. Though Hick describes only Augustine's aesthetic theme, I will put forward that we may take the aesthetic theme to more generally indicate *a certain way of seeing elements of the theology, and more specifically, theodicy, through the lens of aesthetic values, categories, or works*. The aesthetic theme, then, is not necessarily inclusive of all aesthetic elements (such as, say, the beatific vision) which can be included in a straightforwardly moral theodicy, but rather is defined by an attempt to *see from the perspective of the aesthetic* (if only for a moment) *in order to glimpse something perhaps not visible from other vantage points*.

Second, Hick's sustained argument against the aesthetic theme shows us that our larger methodology in doing theodicy will affect what kinds of values and categories we will allow to play a role. As mentioned above, Hick seeks internal coherence as well as agreement with the findings of science and the religious data.⁶⁹ To be sure, it is difficult to quarrel with a theodicy that seeks coherence and rationality. But reading Hick carefully may lead us to question the methods of Hick's theodicy. In his conclusion to his lengthy discussion of the Augustinian type of theodicy, Hick boldly states that "man alone among God's creatures is, as far as we know, capable of personal relationship with Him."⁷⁰ This shores up, in Hick's mind, the likelihood that God created "the great frame of nature, with all its sources of evil, as the deliberately mysterious environment of finite personal life."⁷¹ Sensing potential objections from his more biblically-minded readers, Hick adds the qualification that the existence of higher beings like angels is perfectly consistent with the Christian tradition, but that "we do not know enough about them to draw them within the scope of the rational discussion".⁷²

⁶⁹ John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy" in *Encountering Evil*, 38.

⁷⁰ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 202.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 203.

Immediately thereafter Hick also notes that we also lack positive knowledge of life on other planets, as if belief in angels and belief in aliens were on the same level of likelihood, given Christian presuppositions.

Hick then grants the *possibility* that “the material universe and the ranges of sub-human life within it have very important further significances to their maker than simply as an environment for personal life”, but comments that we cannot “properly build any specific theological conclusions upon them.”⁷³ Hick’s comment here, that we cannot build “theological conclusions” on the elements of the aesthetic theme (specifically, in this case, *plenitude*), seems hastily dismissive in isolation, and though I think he is mistaken, he helpfully contrasts this element of the aesthetic theme with something which he finds much more helpful. In the next paragraph, Hick writes,

Whatever realms of life and dimensions of meaning there may be beyond our present awareness and concern [e.g. the aesthetic theme], our positive knowledge of God’s nature and purpose still derives from His incarnation in Jesus Christ... The actions constituting Jesus’ impact upon the world were the actions of an agape which was continuous with, and directly revelatory of, the eternal agape of God.⁷⁴

Specifically, as Hick observes, the gospels witness to “the active agape of God at work in human life.”⁷⁵ Thus “in light of the Incarnation, then, any justification of evil must,” Hick suggests, “be a justification of it as playing a part in bringing about the high good of man’s fellowship with God, rather than as necessary to the aesthetic perfection of a universe which, in virtue of its completeness, includes personal life.”⁷⁶ Hick concludes his entire section on Augustinian theodicy with the provocative statement: “A

⁷³ Ibid., 204.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Christian theodicy must be centered upon moral personality rather than upon nature as a whole, and its governing principle must be ethical rather than aesthetic.”⁷⁷ This suggests that Hick advocates a kind of moral minimalism, a compression of theodicy’s “spectrum” to include only those parts of the theological bandwidth which touch directly on the moral and personal elements of God’s providential plan.

Given the above discussion of Hick’s treatment of the aesthetic theme, it is now possible to grasp more solidly why he resists its inclusion in Christian theodicy. Two key elements inform this eschewal: 1) the “scope of rational discussion” is not such that speculative elements such as human pre-lapsarian existence, the existence of angels, or the aesthetic theme could play a significant role; and 2) the point of the theodicy discussion is God’s active agape for human persons, and if the aesthetic theme is not directly revelatory of this, it is beyond theodicy’s concern.

The remainder of Part I is my attempt to examine these two assumptions. Chapter 1 will deal with the task and scope of theodicy as I seek to explore how the shape of theodicy has affected the sorts of categories allowed into the discussion. Chapter 2 will address the role of the aesthetic theme in the communication of God’s agape for persons. Further, in Part II, Chapter 3 will take on some of the issues Hick has raised in regard to Augustinian theodicy as I seek to defend the Augustinian type of theodicy more

⁷⁷ Ibid.

specifically. The remaining chapters seek further to explore how various aesthetic themes affect the practice of theodicy.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Though Hick's book is more of a classic than a recent work at this point, it is worth noting that the most complete treatment on aesthetics and evil in print, Marilyn McCord Adams' *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, does not respond to these accusations. Hohyun Sohn's 2004 thesis "Beauty and Evil: Theological Aesthetic and Theodicy in Augustine, Whitehead and Hegel" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 2004) does very little to answer Hick, merely citing his critique as an example of Adams' charted trend of skepticism, cited below. Neither Adams nor Sohn, respond at length to these critics, and while Adams does a bit more to justify the inclusion of aesthetic values in her chapter on the subject I think that neither have sufficiently answered the charges of these critics, and thus a careful defense is required. Though Adams does go some way to sabotage the trend of modern separation of aesthetics from utility, I believe that a more systematic argument for the usefulness of aesthetics in theodicy is also necessary.

CHAPTER 1: AESTHETICS AND THE SCOPE OF THEODICY

*I pray thee, cease thy counsel,
Which falls into mine ears as profitless
As water in a sieve: give not me counsel;
Nor let no comforter delight mine ear...
For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,*

SHAKESPEARE
Much Ado About Nothing

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy*

SHAKESPEARE
Hamlet

1. Contemporary Theodicy and The Aesthetic Theme

John Hick has raised two related objections which I will allow to be determinative for the remainder of Part I. In an attempt to address the first objection in this chapter it will now be necessary to look at the wider range of problem of evil literature. Here we will find that Hick is not alone in doubting the value of the aesthetic theme in the theodicy discussion. First, I will look at specific objections in the wider literature. Then, I will explore more fundamental reasons why the aesthetic theme has met with indifference, if not resistance. In the final section, I will explore some developments in the recent literature which point to modes of theodicy which are much more inclusive of the aesthetic theme.

1.1. Philosophical Theodicy and the Aesthetic Theme

Though the theodicy literature of the last sixty years is formidable and specialized (Barry L. Whitney records 4200 works on the subject between 1960 and 1991) there is a paucity of literature on the role of aesthetic

considerations in the area.⁷⁹ As theodicians have diverged into detailed discussions of the logical argument from evil, the evidential argument from evil, the probabilistic problem of evil, and a host of other issues, the role of aesthetics has gained virtually no attention. Those mentions aesthetics does warrant are rarely positive.

⁷⁹ It is impossible to make any sweeping statements about the current theodicy literature, as diverse and plentiful as it is. In his annotated bibliography of theodicy, Barry Whitney cites 4200 works on the subject between 1960 and 1991 [Barry L. Whitney, *Theodicy: An Annotated Bibliography on the Problem of Evil, 1960-1991* (Charlottesville, VA: The Philosophy Documentation Center, 1998)]. Such a literature is beyond summary. Further complicating study of the voluminous publications are two key polarities. First, though the problem of evil is a fundamentally a theological issue - it has no force apart from belief in a supreme being - study of this field is relevant to theists and atheists alike. Systematic theology is understandably more insular, an internal dialogue between theologians, but theodicy is often defined by an interchange between believers and unbelievers. This first dichotomy understandably leads to a second one between theologians and philosophers. Since those outside the faith are not often primarily in theology, but in the wider realm of secular inquiry, the atheistic component of the theodicy is understandably philosophical. The theological response to the problem of evil then, has recently been very philosophical in nature, and thus a large portion of recent theodicy is produced by Christian philosophers.

Adding to this, theologians of recent years have tended to steer away from theodicy as it has been classically defined. Though Barth's writings on evil are significant and often discussed, the Barthian critique of Leibniz and natural theology in general has taken much of the wind out of theodicy's sails by removing theological reflection on evil from the reach of the atheistic argument. Hume's inconsistent triad in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* rests on an ability to abstract the content of theology from an explicitly Christian context and thus exists in the realm of natural theology. By focusing on the problem of evil as an internal question, and thus removing theology from the realm of secular understanding, it is removed from secular dialogue.

P. T. Forsyth, paralleling many of Barth's observations, likewise focuses his theodicy as an internal justification of God's goodness rather than an explication of the occurrence of evil to outsiders:

The object is not to bring God's ways to the bar either of man's reason or man's conscience, but rather to the bar where all reason and conscience must go at last, to the standard of a holy God's own account of Himself in Jesus Christ and His Cross. A philosophical theodicy or vindication of God's justice has not yet been found. [P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy* (London: Duckworth, 1916) v]

Theologians such as Moltmann have eschewed speculative theodicy, in favor of a more "critical" one. For Moltmann, a Christian should not "rest content with any slickly explanatory answer to the theodicy question. And he will also resist any attempts to soften the question down. The more a person believes, the more deeply he experiences pain over the suffering in the world, and the more passionately he asks about God and the new creation" [Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1991) 49]. Liberation theology and feminist theology share much of the same focus, as they seek to avoid speculative comfort in favor of practical action.

In the 20th-century Protestant context, Pannenberg stands out as a something of an exception in that he acknowledges the problem of evil as it challenges the Christian doctrine of the goodness of God's creative act, and offers a modest response to the problem by drawing on contemporary philosophers such as Hick. More recently, however, the trend has continued in theology to cast doubt on theodicy in the philosophical tradition, as is evinced (in differing ways) by the writings of theologians such as Donald MacKinnon, Richard Bauckham, Kenneth Surin, T. W. Tilley, Sarah Katherine Pinnock, and David Bentley Hart. Undoubtedly the greatest focus on theodicy as an attempt to resolve the *prima facie* contradiction between the idea of God and the fact of evil has been within the field of the philosophy of religion, and thus it is reasonable to focus our attention here at the outset in order to get a sense of the prevailing trends in theodicy.

In his essay, “Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil”, Terence Penelhum warns against the idea that “minor aesthetic advantages could outweigh major moral and physical disadvantages.”⁸⁰ Penelhum’s example is of the aesthetically pleasing side-effects” of tuberculosis, the sufferers of which “acquire a charming pink flush, and according to Puccini can often sing better than healthy people.”⁸¹ Here Penelhum is referencing the medical symptoms of tuberculosis, as well as wittily alluding to Puccini’s *La Boheme*, where the character of Mimì, afflicted with tuberculosis, can amazingly sing with clarity, despite the lung-ravaging nature of the disease.

To be sure, in either case it would seem silly to hold up a natural blush (caused by fever) or enhanced singing ability as compensation for the affliction of consumption. We too would combat the idea that “minor aesthetic advantages could outweigh major moral and physical disadvantages.”⁸² Yet, while Penelhum’s witty warning against such silly suggestions is certainly valid, the reader is left wondering why anyone *would* value the pink flush of tuberculosis over the attendant sickness and death? Penelhum doesn’t say, though he later imagines “a consistent disciple of Oscar Wilde, who believes that aesthetic values can properly take precedence over ethical ones”.⁸³

Timothy O’Connor, however, in giving advice to theodacists in “The Problem of Evil: An Introduction”, goes further than Penelhum in warning against the dangers of aesthetics. In his general advice O’Connor lays down the rule that “Grave evils cannot be morally justified by their service of

⁸⁰ Terence Penelhum, “Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil” in *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 73.

⁸¹ Ibid, 72.

⁸² Ibid, 73.

⁸³ Ibid, 76. The reference to Wilde is fitting, who, in his famous preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, makes such statements as “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” and “No artist has ethical sympathies” (v). These statements by Wilde are often held up as examples of the “art for art’s sake” movement, and the general decadence of aesthetes like Wilde who sought pleasure over virtue.

aesthetic or other non-moral value.”⁸⁴ Thus O’Connor establishes a ‘chain of command’ within theodicy, with all aesthetic and other non-moral goods disallowed from standing in as potential justifying reasons.

Eleonore Stump seems to take this line as well. In her essay “The Problem of Evil”, she attempts to find some room for “other goods” (including, perhaps, such goods as the Augustinian contrastive beauty):

Finally, for the many other goods sometimes said to be produced by evil, such as punishment of sins or aesthetic contemplation of the whole canvas of creation if any of these are in fact both good and produced by evil, I welcome them into my account... I have singled out one good produced by evil, [free will] as the good which justifies all the evil in the world, but nothing in this claim rules out the possibility that evil produces various other lesser goods as well which may contribute to the justification of some sorts of evil.⁸⁵

Stump’s mention of aesthetic goods is more positive sounding than O’Connor’s, in that Stump *welcomes* a variety of other goods which “may contribute” to justification of certain evils, while O’Connor simply lays out his maxim *against* their use in justifying serious evils.

Perhaps the most negative statement about the role of aesthetic values appears in Philip Quinn’s essay “God, Moral Perfection, and Possible Worlds”. In discussing the relative value of possible worlds, Quinn assumes that moral goodness is the dominant category for deciding between them. He writes, “I shall assume that the sort of goodness which would be important from the point of view of a perfectly good moral agent envisaging a possible world is moral goodness”.⁸⁶ Quinn acknowledges other criteria, specifically aesthetic value, but denies that this should be a serious consideration. He writes,

⁸⁴ Timothy O’Connor, “The Problem of Evil: An Introduction”, in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 313.

⁸⁵ Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil”, *Faith and Philosophy* 2: 4 (1985): 417.

⁸⁶ Philip L. Quinn, “God, Moral Perfection, and Possible Worlds,” in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson (Notre Dame UP, 1992), 293.

[O]ne possible world might be judged better than another just in case the first ranked higher on a scale combining considerations of simplicity and variety... Of course, it is by no means evident that possible worlds which are very simple and chock full of variety are also particularly morally edifying. Perhaps simplicity and variety constitute an appropriate basis for comparative judgments of aesthetic goodness and yet are utterly irrelevant to moral goodness.”⁸⁷

1.3. Reasons Behind this Suspicion

These four shorter examples, in addition to Hick’s longer critique, are among the clearest attempts to deal with aesthetic value in thinking about the practice of theodicy. Though each comes with its own background, some continuity may be found between them. All four show a desire, on the part of theodacists, to bracket out or bar aesthetic considerations from the main focus of theodicy. In all cases, aesthetics is more-or-less discreetly pushed to the side.

Marilyn Adams, in *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, uses three brief citations of Penelhum, Stump, and Quinn (respectively) to chart a sliding scale set of assumptions which lead to, as Adams writes, “a full-scale compartmentalization of aesthetic from moral value and from goodness to persons”.⁸⁸

In observing this trend, Adams is not interested in looking at the particular motivations behind the varying statements, nor is it, as she writes, “to charge individual authors with invalid references”.⁸⁹ For her it is enough to observe the trend, which may be due to a wide number of reasons. Adams highlights one main reason she suspects lies behind much of this suspicion,

⁸⁷ Philip L. Quinn, “God, Moral Perfection, and Possible Worlds,” 292-3.

⁸⁸ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 131.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

the “enormous influence of Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment* enforces a separation of aesthetics from science and morals”.⁹⁰

Here I certainly agree with Adams that the Kantian legacy has been powerfully determinative of the way that aesthetics has been utilized (or, more accurately, barred from being “useful”).⁹¹ But while I find Adams’ treatment of Penelhum, Stump, and Quinn to be fair-minded (she levels no unfair accusations against them) both her sliding-scale trend and her intimations of Kantian influence do not get to one major part of the problem with moral- and aesthetic-value integration in theodicy, and thus overlooks why aesthetics is excluded in this context.

Adams’ charted trend seemingly implies *only* an underlying suspicion of aesthetic value. Which is to say that some aesthetic values are “insufficient” for defeating evils, that some are “*at most supplementary*, to the defeat of evils”, and finally that they are “*utterly irrelevant* to the defeat of evils”.⁹² But I believe there is more to be said about why aesthetics is given so little attention in theodicy, and why, when it is mentioned, it is often dismissed, or separated from the main discussion. In his lengthy treatment of the issue, John Hick’s extended critique of the aesthetic theme points to a more serious problem, that aesthetic values lie at the edges (or outside) the scope of rational theodicy. Penelhum, O’Connor, Stump and Quinn imply an insufficiency to aesthetic values, which Adams takes to be representative of widespread attitudes toward aesthetics as a discipline.

However, the more basic problem for the aesthetic theme, it seems to me, is the way that the practice of theodicy is typically set against integrating non-

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff has been very helpful in attacking the art-for-art’s-sake movement (which owes much to the Kantian legacy), in his book, *Art in Action*. For more on this see parts I and II of his book [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980].

⁹² Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 130-1.

moral values. Even if the Kantian trend can be stopped and the usefulness of aesthetics affirmed in theory, we must also lay out a model (or models) for the use of aesthetics in the task of resolving the tension between the idea of God and occurrent evils.

Giving due respect to Adams, her theodicy *does* lay out a model for integrating aesthetics (see Chapter 5), though she seems to overlook, within her discussion of other theodicies, how the goals and methods of theodacists affect their inclusion of the aesthetic theme, and therefore fails to advance the use of the aesthetic theme in other forms of theodicy beside her own.

In order to remedy this, it is necessary to lay out several key barriers that prevent more mainstream theodacists from integrating the aesthetic theme. In the next section I will lay out two key reasons why theodicy has this problem, and therefore begin to deal with Hick's primary objection to the aesthetic theme based on the limited "scope" of theodicy.

2. Philosophical Frameworks in Theodicy: *Morally Sufficient Reasons*

2.1. Finding the Reasons.

The practice of theodicy over the last fifty years (since J. L. Mackie's landmark "Evil and Omnipotence" in 1955), like most fifty-year-olds, has acquired comfortable *habits*. These habits may be good or bad (I make no broad judgment here), but they have certainly been determined by the ongoing discourse between atheistic and theistic philosophers within the problem of evil area.

In Mackie's famous essay, he puts forward not only that atheism is more likely, based on the presence of evil in the world, but that theism is "positively irrational," given the logical conflict between 1) God's goodness,

2) God's power and 3) Evil's existence.⁹³ Plantinga's reply to Mackie, the equally landmark free-will defense, establishes the back-and-forth pattern for much of the pursuant discussion. To refute Mackie, Plantinga sets out to "Conceive of a possible state of affairs such that, if it obtained, an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly Good God would have a good reason for permitting evil."⁹⁴ To this end, Plantinga conjoins the axiological assumption that

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more [morally] good than [morally] evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all.⁹⁵

with the premise that

it is *possible* that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil.⁹⁶

Thus, by imagining a great enough good, and positing that that good could not come about without the possibility of some evil, Plantinga aims to provide a morally sufficient reason (be it, according to his definition of 'defense', a merely *possible* one), and so rebut the attack on theism. This effort by Plantinga is generally taken to be quite successful on two counts. First, as William Alston comments, it is "now acknowledged on (almost) all sides that the logical argument [especially as it is put forth by Mackie] is bankrupt."⁹⁷ Second, free will has become quite entrenched in the theodicy discussion, with many others advocating it strongly. Eleonore Stump, quoted above, finds free exercise of the will essential to explaining evil when

⁹³ J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" in *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 46.

⁹⁴ Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 26.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁷ William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition" in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indianapolis UP, 1996), 97.

she calls it “the good which justifies all the evil in the world”.⁹⁸ Jerry Walls is equally emphatic on this point when he writes, “there is no other possible explanation of the moral evil in our world apart from free will.”⁹⁹

Other theodicies, while not holding exclusively to free will, employ much the same pattern. John Hick’s soul-making theodicy holds up the value of character development, and like Plantinga, attempts to show that this particular good is connected to some portions of evil in the world. In Hick’s case, the connection is much stronger, in that suffering is often necessary for human spiritual growth.

Richard Swinburne’s theodicy holds to this pattern, combining the emphases of Plantinga and Hick’s theodicies on free will and soul making with emphasis on the importance of human knowledge. Swinburne emphasizes the value of God giving humans significant responsibility. “[W]hat an awful world it would be if the only good or harm we could do was to ourselves”, he writes.¹⁰⁰ Given this, it follows that the high degree of responsibility we are given will increase the probability that we will cause a great amount of pain. Hence, humans have a responsibility not to cause harm to others, and this requires that we learn more about the world as well as about our moral responsibilities. Swinburne writes,

But if our choices are to be choices which make a difference to things for good or ill - not just choices made in a simulator - we need, as has been pointed out earlier, knowledge, factual and moral, of the consequences of our choices.¹⁰¹

For those who find this line unpersuasive, Swinburne also argues that God could not give us free will, and yet protect us and others from the full effects

⁹⁸ Stump, “The Problem of Evil”, 417.

⁹⁹ Jerry L. Walls, “Why Plantinga Must Move from Defense to Theodicy” in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1992), 333.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 147.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

of our bad choices. Proposing the Principle of Honesty, Swinburne tries to further elucidate why God has morally sufficient reasons to allow evils.

“God has an obligation not to make a world,” he writes, “in which agents are systematically deceived on important matters without their having the possibility of discovering the deception.”¹⁰² Thus, free will and significant responsibility must not be thwarted by God’s systematic intervention.

The above are three examples of the form theodicy often takes in trying to answer the problem of evil question. Each noticeably focuses on finding one or more morally sufficient reasons for God to allow evils. By contrast, a number of more recent attempts to rebut the evidential argument from evil take the opposite approach.

2.2. Explaining their Absence.

Though the logical argument from evil (as Mackie proposed it) seems to be defeated, a more recent iteration of the argument from evil, the evidential argument, seems to be more difficult to push back. In its most popular version, framed by William Rowe, the evidential argument states that “There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.”¹⁰³ Rowe gives two examples of this kind of evil, one of a fawn burnt and dying alone in the woods,¹⁰⁴ and the other a five-year-old girl, raped, beaten, and murdered by her mother’s drunken boyfriend.¹⁰⁵

Since, Rowe goes on to argue, an omnipotent, wholly good God would prevent all such instances of suffering, this God must not exist. The

¹⁰² Ibid., 139.

¹⁰³ William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil & Some Varieties of Atheism”, in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1996), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ William Rowe, “Evil and Theodicy” *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 119-132

difference between the evidential argument and the logical argument is that the logical problem depends upon the incompatibility between the idea of God and the fact of evil, where the evidential argument depends upon the likelihood of the existence of gratuitous evils.

Most common among the responses to Rowe's evidential argument has been the effort to challenge the notion that there exist "instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse."¹⁰⁶ Stephen Wykstra, in his essay "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil", challenges Rowe by proposing the principle of CORNEA (Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access), which states that a person is only entitled to believe something does not exist, if things would appear differently if that thing did exist. Since we cannot assume that we would be privy to God's morally sufficient reasons, Wykstra's argument goes, what appear to be gratuitous evils may very well not be, for all we know.¹⁰⁷

Wykstra's development of CORNEA is compelling, but not without its problems. Richard Swinburne has raised the criticism that Wykstra's skeptical maneuver is too simplistic. The crux of Wykstra's argument is the assumption that God's ways are so much higher than our ways, that we lack the understanding to label certain evils gratuitous. Swinburne writes:

¹⁰⁶ More rare is the effort to argue that God may well have *good reason* to allow instances of gratuitous evils. In his essay, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil" Hasker argues that in order for God to give us morally significant freedom, our evil choices must sometimes have serious consequences. Part of that entails being able to do genuine harm to others, which will not bring about some greater good or prevent some greater evil. In other words, morally significant freedom entails the possibility of gratuitous evil. Hasker concludes then that "If God necessarily prevents gratuitous evil, then morality is undermined" (William Hasker "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil" *Faith and Philosophy* 9:1 (1992): 30). John Hick pursues a similar line, as I mentioned above, where he finds "good use" for gratuitous or unnecessary evils whose "very irrationality and this lack of ethical meaning contribute to the character of the world as a place in which true human goodness can occur and in which loving sympathy and compassionate self-sacrifice can take place" (John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 371-2).

¹⁰⁷ Stephen John Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil" in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1996), 128-130.

But the trouble with this version of the argument is that while our moral beliefs (and factual beliefs, we may add) may indeed be in error in relevant respects, we need some further argument to show that they are more likely to be biased in the direction of failing to understand that some apparent bad states really serve greater goods, rather than in the direction of failing to understand why some apparent good states really serve greater bad states.¹⁰⁸

William Alston advances an “agnostic thesis” that takes on Rowe’s arguments from gratuitous evils, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls Swinburne points out with Wykstra’s argument. Alston writes,

I will not be proceeding on the basis of any general skepticism about our cognitive powers either across the board or generally with respect to God. I will, rather, be focusing on the peculiar difficulties we encounter in attempting to provide adequate support for a certain very ambitious negative existential claim, viz., that there is (can be) no sufficient divine reason for permitting a certain case of suffering...¹⁰⁹

Alston combats the idea that our cognitive powers are incapable of understanding evil at all. He does this by assembling a list of partial reasons why God might allow evils: these include allowing evil as a punishment for sin, allowing evil as a result of free will, allowing evil for the purpose of soul making, and allowing evil because of the redemptive power of suffering.¹¹⁰ The fact that none of these reasons seem to strongly outweigh the gratuitous evils Rowe brings up does not mean that Alston’s attempt fails. True, no single reason or set of reasons we can think of acts as the trump card to horrendous evil, but the fact that we can think of a wide range of reasons for serious, but not horrendous evils, leads us to believe that it is likely that there are such reasons, we just can’t quite grasp them.¹¹¹

Our inability to summon perfect reasons Alston chocks up to six factors:

¹⁰⁸ Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 25ff.

¹⁰⁹ William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition”, 102.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 103-116.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 118.

- a. "Lack of data," including full knowledge of the past and future, the workings of the human psyche, and so on.
- b. "Complexity greater than we can handle."
- c. "Difficulty determining what is metaphysically possible or necessary."
- d. "Ignorance of the full range of possibilities," our imaginations are often limited in what they can conceive.
- e. "Ignorance of the full range of values."
- f. "Limits to our capacity to make well-considered value judgments."

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So Wykstra, Alston and others attempt to deflect Rowe's argument from gratuitous evil by finding *reasons* why we may not have access to God's reasons.

2.3. *Application.*

The above summary of some major elements of the contemporary theodicy discussion is helpful to show the prominent role of morally sufficient reasons in the theodicy discussion. While there are exceptions (some will be discussed below) the majority of the theodicy question centers around finding morally sufficient reasons, or otherwise explaining why we need not, or cannot, find them. Richard Swinburne states well one side of the methodology for theodicy as it is often practiced, while Stephen Wykstra shows us the other side of the pendulum swing:

Swinburne: If the theist can provide for states of each kind a reason why God could justifiably allow a state of that kind to occur - e.g. pain deliberately caused by humans being justified in terms of the good of humans having a free choice of whether or not to cause pain deliberately to others - he will have provided a total adequate theodicy.¹¹³

Wykstra: [The theist's account is that] behind the universe there is God, who cares for us (and sparrows and fawns as well); we cannot,

¹¹² William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition", 120.

¹¹³ Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 15.

however, however, see the purposes for which God allows many of the things he does. The Christian specification of theism, in particular, promises no insight into God's purposes, but assurance of his love.¹¹⁴

Whether or not one agrees with Swinburne or Wykstra (or neither) is beside the point. The key here is gaining a sense of the major emphasis in theodicy on *reasons*, whether probable, plausible, possible, or hidden. These reasons are proposed in an effort to acquit God of culpability for an action - specifically, the action of permitting (or perhaps causing) a certain evil or type of evil. The problem this poses for theodicy, I suggest, is that *aesthetic values have fared very poorly when employed exclusively within the context of morally sufficient reasons*. Though I cannot back up this statement completely, by way of example, I will invoke one part of the aesthetic theodicy tradition, process theodicy, which falls into this trap, as a way of elucidating the challenges of introducing aesthetic criteria in this framework.

2.4. *Aesthetic Values as Morally Sufficient Reasons?*

Penelhum, above, raised a warning against the idea that “minor aesthetic advantages could outweigh major moral and physical disadvantages” citing an imaginary disciple of Oscar Wilde as the potential advocate of such views.¹¹⁵ O'Connor vaguely puts forward a warning against such similar employment of “aesthetic or other non-moral value” in justifying grave evils, though without any apparent target in mind.¹¹⁶ It seems likely, however, that lying behind these warnings against aesthetic values is a fear of slipping into modes of theodicy like those in process theology, which often invoke goods that are deemed as less-than-sufficient to morally compensate for evil.

¹¹⁴ Stephen John Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil”, 145.

¹¹⁵ Terence Penelhum, “Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil”, 73, 76.

¹¹⁶ Timothy O'Connor, “The Problem of Evil: An Introduction”, 313. In conversation with O'Connor he stated that he did not have any specific target in mind when writing these words, so the descriptor vague seems an appropriate designation here.

Two recent process theologians, David Ray Griffin and Barry L. Whitney, have weighed aesthetic value on the scales of theodicy, and attempted to show a substantial aesthetic benefit which outweighs occurrent evil. In this way, both stand in the tradition of Alfred North Whitehead, who placed heavy emphasis on aesthetic categories when formulating his theodicy. In *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead writes, “All order is aesthetic order; and the moral order is merely certain aspects of aesthetic order.”¹¹⁷ Griffin follows in Whitehead’s steps, championing the two central aesthetic criteria of “harmony and intensity” as central to the world’s purpose: *following* Whitehead and Griffin, the former is ideal, the latter is guaranteed.¹¹⁸ For Whitehead, the highest form of beauty consists in *harmony*, together with the quality of *intensity*. In his *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead differentiates between “minor” and “major” beauty to make a bigger point. Minor beauty is *merely* harmonious, merely “the absence of painful clash”.¹¹⁹ But major beauty is bigger and better. It contains contrasts. Whitehead writes, “These contrasts introduce new conformal intensities natural to each of them, and by so doing raise the intensities of conformal feeling”.¹²⁰ In other words, contrasts raise the level of intensity and make beauty *bigger*. For Whitehead, all of life is like a big work of art, so it’s no surprise that he sees the purpose of the universe in the same way that he views beauty: “God’s purpose in the creative advance is the evocation of intensities.”¹²¹

Griffin elaborates on Whitehead’s maxim that “Perfection at a low level ranks below Imperfection with higher aim”¹²² to hold up intense discord as preferable to trivial harmony, and thus to argue that:

¹¹⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York, NY: Fordham Univ Press, 1996), 105.

¹¹⁸ David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2004), 284-5.

¹¹⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 252.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 161.

¹²² Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 264.

Recognizing that unnecessary triviality is an evil provides a basis for understanding the evolutionary development of our world as manifesting the creative purposes of a good God.¹²³

Both Griffin and Whitehead strongly emphasize the importance of intensity and the danger of triviality. However, Griffin is keen to point out that harmony, for both thinkers, is a value that God desires to bring about. Griffin writes, “Aesthetic goodness requires harmony as well as intensity, and physical pain is a primary example of dis-harmony or discord.”¹²⁴ Griffin’s process deity desires harmony, then, but also wants to avoid *trivial* harmony, hence the process God brings about more intense experiences, and therefore “risk[s] the possibility of more intense discord.”¹²⁵ Applying his aesthetic insights to the world of human life, Griffin asks whether God ought to have avoided the “possibility of Jesus, Gautama, Socrates... Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Ghandi [etc.]” in order to avoid “the possibility of persons such as Hitler, and horrors such as Auschwitz”?¹²⁶

Here Griffin makes his strongest call for the value of increased intensity in human history, but even here we may still feel a nagging sense of worry about the calculus which Griffin (and other process philosophers) use. While we may heartily approve of the valor of the kind of people that this intensity makes possible, the very language of intensity and triviality somehow seems inadequate to make sense of how this world’s immense suffering might be justified. In critiquing process theodicy, Stephen Ely has commented that the process God “is not primarily good. He does not will the good. He wills the beautiful.”¹²⁷ Though Griffin attempts to say that “‘physical’ goodness cannot be played off against aesthetic goodness” and

¹²³ David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*, 284-5.

¹²⁴ Griffin, *God, Power and Evil*, 301.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹²⁷ Stephen Lee Ely, *The Religious Availability of Whitehead’s God: A Critical Analysis* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), 52.

seeks to avoid the charge that aesthetic values are somehow separate from personal ones, it seems reasonable to say that something in the language of aesthetics, as Griffin uses it, seems inadequate to provide a satisfactory justification.¹²⁸ I think it is safe to say that Griffin here seems to overvalue the conceptual power of aesthetics to communicate the core idea of his theodicy. This tendency to overvalue aesthetics as a way of providing a large-scale justification for evil can be seen in other process theodicy, such as that of Barry Whitney.

Barry Whitney, in his article “An aesthetic solution to the problem of evil”, stands faithfully in the tradition of process theodicy when he attempts to “outline a version of the aesthetic solution that seems to [him] the basis of an intellectually viable rational theodicy.”¹²⁹ Whitney’s article sides with Griffin and Whitehead in defining aesthetic value as “the experience of intensity and harmony.”¹³⁰ Whitney does not, like Whitehead and Griffin, believe that harmony will be absolute, but rather that aesthetic experience “strives toward and incorporates unity amid the diversity, harmony amid the chaos.”¹³¹ In fact, absolute harmony, according to Whitney would be “stifling”, and so he clearly places primary emphasis, alongside other process thinkers, on the view that the main function of the aesthetic is the “evocation of intensities.”¹³²

Whitney’s key thesis is that

[D]espite our finite, vulnerable, and precarious nature as human beings, we have an inherent creativity, an inner drive that seeks meaningful experiences... I submit that creatures not only have this *need* for meaning and value (the former gained through the latter, as aesthetic

¹²⁸ Griffin, *God, Power and Evil*, 301.

¹²⁹ Barry L. Whitney, “An Aesthetic Solution to the Problem of Evil”, *Philosophy of Religion* 35 (1994), 22.

¹³⁰ Barry L. Whitney, “An Aesthetic Solution to the Problem of Evil”, 24.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (NY: Macmillan, 1929) p. 161.

value) but we also have this *opportunity* – at every moment... to experience it. Indeed, no matter how bleak, limited, or disadvantaged our circumstances may be at particular moments, there is always an opportunity to experience at least some aesthetic value.¹³³

This is the core justification at the center of Whitney's theodicy.

The first thought that jumps to mind is that this seems a bit anemic to function as a total justification, but Whitney combines this premise with the further assumption that "there is no reason why any creature should expect to experience anything other than minimal value, let alone maximum value, a surplus of value, or complete fulfillment."¹³⁴ Here he is also clearly drawing on Whitehead, who also shares the assumption that "something is better than nothing."¹³⁵ Even combining his two premises, that there is always some opportunity for aesthetic value, and therefore meaning, and that all we can expect as creatures is minimal value, Whitney's process theodicy seems unlikely to ever succeed. Neither premise, I believe, is correct.

First, Whitney seems convinced that there is always some "opportunity for aesthetic value", but he seems too easily to assume that all aesthetic values are positive, and that there is "some minimal value in each experience".¹³⁶ Here Whitehead's affirmation that "Perfection at a low level ranks below Imperfection with higher aim" probably lies behind Whitney's assumption, but this cannot always be true. It is surely not the case that a spoiled soufflé is preferable to eat than simple baked bread, or that one would rather see a terrible orchestra perform than sing camp songs around a fire. Disvalues can defeat organic wholes such that an artwork, experience, action, and so on, in its entirety, takes on negative value.

¹³³ Barry L. Whitney, "An Aesthetic Solution to the Problem of Evil", 24.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹³⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 105

¹³⁶ Barry L. Whitney, "An Aesthetic Solution to the Problem of Evil", 30.

Second, Whitney's lowering of the bar to merely "minimal value" is unacceptable to most theodacists who seek to find values that are deeply satisfying to humans on par with our ability to experience value and meaning. Since we have the capacity for *more* than minimal value, it is reasonable to expect that God would provide us with such. At the very least, it is reasonable to believe that God would provide us with value that is on par with our experience of disvalues such as injustice and suffering.

In sum, it is difficult to imagine the sort of goods Whitney proposes being very satisfactory when proposed as great enough to outweigh occurrent evil. Imagine a certain situation, say, a man named Polk takes his ten-year-old son to the beach. While swimming, Polk's son is dragged out to sea by a rip-tide and drowns. A year later Polk seeks the advice of four philosophical detectives who have researched the case extensively, in order to discover if his son's death was a gratuitous evil. The Plantingan detective informs Polk that the lifeguard on duty neglected to put up a rip-tide warning and instead freely willed to get drunk at 11 A.M. Thus the lifeguard is to blame for choosing to sinfully neglect his duties. The Hickean detective tells Polk that God does not stop all suffering, because he can use this sad event as a means to shape his character so that he can experience ultimate happiness through loving union with God. The Swinburnian informs Polk that rip-tides are a natural occurrence, and thus if God stopped all such nautical events he would be deceiving us about the functioning of the natural world, and as well as our responsibilities for parental care and beach safety. Finally, the Whitneyan detective informs Polk that in this, as in every, situation we have the opportunity to experience a minimum of aesthetic value, and since this is all we can expect, the son's death is not gratuitous.

While I accede that the first three explanations also sound a bit tinny in the face of such suffering, there is a clear quality difference, I think, between the

first three and the final process explanation. The shared denominator between the first three is, of course, that each seems more closely connected with what many Christians take to be God's ultimate purpose for us—to freely grow in knowledge and love as we become conformed to the likeness of Christ.

Given the structure of considering a specific evil and seeking to discover a morally sufficient reason God might have to cause or permit such an occurrence, it seems unlikely that the aesthetic explanation could ever stand on its own. If we are seeking to acquit a moral agent of charges against him, partial reasons may often appear *worse* on that agent's record. If, by way of explanation, I told a lifelong friend that I couldn't come to his birthday party because I had to give my dog a haircut, this would make me seem much worse of a friend to value my dog's grooming over my friend's celebration. Analogously, if we are seeking to find large-scale morally sufficient reasons why God allows evil, it can often seem confusing or callous to offer only partial explanations. If we are seeking a good reason why God allows us to suffer greatly, and are given an insufficient answer, this will do very little to show how God is good. More likely, a partial answer will make God appear callous to human misery. Partial answers, in

the context of providing morally sufficient reasons, guarantee very little ability to solve the problem.¹³⁷

Some may raise the point that process theism is shielded from the same sorts of scrutiny as traditional theism because of its alternative theology. But it is noteworthy that Whitney himself does not isolate his theodicy to the process community:

[T]he version of the aesthetic theory I have proposed here does not necessarily assume the process metaphysics nor a specialist's familiarity with it. The aesthetic theory stands on its own, although process metaphysics provides a favorable context.¹³⁸

Further, process theology as a whole cannot avoid traditional criticisms. As William Hasker has keenly pointed out, the process God is still responsible for evil (though powerless to stop it) because the process God coaxed this world into its current state of evolution, and thus brought about the environment in which we live and suffer.¹³⁹

Thus, Edward Madden and Peter Hare critique the process God (as described in Whitehead) as "a being who sacrifices human feeling to aesthetic ends" and is therefore "not totally good".¹⁴⁰ They write,

¹³⁷ Now, it may be objected that aesthetic values such as intensity may be more easily used to justify *lesser* evils (such as a broken arm from downhill skiing, a broken heart from first love, or broken windows from storm damage to beach front property), but other morally sufficient reasons will also likely justify these evils far more easily. It is also the case that people are far less likely to raise the problem of evil from such minor reasons as a broken arm from downhill skiing. Plus, given their supplementarity, aesthetic values may well do little to clarify the issue, which any theodicit would certainly want to do. Imagine if I arrive late to pick up my son from soccer practice, if I had a fully sufficient excuse, such as having gotten an emergency phone call, it might well be that giving an additional excuse, such as wanting to teach him the value of patience, would actually *conflict* with my earlier excuse, because it might indicate that I did not try very hard to be there on time anyway.

Thus we can see that excusing God on the basis of His giving us the ability to freely perform evil actions might conflict with also arguing that God desires to bring about a beautifully contrastive world, where evil shines the brighter for the good.

None of this is to suggest that aesthetic reasons cannot be employed within the framework of morally sufficient reasons, merely that their inclusion will likely be insufficient to justify *grave* evils, and hence supplementary to the apologetic task of theodicy.

¹³⁸ Barry L. Whitney, "An Aesthetic Solution to the Problem of Evil", 28-9.

¹³⁹ William Hasker, "The Problem of Evil in Process Theism and Classical Free Will Theism" *Process Studies* 29: 2 (2000): 194-208.

¹⁴⁰ Madden and Hare, *Evil and the Concept of God*, 124.

“Certainly a God who is willing to pay any amount in moral and physical evil to gain aesthetic value is an unlovable being.”¹⁴¹

In the end, Whitney’s theodicy (and process theodicy on the whole) ultimately succumbs to the sorts of criticisms raised by Penelhum, who would no doubt find Whitney’s ‘experience of intensity and harmony’ insufficient to justify major moral or physical harm. The failure of sorts of theodicies like Whitney’s, I think, leads people such as O’Connor to state that grave evils should not be justified by appeal to aesthetic or other non-moral values. Thus, returning to Adams’ citation of the suspicious trend in theodicy toward aesthetics, it is not necessarily a suspicion based on Kantian values segregation, perhaps so much as a desire to avoid guilt by association with process theology’s inability to effectively integrate aesthetic values into the framework of contemporary theodicy.

Yet, the failure of process theodicy to enter aesthetic value into the realm of morally sufficient reasons does not, I think, indicate that aesthetic values can make no contribution to theodicy done in this way—but it is certainly not obvious how this would be so. Eleonore Stump ‘welcomes’ other values to “contribute to the justification of some sorts of evil”, but exactly how they would play this supplemental role, given the general success of free will in explaining evil, is still unknown.¹⁴²

3. Philosophical Frameworks in Theodicy: *Best-of-all-Possible-Worlds Scenarios*

Having briefly looked at the ‘shape’ of contemporary theodicy, with its focus on morally sufficient reasons, we can see the impetus behind the desire to provide such reasons (which seek to alleviate the why question as it focuses on the occurrence of specific evils), and also the way that

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁴² Stump, “The Problem of Evil”, 417.

insufficient reasons seem impotent to provide satisfaction within that framework. There are, however, other ways of considering the problem of evil question. One way of framing this discussion, famously associated with Leibniz, is the *best-of-all-possible-worlds* argument.

In essence, the argument from evil can be reformulated in an effort to contradict the notion that this is the most optimal world, which if combined with the idea that God must create the best, may contradict rational theism. Leibniz formulates the *best-of-all-possible-worlds* argument well when he writes:

One may say that as soon as God has decreed to create something there is a struggle between all the possibles, all of them laying claim to existence, and that those which, being united, produce the most reality, most perfection, most significance carry the day. It is true that all this struggle can only be ideal, that is to say, it can only be a conflict of reasons in the most perfect understanding which cannot but act in the most perfect way, and consequently to choose the best.¹⁴³

Following Leibniz, if we assume “the best” to include aesthetic values as well as moral ones, it seems likely that the role of the aesthetic will factor well into any theodicy in this vein. If the most optimal world includes the best combination of happiness, goodness, and beauty, then any argument for this world’s optimality will include consideration of all these factors. In *The Monadology*, Leibniz argues that there is perfect relationship between all the parts of reality (at basis, simple substances, the eponymous ‘monads’), by which the universe is provided with “the greatest possible variety, together with the greatest order that may be” and through this means the universe has “obtained the greatest possible perfection.”¹⁴⁴

Throughout his various theological works, Leibniz reflects on the optimality of the world by reference to beauty. In *Theodicy*, he writes, “Every time we see such a work of God [the heavens and the rest of the universe], we find

¹⁴³ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 252.

¹⁴⁴ G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and The Monadology* (Mineola, NY: 2005), 56.

it so perfect that we must wonder at the contrivance and the beauty thereof”.¹⁴⁵ Though we cannot conceive of the totality of creation we may see in isolated works such as a plant, animal or human, “a certain point of perfection”, and therefore “the wonderful contrivance of the author.”¹⁴⁶

Here we see an area where aesthetic values can obviously contribute, in that, given a best world scenario, their absence might be considered a challenge to theism. Allen Carlson, in *Aesthetics and the Environment* imagines an analogous “problem of ugliness”:

Since an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-moral deity would presumably have perfect aesthetic judgment, how is he or she to be reconciled with the existence of ugliness or more specific negative aesthetic qualities in the world that he or she has created?¹⁴⁷

One can imagine this sort of consideration weighing more heavily given a best world framework. One might combine an argument using morally sufficient reasons explaining God’s allowance of evil, and then “top it off” with aesthetic arguments for the world’s harmonious perfection. Thus an aesthetic apologetic could become a regular part of the problem of evil argument. Is this the place for aesthetics that we have been seeking?

On the whole it seems that the larger question of the world’s general goodness admits more easily of aesthetic considerations than the question of God’s permission of specific evils. Thus one could argue that by shifting focus from a framework of morally sufficient reasons to an emphasis on highlighting the optimal value of the world, one can better make room for the aesthetic theme. But this move may be overly hasty. Recent work on the concept of a best possible world has shown the idea to be incoherent, and otherwise generally unhelpful.

¹⁴⁵ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 215.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 83.

3.1. *Could There Be a Best Possible World?*

Though Leibniz, as quoted above, seems convinced that God could weigh all the possibilities and emerge with a single, perfect world, there is good reason to doubt Leibniz's position. In evaluating the coherence of the idea of "optimality", Bruce Reichenbach imagines two ways that we might conceive of the best possible world.

The first way is in terms of the world's richness and variety. Following Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas and others, Leibniz imagines the world as an immensely diverse plenitude of forms, ascending from the lowest to the highest. Yet Reichenbach notes that even given the widely diverse forms of this world, interstitial gaps are always present. He writes, "Between various life forms, whether actual or possible, there is an infinite variety of other life forms."¹⁴⁸ Hence, "regarding the richness of the actual or any possible world, for any degree of richness n , there could be $n+1$ richness."¹⁴⁹ A second way of construing the world's "optimality" would be in the degree that it exhibited some positive state of affairs, whether it be happiness, or beauty, or pleasure, or morality. But, as before, no upper limit could clearly be proposed. For any amount of beauty or happiness n , one could always imagine $n+1$. Reichenbach concludes, "Thus, there could be no best possible world, since for any world which we would name there would always be another which was more optimific. Again, the notion of best possible world proves to be meaningless."¹⁵⁰ Following Reichenbach I am inclined to agree that, whether one construes the world's optimality in terms of a maximum amount of variety, or a maximum amount of value, there can be no conceivable upper limit to such value, and thus no truly "best" possible world.

¹⁴⁸ Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (NY: Fordham UP, 1982), 127.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 128.

There are further problems with best of all possible worlds scenarios, because the notion that there could be no best possible world, if adhered to without abandoning the notion that God *must* create the best world, creates an internal contradiction. If we retain a Leibnizian notion of God as the creator of only the best, then this world, less than the best, is not created by God. This is clearly an unattractive option, and so we must be led to assume that God need not, according to His perfection, create the best world.

3.2. Need God Create the Best Possible World?

In his article, “Must God Create the Best?”, Robert Adams argues that “even if there is a best among possible worlds [which he doubts], God could create another instead of it, and still be perfectly good.”¹⁵¹ Central to Adams argument is the assumption that if major aspects which contribute to one’s personhood were radically different, one would, in fact, be a different person. Leaning on Adams’ understanding, then, though Philip Tallon might have had a far more felicitous life in some better world (perhaps I would be an athletic astronaut and also a fashion model), this other Philip Tallon would not be *me*. Thus I am not wronged by not being an incredibly famous astronaut. Also key to Adams’ case is the idea that God does not have obligations to uncreated possible people. Thus world-famous astronaut Philip Tallon is not wronged by God not creating *him*. Given these two assumptions, Adams proposes three characteristics that a world which a good God would create must possess:

- (1) None of the individual creatures in it would exist in the best of all possible worlds.

¹⁵¹ Robert M. Adams, “Must God Create the Best”, in *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*, ed. Michael Peterson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1992), 275.

- (2) None of the creatures in it has a life which is so miserable on the whole that it would be better for that creature if it had never existed.
- (3) Every individual creature in the world is at least as happy on the whole as it would have been in any other possible world in which it could have existed.¹⁵²

Adams summarizes:

It seems obvious that if God creates such a world He does not thereby wrong any of the creatures in it, and does not thereby treat any of them with less than perfect kindness. For none of them would have benefited by His creating any other world instead.¹⁵³

The best-possible-world discussion can be riddling, but I think that Adams' point is sufficiently clear now, in that God could be justified in creating a good (but not necessarily maximally good) world (such as one where everyone's lives are on-the-whole positive), and that this could be done without wronging any created (or uncreated) person.¹⁵⁴ A position such as Adams' is obviously helpful in resolving the apparent contradictions generated by the best world scenario. It shows that Christians and other theists need not be worried by the conflict between the somewhat intuitive notion that God must create the best world, together with the worrisome thought that the best world is impossible to create, by offering a coherent account of a good (but not optimal) world.

However, in revising our criteria for the kind of world that a good God could create, it seems likely that aesthetic values will play a far less necessary role in arguing for the minimal goodness of the world. Where Leibniz

¹⁵² Robert M. Adams, "Must God Create the Best", in *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*, ed. Michael Peterson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1992), 275.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 278.

¹⁵⁴ This should, of course, be disambiguated from Whitney's idea that all anyone can be guaranteed is minimal value, which I take to be insufficient to guarantee that anyone's life is on the whole good, because it seems that we experience more than minimal disvalue.

sought to find perfection in all things, including the harmony of the nature, one who argues that this world possesses a minimum level of goodness—such as described in Adams—will feel much less need to discover harmony in every aspect of creation.¹⁵⁵ This is not to say that the aesthetic values cannot be integrated into an argument for the minimally-necessary goodness of a world, merely that a minimal-goodness scenario doesn't seem to mandate appeal to these values in the way that a best-world scenario obviously does.¹⁵⁶ However, just as the role of aesthetic value in pointing to the world's optimality is taken away, so is the strength of the atheistic argument from evil. God's aesthetic judgment could be "reconciled with the existence of ugliness or more specific negative aesthetic qualities in the world" by simply arguing that bits of ugliness, a diffuse blandness, or other negative aesthetic values do not necessitate that anyone's life will be on the whole negative rather than positive.¹⁵⁷

I therefore argue that we will need to leave behind best-of-all-possible-worlds scenarios, despite their *prima facie* compatibility with aesthetic values. However, I suggest that Robert Adams' schema of the minimal goodness of the world might lend itself to the inclusion of aesthetic criteria, though it by no means necessitates this.

Marilyn Adams, appropriately enough, has built on Robert Adams' schema in her theodicy, by arguing that certain aesthetic values can help humans to have an on-the-whole positive life. By shifting to an individualistic focus for aesthetic categories, Marilyn Adams recasts the argument in a way which can

¹⁵⁵ Robert M. Adams, "Must God Create the Best", in *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*, ed. Michael Peterson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1992), 275.

¹⁵⁶ Marilyn Adams, in *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, seems to be using this as her paradigm for theodicy when she argues that in order to show how horrors are compossible with the existence of God, it must be shown how each person's life can be a great good to them, on the whole. The power of horrors, in fact, is that they threaten the possibility that anyone's life could be a great good to them on the whole. Further, Adams uses aesthetic values as part of her argument to show that God can guarantee that everyone's life is great good to them on the whole. I lay this out in more detail in Chapter 5.

¹⁵⁷ Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 83

be very helpful for this study. Though I will discuss Adams' use of aesthetic benefits more fully in Chapter 5, for the moment, I will mention that Adams invokes the beatific vision as a powerful aesthetic benefit which can contribute to the ultimate well-being of individuals. The beatific vision, though not exclusively an aesthetic phenomenon, would possess great value as a sight to behold, and thus enrich the afterlives of those who suffer, as indicated by St Paul in Romans. Adams here opens up new possibilities for aesthetic value in the theodicy discussion, though I will not discuss her work yet, as I think that a more helpful model for aesthetic interaction with theodicy is laid out by Eleonore Stump, which I will discuss in the next section.

3.4. Summary.

In this section, and the last section I have laid out two 'paradigms' for theodicy within which aesthetic criteria have played a role in the past. Regarding morally sufficient reasons, we can see why theodacists may have been resistant to incorporating these values: 1) aesthetic values do not easily function as morally sufficient reasons for God's permission of evil, and 2) in order to avoid guilt-by-association with process theodicy, many mainstream theodacists no doubt stay away from aesthetics.

Regarding best-of-all-possible-world scenarios, we can see quite easily how aesthetic criteria (or the lack thereof) have played and could play a role in arguing for (against) the optimality of the world. However, given the problematic nature of best world scenarios, we can see how aesthetic criteria can come to play next to no role at all in arguing for the *minimally*-necessary goodness of the world, except insofar as aesthetic values contribute to the ultimate well-being of an individual.

4. Philosophical Frameworks in Theodicy: *Perception as Theodicy*

Though we read Eleonore Stump above—noting that she could find no obvious place for aesthetic categories to play a role in theodicy—appropriately enough, perhaps in some sense answering her own question, several of Eleonore Stump’s more recent essays have tackled the theodicy question from a vantage point which is distinct from much of the other recent work in the area. In two essays, “The Mirror of Evil”, and “Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil” Stump introduces new considerations which are suggestive for the scope of theodicy and may open the door for the full range of Christian distinctives, which Hick places outside the scope of rational theology.

4.1. The Mirror of Evil.

In “The Mirror of Evil” Stump reflects on the obsessive and nearly morbid inability some people have to look away from the evils of the world. Some, Stump notes, can look into the mirror, “take note, shake their heads sadly, and go about their business.”¹⁵⁸ Stump compares these people to Tolkien’s hobbits. Others, however, like Philip Hallie, who studied the cruelty of the Nazis, cannot stop gazing at the miserific visions of our world, no matter how dark. Hallie writes of his research into the Nazi medical experiments, “My study of evil incarnate whose bars were my bitterness toward the violent, and whose walls were my horrified indifference to slow murder... Between the bars and the walls I revolved like a madman...over the years I had dug myself into Hell.”¹⁵⁹

Stump uses our perception of evil to dig deeper into the nature of our ability to arrive at beliefs and value judgments, especially regarding evil. “[H]ow do we know”, she writes, “that the torture of Jewish children by

¹⁵⁸ Eleonore Stump, “The Mirror of Evil” in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (NY: Oxford UP, 1994), 236.

¹⁵⁹ Eleonore Stump, “The Mirror of Evil”, 238.

Nazi doctors is evil?”¹⁶⁰ The answer Stump gives is, I think, correct: such evil is immediately and intuitively *felt* to be wrong. We begin with strong intuitions, which are later organized and revised, but “our original intuitions retain an essential primacy.”¹⁶¹ If, in the process of organizing and revising our insights, “we found that our ethical theory countenanced those Nazi experiments”, Stump says, “we’d throw away the theory as something evil itself.”¹⁶² While we don’t know how exactly we form these intuitions they retain a primacy which is irreplaceable, even if it is not completely explicable.

In a similar way, we also cannot completely explain how we recognize persons. “When I see my daughter’s face” Stump says, “I know who she is, and not by reason, memory, or perception.”¹⁶³ Stump buttresses her case with the example of “prosopagnosics”, people who cannot recognize friends or family, despite the fact that these poor people have their reason, memory, and senses in working order.¹⁶⁴ Though our understanding of this faculty is underdeveloped, both here and in Stump’s essay, her conclusion seems sensible: that we have “cognitive faculties that we don’t understand much about but regularly and appropriately rely on”.¹⁶⁵

What Stump wants to suggest here is that our judgments of evil, like our ability to recognize faces of people that we know, operate in similar, and similarly mysterious ways. On seeing some atrocity (Stump gives an example of a Bosnian woman’s baby being decapitated and its head thrown into her lap) we instinctively perceive the evil at work, without recourse to memory or reason. We do not need to recall the sixth commandment given to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 239.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Moses, or abstract to the categorical imperative in order to discern the evil at work, we simply recognize it for what it is.

Stump builds on this faculty for perceiving evil, arguing that ‘it’ can also discern true goodness “without needing to reflect much or reason it out.”¹⁶⁶ The story of Philip Hallie comes back in again, as Hallie, in the midst of his research into Nazi atrocities, discovered the account of the residents of Chambon, and their effort to hide Jews in order to protect them. Reading the story, Hallie reached up to brush some dust from his cheek and discovered that tears covered both his cheeks. “Why tears, do you suppose?” Stump asks, and then answering herself, writes, “good news cracks your heart. It makes it feel keenly again all the evils to which it had become dull.”¹⁶⁷

[W]e sometimes weep when we are surprised by true goodness. The latest tales of horror in the newspaper distress us but don’t surprise us. We have all heard so many stories of the same sort already. But true goodness is unexpected and lovely, and its loveliness can be heartbreaking. The stories of the Chambonnais rescuing Jews even on peril of their own imprisonment and death went through him like a spear, Hallie says. Perhaps if he had been less filled with the vision of the mirror of evil, he would have wept less over Le Chambon.¹⁶⁸

The *modus operandi* for Stump’s essay rests on the way this mirror enables a certain kind of perception:

So, in an odd sort of way, the mirror of evil can also lead us to God. A loathing focus on the evils of the world and ourselves prepares us to be the more startled by the taste of true goodness when we find it and the more determined to follow that taste until we see where it leads. And where it leads is the truest goodness of all - not the boss of the universe whose word is moral law or to sovereignty that must not be dishonored, but to the sort of goodness of which the Chambonnais’s goodness is only a tepid aftertaste. The mirror of evil

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 240.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

becomes translucent, and we can see through it to the goodness of God. There are some people, then, and I count myself among them, for whom focus on evil constitutes a way to God.¹⁶⁹

Stump builds on this to argue that depending on where we start, in our reflections, will determine how we see the mirror of evil and the goodness of God. If we start only with the vision of evil, then the problem of evil will be more pressing. But if we can see both God's goodness and the vision of evil, we may be assured that there is a "morally sufficient reason for God to allow evil...a reason in which true goodness is manifest."¹⁷⁰

Stump is ultimately, in my opinion, vague on the details as to how the mirror of evil might work for the rest of us, though this is hardly a fatal flaw for her argument, especially as it rests largely on the (twice quoted) Biblical invocation to "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). If Stump is arguing that there are ways of perceiving God's goodness in uniquely phenomenological ways somewhat distinct from philosophical discourse, then it makes sense that an essay would not be able to clearly convey this notion.

The mirror of evil is not the only route we can use to arrive at a vista of true goodness. "Some people glimpse true goodness by seeing it reflected in other people," she writes, "Others approach it more indirectly through beauty, the beauty of nature or mathematics or music."¹⁷¹ This sense of God's goodness, though, for Stump, is "found first and most readily in the traces of God left in the Bible."¹⁷² This leads us to Stump's second essay.

4.2. Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 242.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 240.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 241.

¹⁷² Ibid.

In her analysis of the Book of Job, Stump develops her ideas from “The Mirror of Evil” in a more concrete context, if one perhaps less universally applicable. She attempts to counter the prevailing notion (common, she says, to Biblical interpreters) that Job never gets the one thing he wants from God, an answer to why he suffers. Stump writes:

Contrary to the common interpretation, I think that Job does get what he wants in this story, namely, an explanation of why he suffers. Consequently, I also think that the Book of Job is helpful for thinking about solutions to the problem of evil, but only if it is read with careful attention to its character as a second person account.¹⁷³

Stump utilizes the distinction between first-, second-, and third-person accounts (perhaps most commonly discussed in literary criticism) to point to unique content that might exist in a personal, face-to-face experience. Where first-person accounts describe experiences subjectively (“I am wearing tattered khakis”) and third-person accounts describe experiences objectively (“Philip is wearing tattered khakis”), second person accounts seem to bridge the two types (“You are wearing tattered khakis”). The factual content of the third statement is essentially the same, but the relational content is surely different, specifically, if someone says this to me, there is the added content of being addressed by someone.

In the Book of Job, Stump’s essay argues, we must not overlook the relational content present in God’s address to Job at the end of the book. As described by many commentators (Stump here holds up the Anchor Bible Dictionary as her main foil), there is a relational disjuncture in the divine-human communications in the story. Job calls for an account by his adversary (Job 31:35), but God’s address to Job apparently gives no such account. Instead God’s speech to Job is merely an opportunity for him to hit a different set of ‘talking points’ - especially his role as the all-powerful

¹⁷³ Eleonore Stump, “Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil” in *Faith and Narrative* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.

overseer of creation (Job 38-40). As described by Stump, this way of construing the narrative is typically the basis for the notion that Job gets no answer to his request. Stump, however, disagrees, and finds in the divine speeches the indications of God's second-person relationship with creation itself. As when God describes his relationship to the sea, and says to it, "Thus far come, but no more. Here your wild waves halt" (38:11), or when God notes with motherly interest that He "marks" when the hinds and she-goats calve (39:1-2).

Stump writes about these passages that they "show God having personal interactions with all his creatures. He relates to everything he has made on a face-to-face basis, as it were; and in these personal interactions, God deals maternally with his creatures".¹⁷⁴ Job too is, by extension, included in this:

Nothing in God's speeches to Job specifically describes God's relations with human beings, of course, but there is certainly a ready inference - both for Job and for the readers of the book - from the way God deals with the rest of his creation to the way in which he deals with human persons.¹⁷⁵

But again Stump is keen to note that the content of God's speeches about his creation is not propositional in any obvious way. "The divine speeches don't make claims about God's relations to creation," she writes, "If they did, they would be a third-person account laying out some general theological claims. Instead, they constitute a second-person account that lets us participate, to some limited extent, in the perception of God's relation to inanimate things, plants, and animals".¹⁷⁶

It is this form of perception which is key to Stump's argument here, as she shows us how the experience of coming face-to-face with God, regardless

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 96.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 97.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 96.

of a seeming absence of “answers” would have content which might answer Job’s deepest questions. Stump writes,

Job does, then, have an explanation of his suffering; but it isn’t of the sort that philosophers have been interested in when they considered theodicies, because it isn’t a third person account. A second-person experience can constitute a good explanation of a mistaken charge of betrayal for the person who has that experience, but it will be hard for him to use that experience to convince a third party, for just the reasons I gave when I was explaining why second-person accounts differ from third-person accounts.¹⁷⁷

I think that Stump’s suggestions are compelling when reading the Book of Job, though an exegetical evaluation is beyond my interests. Her comments above, that second-person accounts may provide explanations for the person who experiences them, but are unconvincing in the larger sphere, raise the question of application for the problem of evil, generally.

Assuming that most of us do not have similar face-to-face experiences with God, the philosopher may well ask, at this point, what second-person accounts contribute to theodicy, aside from helping us read the Book of Job more clearly?

Stump, in reflecting on the insights of second-person accounts and Job, emphasizes the benefit for those already inside the Christian faith. Thinking about how compelling Job’s story will be for readers, she writes that Job’s encounter “can’t compel a certain view of things as arguments can”, and that “they are much more likely to be persuasive to those who have had some experience of their own of the sort being described in the story”.¹⁷⁸ In essence, Stump seems to concede that second-person accounts are of limited use, but here she quietly unmasks, I think, a tacit assumption in much contemporary theodicy, that theodicy must be addressed to those *outside* the faith.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 99.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Stump's essay concludes by reflecting that

The problem of evil presents itself differently to those within and those outside a religious community. Believers come to the problem of evil with what they take to be some sort of history of relations with the God they believe in. They can and should draw on that history in reflections on suffering... Furthermore, the second-person accounts of God, the stories about God in Scripture, will be read differently by believers, who have their own religious experiences to draw on as they read them... Consequently, believers will not and need not think about the problem of evil in the same way as nonbelievers do, and the believer's resolution to the problem of evil may be successful, even if it isn't persuasive to nonbelievers.¹⁷⁹

4.3. Reflection.

Stump's suggestions, thus presented, seem only to form the beginnings of a response to John Hick's skepticism about the role of the aesthetic theme (or other such notions) in the scope of rational theodicy. In the "Mirror of Evil" Stump points to our ability to recognize evil, and draws on our faculty to do so to bring out the mysterious way in which the mirror of evil may prepare us for the taste of true goodness. In "Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil" she notes the unique content gained by face-to-face contact (prototypically, by Job), and suggests that we too can gain a similar vision through our own experiences, or through reflection on the story of Job.

What is crucial for me to bring out here is that Stump points to several ways that we can perceive God's goodness in which are not amenable to the straightforward practice of theodicy. If there is content that is not easily transmitted in the standard practice of theodicy—if, in more classic words, we must "Taste and see that the Lord is good"—then it is reasonable to introduce a spectrum of modes of perception which may have bearing for theodicy. Stump has introduced two, neither of which I feel it necessary to

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 100.

defend, but both of which, I believe, form the beginnings of a critique of Hick's doubts. They work to undermine, not merely Hick's explicit arguments, but the general assumption which one finds throughout contemporary theodicy, that theodicy exists to counter accusations by career philosophers of the unbelieving variety.

In essence, theodicy's goal is often seen to be to defend the outer edges of Christian belief (or generically theistic belief) against atheistic incursions. Given this framework, we see more clearly why, say, Hick takes umbrage with angelology as a resource for theodicy. When he says that it is beyond the scope of rational theology (in the same breath as saying that belief in aliens is beyond its scope) Hick is attempting to convince an audience that probably believes in *neither*. Many Christians, however, have no problem accepting the reality of angels (in fact, will affirm gladly based on nothing other than scriptural testimony). To construct a theodicy that brackets out internal Christian resources such as angels or aesthetics is surely no crime, but to state that such categories are beyond theodicy's scope is far too restrictive.

While I grant that theodicy's task is somewhat specific—to alleviate the tension between the idea of God and the fact of evil—its resources are ultimately catholic. In doing theodicy we can, I argue, and should, draw on the richness and complexity of all of God's design. If creation is to be any indicator for God's *modus operandi* we should expect a richly layered account of providence. God's creation is filled with incredible variety. Gerard Manley Hopkins writes of a world filled with "Pied Beauty", "All things counter, original, spare, strange, / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim. / He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change / Praise Him". This poetic awareness of the variety and beauty of creation is a striking reminder of the immensity of

God's creation, and the unique ways in which each part reflects God's glory. Chesterton raises a similar point. "If Christianity should happen to be true—that is to say, if its God is the real God of the universe—then defending it may mean talking about anything and everything", Chesterton writes, "Things can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is false, but nothing can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is true."¹⁸⁰ This comment is remarkably apropos for our study in general, and this context specifically. If everything that exists is created by God, then it seems foolish to look away from aspects of this reality in order to perceive more clearly God's purposes. But even more than the variety of God's creation, God Himself is revealed to us in a multiplicity of ways: as Creator, Judge, King, Father, Redeemer, and Shepherd.¹⁸¹ To hold up one aspect of God's person to the exclusion of other aspects distorts our picture of God's person and purposes. Not only does it hamper the task of theodicy, but it weakens the importance of it. To defend a God who is a just Judge but *not* a great Artist - who is Goodness but *not* Beauty - is to defend a God in whom I do not believe.¹⁸²

Stump's work points to unique ways that we can grow in our perception of God's goodness in the midst of evil which are not encompassed within the traditional calculus of morally sufficient reasons (though they do not overturn, but rather complement this calculus, as Stump herself would no doubt suggest.) Though I have, through examining several different frameworks for theodicy, argued for varying roles (marginal though they may be) for aesthetic values to play, I believe that Stump's work is the most hospitable to the aesthetic theme, in that the aesthetic theme could be

¹⁸⁰ Quoted in Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 80.

¹⁸¹ For more on this, see Alan Coppedge's *Portraits of God: A Biblical Theology of Holiness* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

¹⁸² See also *Conf.* 11.4.

employed as a unique mode of perception (akin to the mirror of evil or a second-person experience) which allows us to see the larger issue of God's providence from a unique vantage point. While Stump argues that certain kinds of perception are only available to those within the Christian faith, I make no identical claim for the aesthetic theme, but a related one in that the aesthetic theme may not be amenable to all addressees of theodicy.

Nevertheless, this says little about the usefulness of the aesthetic theme, so long as we make no requirement that all attempts at theodicy must be addressed to all reasonable people.

In the next chapter we will attempt to move toward an account of *seeing* theodicy through the aesthetic theme.

APPENDIX A: *Kellenberger and the Epistemic Power of Beauty*

There is a possible fourth paradigm for theodicy which is worth mentioning briefly, specifically, there is an argument that other factors give us such strong insight into the goodness of God that, though the problem of evil as such remains unresolved, in the face of other epistemological evidence, the problem of evil is reduced, as Nelson Pike phrases it, “to a noncrucial perplexity of relatively minor importance.”¹⁸³ Into this framework aesthetics might possibly be fit because the argument from beauty could act as an epistemological booster shot. James Kellenberger, for one, proposes this sort of scenario. Kellenberger’s recent article “God’s goodness and God’s evil” also sees Job as a prototype for some believers. “His belief in God’s goodness does not require an understanding of God’s reason for allowing or creating evil,” Kellenberger writes of Job, “It is, however, essential that Job unfalteringly believes in God’s goodness and the goodness of God’s creation.”¹⁸⁴ The beauty of creation is especially key in Kellenberger’s argument, because it is through creation that the Job-like believers will perceive God’s goodness.

[W]e humans are such that when we are allowed to lift up our eyes and to behold God’s creation, we will behold God’s goodness, righteousness, and love in it, so that, in our addition to standing in awe before the transcendent majesty of creation, we might well be moved to bless the name of the Lord and to be joyful.¹⁸⁵

Kellenberger thus combines Stump’s insights about Job’s “second-person” encounter with God and our mysterious recognition of God’s goodness in the beauty of nature under the moniker “Job-like faith.” But Kellenberger

¹⁸³ Nelson Pike, “Hume on Evil” in *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 102.

¹⁸⁴ James Kellenberger, “God’s Goodness and God’s Evil.” *Religious Studies* 41.1 (2005): 25-26

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

seems more ambitious with his use of “Job-like faith”—more than simply a confidence that God must have a morally sufficient reason, as Stump argues—Kellenberger’s believer “would not regard evil as evidence of any sort or degree against God’s goodness or existence.”¹⁸⁶ Just as Job found comfort after a face-to-face encounter with God, we too, Kellenberger thinks, may well experience a comfort and trust in God after seeing the divinely-designed “transcendent majesty of creation”.¹⁸⁷

He further provides an example that indicates how strongly we ought to take evidence for God’s goodness perceived in creation. The example provided in the essay is of a clever houseguest who steals the family jewels and frames the butler. Clues are left by this clever criminal to implicate the butler, and when the police arrive they discover these clues. Kellenberger raises that point that even despite the presence of clues, it would be “quite irrational” if the *criminal* took such evidence as proof of the butler’s guilt. Since the criminal has special (incurable) knowledge, no amount of evidence would serve to convince him that the butler committed the crime. By extension, “the Job-like believer knows that God is good and that God’s goodness shines through creation, she/he would not, should not, see evil as any evidence against God’s goodness”.¹⁸⁸

Given the apparent value of this sort of perception, we must ask how likely it is that we might also possess Job-like faith? Kellenberger’s essay is unhelpfully vague here, as he gives few clues as to the availability of this perception, though he does seem to suggest that it might be widely available. Citing an example raised from H. H. Farmer, “Walking in a

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 31.

garden, or through the fields, a man of sensitive spirit may suddenly become livingly aware, through the contemplation of the beauty and richness and orderly reliability of nature, of the steadfast goodness of God toward man...”¹⁸⁹ Kellenberger invokes the long-standing tradition that the beauty, richness, and orderliness of nature provides awareness of God’s goodness, à la Augustine.¹⁹⁰ But would this awareness likely provide third-person evidence of “God’s goodness, righteousness, and love”?¹⁹¹ In Farmer’s example, it is the “beauty and richness and orderly reliability” of nature which makes us aware of God’s goodness. This is indeed part of the traditional argument for the existence of a good God. Beauty and orderliness act as a set of evidence for God’s goodness, but it must also be remembered that evil acts as a competing set of evidence.

Given these two competing sets of evidence, we must seriously consider how much weight to assign each of the sets of evidence. Without denying that for some, the experience of created beauty may well be powerfully compelling and even mystical, I find it difficult to believe that created beauty can be confidently assigned the sort of evidence of which Kellenberger speaks (i.e. being as incorrigibly sure of God’s goodness as of the knowledge of our own recent criminal actions). Philosopher Paul Draper, writing about the epistemic “weight” of beauty says,

theism is supported by the fact that the universe contains an abundance of beauty... Thus, a beautiful universe, especially one containing beings that can appreciate that beauty, is clearly more likely on theism than on naturalism, and so is evidence favoring theism over naturalism.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Quoted in James Kellenberger, “God’s Goodness and God’s Evil”, 30.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Paul Draper, “Seeking but Not Believing: Confessions of a Practicing Agnostic” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 204.

Yet, even acknowledging this epistemic advantage, Draper denies that beauty overturns the argument against God's existence, because, as he asserts, "[a]rguments from evil against theism are much more powerful than the argument from beauty in favor of theism."¹⁹³ Here I am inclined to agree with Draper that the power of the problem of evil argument (as it presents itself *prima facie*) is greater than the argument for God's goodness/power/existence which we can base on the amount of beauty in the world. Thus, I think that Kellenberger likely overestimates the evidential weight of beauty in the midst of evil.

However, *even if* we assigned beauty the sort of evidentiary weight which Kellenberger does, there may still be problems with his argument: specifically, if the traditional theistic picture were the *only* option for belief in the divine, then perhaps the epistemic weight of beauty could be said to outweigh and upset the weight of the problem of evil, but there are *other* options for making sense of both sets of evidence. C. S. Lewis comments on the observation of nature as a clue to God's character when he writes

One [bit of evidence we have about God] is the universe he has made. If we used that as our only clue, then I think we should have to conclude that He was a great artist (for the universe is a very beautiful place), but also that He is quite merciless and no friend to man (for the universe is a very dangerous and terrifying place).¹⁹⁴

If we followed Lewis's line of thought, trying to synthesize both good and bad sets of evidence, the resulting picture of God would likely be a deistic one. God is viewed as a distant artist, winding up the lovely clockwork and letting it alone. Or perhaps something like the process theologian's view of God will work: where God is involved in the world, providing some goods,

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book I, Chapter 5.

but unable or unwilling to ensure perfect harmony. The two problems with Kellenberger's argument, in my view, are that it likely overestimates the evidentiary power of beauty, and that (even if beauty could be assigned such strong value as Kellenberger would like) it does not take into account quasi-theistic positions that might easily account for both created beauty and serious evils.

PART I, CONTINUED: THE FOUNDATIONS OF AESTHETIC THEODICY

John Hick on the Aesthetic Theme, Continued.

In the previous chapter we have attempted to confront John Hick's claim that the scope of theodicy is not such that elements such as the aesthetic theme can play any role. In examining differing frameworks for theodicy, I have tried to show how aesthetic values generally may play a role, as lesser morally sufficient reasons and as contributors to God's goodness to persons (and hence the minimal goodness of a world). Yet, while these are certainly suggestive that aesthetic values cannot be cleanly divorced from theodicy's larger moral considerations, I have favored a third framework for the inclusion of aesthetics (and one which is closer, I think, to Hick's original critique): that of the aesthetic theme as a way of perceiving God's providence.

In *Evil and the God of Love*, Hick describes the Augustinian picture of the universe as "seen as a complex picture or symphony or organism whose value resides in its totality".¹⁹⁵ It is this picture which Hick critiques in writing that "A Christian theodicy must be centered upon moral personality rather than upon nature as a whole, and its governing principle must be ethical rather than aesthetic."¹⁹⁶ Again, it is not simply that Hick finds fault with the constituent elements of Augustine's theodicy (plenitude, balanced punishment, evil as privation), though he does challenge them; rather Hick also finds fault with an aesthetic rendering of key elements of Hick's Irenaean theodicy (soul-making, eschatological rather than original focus, universal redemption). Writes Hick, "even this improved version of the

¹⁹⁵ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 201.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 204.

aesthetic theme, making use of the added dimension of time, and pointing to an eschatological resolution of the interplay between good and evil, is still open to a fundamental objection,” which Hick labels as “sub-personal.”¹⁹⁷

I have played upon Hick’s use of the visual metaphor (“The universe... is *seen* as a complex picture or symphony or organism”) to indicate a fundamental objection with any attempt *to look at theodicy from the scenic vista of aesthetic categories*. Following Hick’s use of the term, I have called this vista the “aesthetic theme”, and extracted it from its Augustinian context to apply to all attempts to look at theodicy aesthetically.

I have conceded that not all frameworks for doing theodicy are perfectly amenable to the inclusion of aesthetic goods. In arguing against the atheistic arguments from evil we may find them less-than-helpful, even distracting in offering a tight, logical defense. But I have not conceded that all theodicy must operate in this particular mode. Theodicy connotes an attempt to help resolve the *prima facie* tension between the idea of God and occurrent evil, with the intention of resolving it in God’s favor. Invoking G. K. Chesterton, I have tried to suggest that in arguing for the truth of Christianity, “nothing can be irrelevant”. If indeed this world is brought about by a sovereign creator (i.e. all is either performed or permitted by Him for some good purpose), no matter how varied His intentions, all things can be connected to our understanding of God. By extension, we can believe that sensing God’s providence in the midst of evil will therefore be connected to a wide range of affairs, and ultimately, somehow connected to all creation. Attempting to avoid, however, steering theodicy into exploring endless minutiae, I have held up two recent essays by Eleonore Stump which point to unique modes of perception that have relevance for theodicy.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 199, 201.

In person-to-person contact with God (or in perceiving someone else's contact), and in observing the stark contrast between obscene wickedness and true goodness, we sense something of providence perhaps otherwise hidden. I suggest that these modes of perception are non-trivial, and hypothesize that other such modes of perception may be equally helpful. In this framework, I put forward the aesthetic theme as a way of perceiving elements of God's providence which is helpful for the purposes of resolving the *prima facie* tension which seems to arise so naturally for fallen humanity.

As such, the previous chapter counters Hick's general suspicion of elements such as the aesthetic theme playing a role in the "rational discussion" of theodicy, and attempts to counter the wider suspicion of aesthetic values in theodicy by providing a context within which they can play a role without "stealing thunder" from moral values or contributing to confusion about God's purposes.

Yet a second objection is still in play, and, though it requires less conceptual shifting, it is, I think, the more challenging to answer. Hick, anticipating the sort of response that I have brought in the previous chapter, admits that whatever other "realms of life and dimensions of meaning there may be...our positive knowledge of God's nature and purpose still derives from His incarnation in Jesus Christ".¹⁹⁸ This revelation, *following* Hick, suggests that "any justification of evil must be a justification of it as playing a part in bringing about the high good of man's fellowship with God, rather than as necessary to the aesthetic perfection of a universe which, in virtue of its completeness, includes personal life."¹⁹⁹ In this context, Hick is questioning the Augustinian "aesthetic theme", which places emphasis on a certain *sort*

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 204.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

of aesthetic perfection, moment-to-moment harmony. Hick is rightly skeptical of Augustine's attempt to affirm the continual justice of the entire universe at any given moment. But Hick is further skeptical of *all* attempts to construct aesthetic analogies, even within a more eschatological model, because a focus on creation's aesthetics would distract from the relational elements of any theodicy. Following Hick's line of thought, if the fullest revelation of God's character is in the God-man Jesus, sent to redeem humans and reveal God's personal love for them, why bother with impersonal pictures and analogies? If indeed, as Hick indicates, the most direct form of God's revelation is in Jesus, why take detours down the 'back-roads' of theological aesthetics?²⁰⁰

Given the urgency of the anguished "why" question, and the specific challenge that the problem of evil poses for trust in God, mightn't theodacists drive a bit more directly toward the destination, rather than stop for so many scenic vistas? Hick's case carries with it the power and tradition of Occam's Razor, which seeks to *shave away* unnecessary complications when simpler ones will do. It is therefore necessary to suggest that aesthetics is not a *diversion* for Christian theology, but another important angle from which to view it. Though aesthetic theodicy may not be blessed with the benefit of making the theodicy conversation simpler in the short term, its operating assumption is that (as the church fathers saw again and again) any basic account of reality should include the beautiful alongside the good and the true. A purely moral account may be *simpler*, but only at the cost of being *reductionistic*.

Yet, it must be noted that there is a pastoral context for Hick's comments, and these need to be taken seriously. "A Christian theodicy," he writes, "must be centered upon moral personality rather than upon nature as a

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

whole, and its governing principle must be ethical rather than aesthetic.”²⁰¹

We must agree that theodicy as we are concerned with it is *centered* on human suffering. The suffering *of* the animal world is a serious question, but we must keep in mind that the problem of suffering as we understand it is not a problem *for* the animal world. It is *we* who must grapple with this question as it appears to us and affects us, and thus respond to it from our situated epistemic and moral position. The sufferings of long-extinct species or the chaotic collapse of a distant galaxy are not within our network of moral affections nor much within our grasp of understanding. To focus on such distant ‘evils’ would be a wasted exercise in sympathy. As a member of a thinking, feeling, and suffering species - further, one which has been honored by the miracle of the incarnation - we ought to take our own experience as the central focus of theodicy. Thus, we can hardly blame Hick’s intentions in taking human life so seriously.

The proper question for theodicean method, then, is not *where* the center of the discussion should be located, but how *widely* the circumference should be extended. It is the purpose of this chapter to argue that aesthetic considerations enrich our perception, and thus make it worthwhile to widen the circumference of theodicy to include them.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2 - AESTHETICS AND THEOLOGICAL INSIGHT

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

HEBREWS 1: 1-3, KJV

1. The Divorce of Theology and Aesthetics: *The Duck/Rabbit Phenomenon*

Over the last fifty years, while the problem of evil discussion has flourished and specialized into a variety of areas, the relationship between theodicy and aesthetics has remained almost entirely unexplored—with very few mentions scattered across the literature. When aesthetics *is* mentioned it is often treated briefly and/or dismissively. As I argued in the last chapter, this is understandable because the way that the problem of evil argument is *framed* often admits little room for aesthetic considerations. But there is more to the matter than the framing of the theodicy question.

Philosophically speaking, aesthetics itself can be resistant to inclusion. As an area of study, it often generates little interest in mainstream philosophy and theology. For philosophers, the area can seem to be more the domain of artists, while for artists, it may seem to be too philosophical. For theologians, the area may likewise seem too philosophical or too artistic, and thus be ignored. Protestant theologians in particular have been at times (though not always) especially desensitized to the role of the senses in theological insight.

But part of the blame for the dysfunctional relationship between theodicy and aesthetics must be attributed to the way aesthetics *itself* has been understood. It is difficult to pinpoint all the exact issues which have contributed to the division of these two areas, but there are a number of recent trends which have likely contributed and should be addressed in an attempt to bring these two areas back together.

1.1. The Modern Aesthetic Attitude: Irresponsible Aesthetics

Oscar Wilde opens his novella, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with an epigrammatic reflection on the interaction between art and morality. “Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming”, Wilde writes, “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated”.²⁰² But neither of these camps have reached the apex of aesthetic enlightenment, Wilde indicates, rather, “They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.”²⁰³

Throughout his preface, Wilde describes a divorce between artistic making and moral meaning: “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.”²⁰⁴ Utility is equally *verboten*; in Wilde’s words, “All art is quite useless.”²⁰⁵ The author’s famously sardonic wit and the preface’s complicated relation to the following story (Dorian Gray’s painting is, in fact useful, and we *do* find ugly meanings in Dorian’s beauty) make taking Wilde too literally a bit dangerous. But the import of Wilde’s words here lies not so much in his ability to lay out a systematic philosophy of art, but rather his ability to evoke a certain *mood*

²⁰² Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Paris: Charles Carrington, 1905), v.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., vi.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., vii.

prevalent in modern thought, where aesthetics was philosophically locked in a gilded cage—protected from moral significance as well as moral reproach.

The separation of aesthetics from utility looms large in philosophy of art over the last two-centuries. Wilde's discussion of art presses this point again and again as aesthetic artifacts are separated from 'meanings', 'ethics' and 'uses.' This Wildean way of thinking fits well into what John Hospers calls the "aesthetic attitude". Hospers describes it thusly,

The aesthetic attitude, or the "aesthetic way of looking at the world," is most commonly opposed to the *practical* attitude, which is concerned only with the utility of the object in question. The real estate agent who views a landscape only with an eye to its possible monetary value is not viewing the landscape aesthetically. To view a landscape aesthetically one must "perceive for perceiving's sake," not for the sake of some ulterior purpose.²⁰⁶

The two main dimensions of "ulterior purpose" which are alien to the aesthetic attitude thus described are the *cognitive* and the *moral*. Under this legacy of thought, certain questions must be off-limits, such as the question, "What does this aesthetic object show us?" or the question, "What is this aesthetic object good for?"

This attitude, cited here by Hospers in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, is undoubtedly the influential legacy to which Marilyn Adams, quoted in the last chapter, refers. Adams sees rightly that one of the contributing factors to theodicy's distrust of aesthetics is this prevalent attitude. "From the side of the art world," she writes "the art-for-art's-sake movement protested utilitarian values of an industrialized society with the declaration that art is

²⁰⁶ John Hospers, "Aesthetics, Problems of," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1967), 36.

Hospers' use of the real estate agent's dilemma, that he can see aesthetically or practically but not both, is indicative of the almost religious commitment to the autonomy of "Beauty" as described by Wilde. In the real estate example, for instance, we could see easily how a piece of property's loveliness could positively correlate to its monetary value (i.e. more beautiful = more valuable), but for a Wildean sensibility, "Beauty" capitalized is somehow tainted by association with utility.

and ought to be useless and irrelevant to-anything else!”²⁰⁷ More than simple irrelevance *to* the worlds of truth and goodness, however, the writings of Wilde (and many lesser ‘aesthetes’) suggest that art should be unfettered *from* truth and goodness.

This Wildean attitude is often seen in the artistic world as painters, photographers, sculptors, writers and filmmakers dismiss moral evaluations of their work as irrelevant, or even deliberately seek to shock the viewer by violating their ethical norms. Nabokov hand-waves questions about the morality of his book *Lolita* by noting that,

No writer in a free country should be expected to bother about the exact demarcation between the sensuous and the sensual... *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss... The rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster...²⁰⁸

Nabokov here does not deny that morality is important, but his preference for art and his disinterest in whether that art is morally beneficial or detrimental is clear. A more shocking quote comes from Norman Mailer, who helped to free a convicted criminal named Jack Abbott from prison because Abbott was a talented writer. Very soon after his release, Abbott murdered a young man, and Mailer's response was, reportedly, "Culture is worth a little risk. I'm willing to gamble with a portion of society to save this man's talent."²⁰⁹ It would be hazardous to suggest that Mailer and Nabokov *deeply* believe that a good novel is worth moral or physical harm—but their quotes none the less evoke a prevalent attitude in artistic culture: that all may be permitted if done in the service of creativity.

²⁰⁷ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 132.

²⁰⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, (New York: Vintage, 1997), 314-315.

²⁰⁹ Cited in Dennis Prager, "Capital punishment opponents have blood on their hands." World Net Daily, 29 November, 2005. Database on-line. http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=47631. Accessed 2 May, 2006.

We hear responses to this prevalent attitude in the writings of theodacists. Reviewing the problem of evil literature, it is easy to discern that Adams is on to something, as the explicit discussion of aesthetics shows a divide between the worlds of art and theology. But there is obviously a deeper worry at play, as aesthetics comes to be associated with prodigality and untrustworthiness.

In the last section, Terence Penelhum held up a Wildean disciple who valued all aesthetic value above all moral and physical values as an imagined opponent for his argument against the trivial use of aesthetics. That Penelhum is deeply worried about a Wildean theodacist making this proposal seems doubtful. In the context of Penelhum's argument, he seems to use aesthetic benefits such as a rosy-pink flush on the cheeks of tuberculosis sufferers as a kind-of short-hand for a value insufficient to defeat moral and physical evils. What is most suggestive about Penelhum's use of the Wildean theodacist is, perhaps, the apparent ease with which he connects the "art for art's sake" aestheticism with irresponsibility. This suggests, at the least, that, at the popular level, aesthetics and aestheticism may be closely linked in the popular imagination. Gordon Graham, for one, believes that this kind of amoral aestheticism is a real, live option within philosophy, and one which we must oppose:

Oscar Wilde in some of his writings (*The Portrait of Dorian Gray* may plausibly be thought to advance a contrary view) shows a marked preference for the aesthetic over the ethical and seems to hold that the beautiful is more important than the good, a view other 'aesthetes' (Edmund Burke to a degree) have held... In our own time close study of some of the century's most notorious serial killers (about which I shall have more to say at a later stage) reveals an indifference to morality which is not easily dismissed as madness or psychological deformity... It is in my view naive to think that egoism, amoralism, aestheticism and militarism are merely logical possibilities in the philosopher's lexicon, to be invoked only to any purpose in the

relatively idle business of exploring the foundations of morality. They are, rather, realities in both history and contemporary experience, demanding responses from what, borrowing a phrase of Onora O'Neill's, we might call 'the friends of virtue'.²¹⁰

Graham here suggests that we take aestheticism seriously as a worldview to be opposed. If indeed this is so, perhaps it is appropriate that Penelhum takes time to warn against minor aesthetics superseding moral values.

In his essay, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?", David Lewis likewise invokes the figure of the immoral artist as a possible explanation for evil. Why does God allow evil? Lewis asks,

maybe He is a fanatical artist who cares only for the aesthetic quality of creation... and cares nothing for the good of the creatures whose lives are woven into His masterpiece? (Just as a tragedian has no business providing a happy end out of compassion for his characters.)²¹¹

Lewis, like Penelhum, rightly rejects this aestheticism as improper within the scope of theodicy. To value aesthetic delight to the exclusion of the well-being of humans does not fit with our most basic understandings of Christian love. As such, both Penelhum's and Lewis' critiques are accurate; but the problem they point out, while easily dismissed, is not easily forgotten. The 'irresponsible aestheticism' of the kind Wilde or Mailer seem to advocate still lingers. At the back of the public consciousness there remains the specter of the aesthete, which suggests an untrustworthiness to artistic considerations in serious undertakings like theodicy. That Timothy O'Connor feels necessary to point out that "Grave evils cannot be morally justified by their service of aesthetic or other non-moral value" may further suggest a felt need on behalf of theodacists to oppose this attitude.²¹² The

²¹⁰ Gordon Graham, *Evil and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 26-7

²¹¹ David Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" *Philosophical Papers* 22:3 (1993): 149-172.

²¹² Timothy O'Connor, "The Problem of Evil: An Introduction", in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2002), 313.

natural temptation of reductionism, simply bracketing out aesthetics from a largely moral issue, may thus seem like the best approach. Because aesthetics is so rarely understood, and because it seems to have so little moral or cognitive value, the move to eliminate aesthetics from theology may seem, in this light, to be quite sensible.

1.2. The Modern Aesthetic Attitude: Kantian Aesthetics

If the modern aesthetic attitude presents itself in one form as a kind of reckless aestheticism, which is antithetical to a compassionate theodicy, there is at least one other form of this attitude which is more fundamental, which (though less obviously anti-Christian) may likewise contribute to the divorce of theodicy and aesthetics.

John Hospers earlier described the modern aesthetic attitude as “opposed to the *practical* attitude, which is concerned only with the utility of the object in question.”²¹³ Where an irresponsible aesthetic takes the divorce between aesthetics and cognitive or moral usefulness and runs with it, taking such liberty as an excuse for playful prodigality - there is a deeper and more serious strain of the modern aesthetic attitude which seeks to affirm morality, but keeps it separated from aesthetic perception.

The bracketing out (described by Hospers, above) of moral and cognitive concerns in the aesthetic attitude can be traced back to its most influential proponent, Immanuel Kant, whose notions of ‘disinterestedness’ and the ‘free play of beauty’, if not first found in his thought, were powerfully

²¹³ John Hospers, “Aesthetics, Problems of,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol 1 and 2 (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1967), 36. Hospers’ use of the real estate agent’s dilemma, that he can see aesthetically or practically but not both, is indicative of the almost religious commitment to the autonomy of “Beauty” as described by Wilde. In the real estate example, for instance, we could see easily how a piece of property’s loveliness could positively correlate to its monetary value (i.e. more beautiful = more valuable), but for a Wildean sensibility, “Beauty” capitalized is somehow tainted by association with utility.

transmitted through his writings.²¹⁴ Kant's *Critique of Judgment* presents a bold attempt to resolve the apparent antinomy between our subjective sensing of the world, and our desire to make universal statements about an object's beauty.²¹⁵ Kant's account of aesthetic judgment is fitting with Baumgarten's coinage of the term "aesthetic" as being the domain of "perceptibles", in that in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant wants to differentiate aesthetic perception from other faculties, such as cognition (pure reason) or morality (practical reason):

Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective... save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as if it is affected by the representation. To apprehend a regular, purposive building by means of one's cognitive faculty...is something quite different from being conscious of this representation as connected with the sensation of satisfaction. Here the representation is altogether referred to the subject and to its feeling of life, under the name of the feeling of pleasure and pain.²¹⁶

Kant's dense prose here indicates two key elements of his account of taste: *the role of concepts* and *the quality of feeling*. Regarding the *first*, that recognition of something's function or purpose (as in the case of a building) is something "quite different" from aesthetic judgment. This marks a sharp break between Kant's theory and the classical, mimetically-driven accounts of Plato and Aristotle.²¹⁷ Further, Kant is keen to break with the Medieval

²¹⁴ The works of Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Edmund Burke, and Archibald Alison either precede or are contemporary with Kant in drawing attention to the notion. [Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20:1 (1961): 131-143.]

²¹⁵ Fitting with his overall project, Kant seeks to navigate the Scylla of empiricism and the Charybdis of rationalism. Kant, in essence, tries to synthesize the empiricist Hume's *a posteriori* account of the subjective sensation of pleasure (while attempting to avoid Hume's ultimate circularity), and the rationalist's emphasis on principles of beauty, such as variety-within-unity (cf. Leibniz' *Discourse on Metaphysics*), which are founded upon *a priori* principles of reason [see Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: 1966), 156]. Thus Kant attempts to give a coherent account of judgment which is free from the conceptual baggage of rationalism, but which allows one to claim the universality of an object's beauty (contra Hume).

²¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1970) §1.

²¹⁷ See Plato, *The Republic*, books 1 and 2, and 10; Aristotle, *Poetics*, books 1, 2, and 3.

emphasis on formal properties and principles of the kind frequently described by Augustine as proportion or order (to which Aquinas adds integrity and luminosity). “There is no empirical *ground of proof* which would force a judgment of taste upon anyone”, Kant writes, standing against his philosophical ancestors.²¹⁸ For Kant, neither a thing’s conformity to some representational purpose (such as an animal’s species or a statue’s lifelike quality) nor its conformity to an abstract value (such as luminosity or unity) are enough to arrive at a pure judgment of beauty. “The judgment of taste can be determined by no representation of an objective purpose”, writes Kant “and consequently by no concept of the good, because it is an aesthetical and not a cognitive judgment”.²¹⁹

It should be noted, however that Kant’s account of taste is not entirely divorced from morality: as Roger Scruton notes, judgments of taste “involve the evaluation of objects as ends rather than means”.²²⁰ We can hardly quarrel with the consonance Kant finds between the moral and the

²¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §33.

²¹⁹ Ibid., § 11. Yet Kant is keen to stress that the apprehension of beauty is not irrational or illogical, though the faculty of appreciation “adds nothing to cognition” of the object’s purpose (§1). Kant secures the rationality of this sensation through the *second* element indicated above, the quality of feeling which one experiences. On his account, “subjective universality” of the judgment of beauty can be secured by ensuring that the operative desire in any aesthetic judgment is disinterested, and thus *pure*. “Everyone must admit,” Kant writes, “that a judgment about beauty, in which the least interest mingles, is very partial and is not a pure judgment of taste” (§2). The apprehension of beauty consists in “*entirely disinterested* satisfaction” (§6).

What is most fascinating about Kant’s work here is his rather ingenious attempt to create a completely subjective account of the judgment of beauty which is not mired in critical relativism. On Kant’s rendering, when presented with an object, two faculties are brought into play, the imagination, which perceives the object, and the understanding, which posits a cognitive concept of beauty specifically for the object perceived. So the two faculties participate in a sort of “free play” which is aimed neither at identification of the object as something specific (say, a Palm Warbler or a Yellow-rumped Warbler) nor at altering the understanding (for instance, with the added idea of “Birds are beautiful”).

In order to consider something good, I must always know what sort of thing the object is [meant] to be... But I do not need this in order to find beauty in something. Flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined and called foliage: these have no significance, depend on no determinate concept, and yet we like [*gefallen*] them (§4).

The end result is an assessment of the object which is free from ‘distractions’ such as pleasure and purpose, and therefore has no obvious conflicts-of-interest, which would prevent one from claiming universality.

²²⁰ Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Methuen, 1974), 27. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 59.

beautiful, even if we must ultimately part ways in seeking out more points of contact. Kant's affirmation of the beautiful as the "symbol of the morally good" is echoed in the work of Iris Murdoch who sees contact with beauty as an "attempt to see the unself".²²¹ If only in a limited way, Kantian aesthetics holds together the essence of moral goodness and the faculty of taste by using the former's capacity for disinterestedness to arrive at an aesthetic verdict.

However, despite its brilliant internal resolution of the antinomies of subjectivity and universality, many have questioned the success of Kant's account of taste; as Anne Sheppard comments, on the Kantian account of taste, "problems of how aesthetic disputes may be resolved, how aesthetic judgments may be justified, and how aesthetic comparisons are possible at all become particularly acute in relation to works of art."²²² One suspects, reading Kant's work, that it would be difficult to have a discussion *about* art with the philosopher. All appeals to artistic canons or poetic principles are seemingly ruled out by Kant. Imagining a situation where the authority of a critic might be invoked, Kant writes that he will stop his ears and "listen to no arguments and no reasoning".²²³ Amusing as this image may be, there is a troubling undercurrent to Kant's account of taste. One wonders if a Kantian aesthetic has room for growth. Can this faculty learn to judge more *disinterestedly*, or see more *perceptively*? And if so, is it possible to make universal statements, knowing that one could still be in need of development of taste? Further, Kant's aesthetic may seem to apply well to certain aesthetic objects, such as abstract designs, but seem ill-fitted to the world of narrative, where the excellence of a story is often judged in

²²¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 93; Cf. Elaine Scarry *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 111, 97. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §59.

²²² Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 75.

²²³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §33.

relation to a specific genre or other. The works of Shakespeare, though genius works, must be understood as existing within, and subverting, genres of fiction. Finally, while one agrees that a critic's writings are not sufficient to judge a work beautiful or not, for those who have learned from critics such as Aristotle, Sidney, Eagleton, Lewis, Beardsley or Frye, it is hard to believe that our sense of the beautiful cannot be aided by the guidance of others. It seems obvious that I have often learned to see and appreciate beauty through the advice of others.

But what is most problematic about the modern aesthetic attitude or, more specifically, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* for a theological aesthetic, is the emerging picture of the autonomy of aesthetic objects *qua* aesthetic objects.²²⁴ Following Kant, though the beautiful is not, *contra* Wilde, necessarily useless—even quite useful objects may possess beauty—consideration of an object's usefulness is contrary to a judgment of its beauty. The critic, Orpheus-like, cannot look back upon the object with other interests, lest the beauty of the object vanish in front of his eyes.²²⁵

Frank Burch Brown describes this 'either/or' thinking fittingly as the "duck/rabbit mentality" (making reference to the well-known optical illusion

²²⁴ Some might argue that Kant's aesthetic theory is only *nearly* autonomous from the cognitive and the moral, because, as Kant himself points out, apprehension of the beautiful signifies a "harmony of the faculties", and Kant writes that the beautiful is the "symbol of the morally good", though without moral purpose (*Critique of Judgment*, §59). But both of these statements ultimately signify nothing about aesthetic objects themselves, but rather point to some facet of our own faculties.

²²⁵ Though it is not a full-blown Kantian aesthetic that infects modern thought, this mentality is obviously seen in the way that we often consume art. Artworks traditionally considered as 'high' are consumed in venues which are devoted to purely perceptual contemplation. Museum paintings are deliberately isolated from other contexts when hung in quiet rooms, while opera, poetry and ballet are likewise separated from everyday life.

popularized in Wittgenstein's discussion of gestalt shifts).²²⁶ The 'duck-rabbit' figure can be seen *either* as a duck *or* as a rabbit, but not both.²²⁷ On Kant's conception, perception of beauty and perception of purpose must exist in alternate dimensions of thinking, and cannot mutually inform one another. While beauty and other aesthetic categories can be affirmed under this model, its value for theodicy will likely be minimal to non-existent.²²⁸

Further, if our judgment of all aesthetic value is free of governing concepts, purposeless, and disinterested, we can sense why those who follow after could see aesthetic value as useless and thus an unnecessary consideration

²²⁶ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 35.

The modernist, prone to exhibit what we can now term the 'duck/rabbit' mentality, tends to think of an experience or object as either aesthetic or non-aesthetic. Since the work of art is regarded as an aesthetic object par excellence, the modernist takes great pains to establish the extraordinary autonomy and self-referential 'meaning' of the art object. Thus we are told that the artwork's function is merely to shine forth in its fullness of being - a plenitude to which all cognitive, social, moral, or religious meanings are supposedly irrelevant. (31)

²²⁷ One gap in my coverage here is, of course, the absent Kierkegaard, whose division of aesthetic and ethical stages is famously held up as an example of either/or (*Either/Or*) thinking. Though Kierkegaard's division is in many senses defensible and often misread (as Kant's is), his dilemma is none the less telling of a perceived divide between sensation and morality which is widely held:

The only absolute Either/Or is the choice between good and evil, but this is also absolutely ethical. The esthetic choice is either altogether immediate, and thus no choice, or it loses itself in a great multiplicity... Consequently, either a person has to live esthetically or he has to live ethically. (in Theissen 199)

Kierkegaard's 'esthetic' stage is notably marked by giving one's self over to particulars, allowing one to live a life determined by contingencies instead of actualizing one's self:

To a certain degree, the person who lives ethically cancels the distinction between the accidental and the essential, for he takes responsibility for all of himself as equally essential... Insofar as the esthetic individual, with 'esthetic earnestness', sets a task for his life, it is really the task of becoming absorbed in his own accidental traits, of becoming an individual whose equal in paradoxicality and irregularity has never been seen, of becoming a caricature of a human being. (Theissen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, 200-1)

Certainly Hick's dichotomizing of the ethical and the aesthetic in *Evil and the God of Love* utilizes the same vocabulary as Kierkegaard, and also sees the aesthetic particulars of theodicy as distractive in a way which fits well with Kierkegaard's general description of the 'esthetic stage'. Kierkegaard's statement that "Christianity does not at all emphasize the idea of earthly beauty, which was everything to the Greeks" would further seem to fit with Hick's general critique of Augustinian theodicy as "neo-Platonic" against Irenaeus' more thoroughly Christian theodicy (Theissen, 196).

²²⁸ David Bentley Hart's book, *The Beauty of the Infinite* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], challenges the Kantian aesthetic, specifically finding fault with the barrier that Kant's sublime poses to aesthetic theology. Writes Hart,

Hence, beauty's only "truth" is the truth of a certain power of judgment, while everything of graver import dwells beyond the aesthetic altogether. The beautiful adumbrates nothing beyond the self, and thought must traverse it, even transgress it, to escape either triviality or illusion: the beautiful leaves off where the sublime begins, and the sublime itself falls away when it has sufficiently suggested to reason the formless power of the infinite. (46-7)

for theodicy. While the beautiful, *according to Kant*, may be the ‘mascot’ of the moral, so to speak, it cannot ‘play on the team’.²²⁹ Theodicy seeks to find order and purpose in a world disrupted by evil, but, as Jeremy Begbie writes, for Kant a “Judgment of taste does not add to our stock of knowledge about the world; it is not a claim to knowledge; it never asserts that there is purpose and order in the world”.²³⁰ If this is the case then aesthetic judgment must be irrelevant to making judgments about God’s goodness. Nor can we look to the aesthetic with any eye for its application to religious concerns, as such desires would cancel out our capacity for disinterested judgment. Thus, though Kantian aesthetics and the modern attitude it influences may perhaps be able to give a *coherent* account of judgment, its nature and structure prevents *cooperation* with theodicy’s task.

Yet even in philosophical circles that would otherwise be opposed to Enlightenment assumptions, there may still be found a widespread prejudice against aesthetics put into practice. Of course, the problem may not be, as Frank Burch Brown phrases it, “that too many people have been reading Kant”, but rather that his ideas express “in a sophisticated way many of the kinds of convictions and habits of mind that do, in fact, underlie our everyday ways of thinking about taste”.²³¹ Just as the figure of the immoral

²²⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §59.

²³⁰ Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 190-191.

Begbie goes on, “According to Kant, art manifests the world in such a way that we view it as if there were order in it, but only ‘as if’. However, this is not to say that the general activity of making aesthetic judgments (whether regarding the beautiful or the sublime) is altogether divorced from every kind of knowledge. Kant seems to use this faculty as ground for the idea of the sublimity of God, including his awe-some endowment of us with capacity for judgment:

Hence sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us (as far as it influences us). Whatever arouses this feeling in us, and this includes the *might* of nature that challenges our forces, is then (although improperly) called sublime. And it is only by presupposing this idea within us, and by referring to it, that we arrive at the idea of the sublimity of that being who arouses deep respect in us, not just by his might as demonstrated in nature, but even more by the ability, with which we have been endowed, to judge nature without fear and to think of our vocation as being sublimely above nature. (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 28)

²³¹ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171-2.

artist remains in the public consciousness, so too the notion that artistic evaluations are “all subjective” (and therefore not the basis for rational inquiry) remains. It is easy to find a near-Kantian philosophy in many art critics. Among even the most eloquent critics, one often finds a dual mentality, where aesthetic judgments are firmly voiced, while at the same time the perceptions of the critic are qualified with a brief statement that ‘This is but one person’s opinion.’ Thus, it seems probable that, though the modern aesthetic attitude may not be held to dogmatically, the Kantian legacy remains widely influential among everyday consumers of culture, eloquent critics and theodacists as well.

In the last chapter, Philip Quinn suggested that aesthetic criteria are “utterly irrelevant” to moral goodness in a way that seems derivative of Kantian thinking. For Quinn, as he considers whether Leibnizian aesthetic categories such as “unity-within-variety” have relevance for the overall moral goodness of a world, he can find no inherent benefit. Even on Kantian principles, this would seem to be an extreme view - Kant affirms a fitting correspondence between the movement of aesthetic judgment and the movement of moral reasoning - disinterested evaluation is necessary. But it is easy to see how Quinn could so easily miss the benefits of beauty given the prevalent modern aesthetic: aesthetics is simply *assumed* to be peripheral to serious moral and intellectual matters.

Likewise, John Hick has plainly contrasted the *ethical* and the *aesthetic* in a way that suggests that Hick might well affirm the modern aesthetic attitude’s separation of aesthetics from all other dimensions of “ulterior purpose”. Thus, if we are to inquire into some *effective* purpose (more than a merely *affective* quality) to aesthetic categories, values or works, in order to suggest that there may be a place for the “aesthetic theme” within theodicy’s task, we must first deal with some of the widespread assumptions about the

nature of art and aesthetics. If indeed contemporary philosophers of religion have tacitly absorbed modern attitudes toward aesthetics, it will be helpful to oppose this view as a preliminary move in any aesthetic theodicy.

The most telling evidence, however, of the absorption of the modern attitude must be the loud silence about aesthetics within theodicy. Where once great theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Boethius, strained to include considerations of beauty within their reflection on evil, the subject is now rarely mentioned. In his systematic theodicy, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Richard Swinburne discusses beauty in a very short chapter given to the consideration of the value of creation. Here Swinburne addresses the beauty of creation as an intrinsic property to all creation, one that is disrupted by the entrance of man onto the world-stage:

If one thinks of ugliness as a negative quality, as opposed to being the mere absence of beauty, one would be hard put to think of any part of the pre-human world which is ugly; ugliness in this sense seems to arrive with the arrival of humans, who, knowingly or unknowingly, make something which could be beautiful ugly instead.²³²

But this is as deeply as Swinburne explores the relation between beauty and evil in creation, and quickly leaves behind the subject by turning to “even better” considerations of “belief and thought, desire, sensation and purpose”.²³³ That beauty is raised and then left behind so quickly is indicative, not so much of any fault with Swinburne’s work, but of a pervasive discomfort with the subject among theodacists. Swinburne’s mention of beauty is the exception that proves the rule, in that it stands out prominently as an example of a theodacist trying to do something with beauty, even though he does so little with it. Thus, though the modern

²³² Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 53.

²³³ Ibid.

aesthetic presents a *prima facie* obstacle to the integration of aesthetics in theodicy, the even more difficult challenge before us is to offer an account of how the two areas may fruitfully interact, after such a long period of division.

Specifically, a theological aesthetic which theodicy would seek to appropriate should be able to allow aesthetic judgments and categories to *add* to our experience of God and the world conceptually and morally. Fortunately, Christian theology is not neutral about the role of images, but rather places central emphasis on a concrete image as fundamental to cognitive understanding. It also makes sense theologically that the direction that a Christian aesthetic should move is away from an account of aesthetic taste which places all emphasis on the judgment of the individual (no matter how disinterestedly he judges).

In the next section, I seek to lay out a preliminary theological aesthetics which may inform theodicy. I hope this account will counteract some of the inherent suspicion of aesthetics by offering a positive and Christian account.

2. A Preliminary Theological Aesthetic: *Fides Quaerens Aestheticum*

2.1. Christian Faith and Poetic Faith

In order to oppose the prevalent, if unexamined modern aesthetic attitude, it is important to begin with a basic, if all too brief, account of Christian aesthetics. Though there is no standard account to which we can appeal, it will be helpful to begin with a look at the form and content of a Christian aesthetic derived from fundamental theological assumptions. Two guides here will be especially helpful, Dorothy Sayers and Hans Urs von Balthasar, as they (respectively) cover questions of the importance of creativity in

expressing truth, and as they raise the subject of *beauty* as a manifestation of God's being—both looking to the incarnation of Christ as the starting point for reflection.

Undoubtedly, after emerging from the tight calculations of Kant's aesthetic, the work of Sayers and Balthasar may seem overly *presumptive* about what we can assume to be true. Sayers writes with confidence that "if we commit ourselves to saying that the Christian revelation discovers to us the nature of all truth, then it must discover to us the nature of the truth about Art among other things".²³⁴ Sayers' point seems a bit too broad, as we will discuss in the next section, but she is certainly pushing a valid point, that it would be ludicrous to approach aesthetics as if it were an entirely secular enterprise, when we must, by the nature of our faith, believe that Christian truth has bearing on all areas of human life.

Balthasar, like Sayers, sees that aesthetics has been trapped for too long in worldly understandings, from which it cannot escape with the tools left to us by Enlightenment thinkers. Though he does not mention Kant explicitly, it is easy to hear in his words a response to Kant's subjective aesthetics:

Are we justified in restricting the beautiful to the area of inner-worldly relationships between 'matter and form', between 'that which appears and the appearance itself', justified in restricting it to the psychic states of imagination and empathy which are certainly required for the perception and production of such expressional relationships? Or: May we not think of the beautiful as one of the transcendental attributes of Being as such, and thereby ascribe to the beautiful the same range of application and the same inwardly analogous form that we ascribe to the one, the true, the good?²³⁵

²³⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Gollancz, 1946), 30.

²³⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 38.

Balthasar favors the latter course, citing precedent in the church fathers, who presuppositionally “regarded beauty as a transcendental and did theology accordingly”.²³⁶ Balthasar writes on beauty, “Yet if the philosopher cannot begin with this word, but can at best conclude with it (always assuming that he has not forgotten it under way), should not the Christian for this very reason perhaps take it as *his* first word?”²³⁷

Balthasar’s opposition to the style of the ‘philosophical person’ (read as ‘Kant’) is undoubtedly an opposition to an overly mechanistic style which cannot handle the ambiguities of beauty. In seeking exactness, the sciences, according to Balthasar, “no longer have any time to spare” for beauty.²³⁸ More sadly in Balthasar’s eyes, theology has followed suit in seeking respectability in following a scientifically exact method which occludes such considerations.²³⁹ “[P]recisely for this reason”, he writes,

it is perhaps high time to break through *this* kind of exactness, which can only pertain to one particular sector of reality, in order to bring the truth of the whole again into view - truth as a transcendental property of Being, truth which is no abstraction, rather the living bond between God and the world.²⁴⁰

What George Steiner describes in *Real Presences* as a “wager on transcendence” sounds remarkably similar to what Sayers and Balthasar have suggested.²⁴¹ Such a wager is not, as Steiner notes, a mere stab in the dark, but a necessary step in any intellectual undertaking. All intellectual ventures require such wagers. “There is no construct, there is no intuitive imaging, of our identity in being, of our relations to the world,” Steiner writes, “which does not include at least one hiatus in the chain of definition and

²³⁶ Ibid., 39.

²³⁷ Ibid., 18.

²³⁸ Ibid., 17-8.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 214.

demonstration.”²⁴² Perhaps the most shocking element of Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm theory about the structure of scientific revolutions was how unscientific the nature of scientific progress seemed to be. Paradigm shifts, as Kuhn himself admitted, have a strongly *aesthetic* dimension, which in itself would seem to suggest little about the veracity of the new paradigm.²⁴³ Yet, the nature of scientific progress often requires such intuitive leaps, which are only later discovered to be highly accurate. Discoveries in science often begin with gut intuitions, such as a preference for a new, more elegant theory. Presumptions are often necessary in a wide range of human endeavors, ranging from the scientist’s hypothesis to the critic’s search for meaning in a work of art.

Steiner, in discussing the possibility of meaning in art, notes that to experience art is to gamble on a genuine encounter with the other. Engaging with art, whether abstract painting or fantastic fiction often requires of us various levels of trust. The reader of a novel must trust the author in order to *receive* the artwork as it is intended. To skip blithely through the pages in search of the “good parts” or to read the end of a mystery first can be a violation of the small trust necessary for enjoyment. Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously describes in his *Biographia Literaria* a need for a “willing suspension of disbelief” in the reading of imaginative literature; such a suspension constitutes an act of “poetic faith.”²⁴⁴ Steiner describes this rightly, then, as a “wager”, an act of trust where the recipient of a work of art must exhibit some measure of faith. He writes, “there is in the art-act and its reception...there is in the experience of meaningful form,

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ For instance, Kuhn writes, of scientific paradigms, new paradigms “appeal to to the individual’s sense of the appropriate or the aesthetic—the new theory is said to be ‘neater,’ ‘more suitable,’ or ‘simpler’ than the old” (Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996], 155.) See also, John Preston, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: A Reader’s Guide* (London: Continuum, 2008)

²⁴⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol 2. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 6.

a presumption of presence.”²⁴⁵ In order to engage in any intellectual venture, then, a Steiner-ian “wager on transcendence”, or a Coleridgian act of “poetic faith”, is clearly needed. If this is true, then it seems fitting to begin with the Christian faith as a starting point for our account of theological aesthetics

2.2. Incarnation and Christian Creativity

In 1944, Dorothy Sayers publicly bemoaned the absence of a Christian philosophy of art and aesthetics in the church. She acknowledges, of course, that there have been “plenty of writers on aesthetics who happen to be Christians, but they have seldom made any consistent attempt to relate their aesthetic to the central Christian dogmas.”²⁴⁶ Sayers’ comment is perhaps a bit broad (neo-Scholastics such as Jacques Maritain might put in a word of defense for Christian aestheticians like Augustine, Aquinas and perhaps himself), but it nevertheless points truthfully to a loud silence about aesthetics in theological discourse in Sayers’ time. Further, as Sayers notes, “as far as the European aesthetic is concerned, one feels that it would have developed along precisely the same lines had there never been an Incarnation to reveal the nature of God - that is to say, the nature of all truth.”²⁴⁷ Again, Sayers is vague about the details of the “European aesthetic” (she leaps from Plato and Aristotle to the contemporary context as if the Western aesthetics had never gone through a period called the Middle Ages) but her comment is remarkably apropos regarding the legacy of Enlightenment thought which, as discussed above, is so powerfully inaugurated by Kant. Regarding the dis-carnate quality of much Enlightenment philosophy, focused as it is on the autonomous thinker (cf.

²⁴⁵ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 214.

²⁴⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Towards a Christian Aesthetic”, in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1946), 30.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum"), and separated from the messy particularities of authority and tradition as sources of knowledge, it is no surprise that the European aesthetic as Sayers glosses it has little room for the incarnation.

Regarding the pagan aesthetic, Sayers' main focus, she points to Plato's moral and ontological objections to the arts. Where Plato first objects to the corrupting influence of all but the simplest and most edifying forms of art (Book III of *The Republic*), he later denounces imitative art on grounds of its increasing removal from the Ideal (Book X of *The Republic*). Here and elsewhere (*Ion*, for instance), Plato's low view of representational art marks it out of bounds for serious consideration as having conceptual benefits. If, as argued in *The Republic*, representational art is just a mimeograph of a mimeograph of a mimeograph, its value can hardly reside in its truth-telling capacities. Plato's austere aesthetic, then, leads one to consider primarily the moral characteristics of art. As Sayers notes, where Plato attacks "art for entertainment", even the highest forms of drama, for their dissipating effect on the psyche, Aristotle's defense of the representational arts simply finds some use for this dissipating effect, rather than challenging Plato's deeper suspicions about the limitations of art.²⁴⁸ At best inspirational and at worst distracting from action and degrading to good character, Plato's aesthetic, Sayers observes, is still found in modern-day England:

Like the people of Plato's decadent Athens [the average British citizen] has forgotten or repudiated the religious origins of all Art. He wants entertainment, or, if he is a little more serious-minded, he wants something with a moral, or to have some spell or incantation put on him to instigate him to virtuous action.²⁴⁹

Fortunately, Christianity does not need to begin at the same point from which Plato (or Kant) originate, because Christian theology is neither

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 40.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

committed to the Greek metaphysics of Ideals (nor an Enlightenment epistemology). Rather, as Sayers argues, there are powerful internal Christian resources which guide us in discerning a properly Christian aesthetic.²⁵⁰

Sayers' specific focus at the end of her address sketches an ontology of creativity which uses presuppositions about what the incarnation *must be* theologically, and then applies this to an account of human creativity. Specifically, Sayers stresses a quality of *coming into being* which accompanies the act of creation, even in the very nature of the Trinity. At the roots of Divine life is an ongoing creativity which is not merely mimetic but truly generative:

God, who is a Trinity, creates by, or through, His second Person, His Word or Son, who is continually begotten from the First Person, the Father, in an eternal creative activity. And certain theologians have added this very significant comment: the Father, they say, is only known to Himself by beholding His image in the Son.²⁵¹

The eternal generation of the Son by the Father is an expression which is more than mimetic, the Son is the Image of the Father, but cannot be the *copy* of the Father (else, could not be 'Son'), and is yet indispensable to the Father's *expression* of His father-hood (else, could not be 'Father'). Christ's incarnation, Sayers emphasizes, is thus an *expression* of God's purposes, but also an *express* expression, an indispensable image. Elaborating on the author of Hebrews (whom she 'reveals' to be Paul), Sayers writes,

'God...hath spoken to us by His Son, the brightness of this glory and *express image* of His person.' - Something which, by being an image,

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 30. It is hard to disagree with Sayers's polemical point here:

It is absurd to go along placidly explaining Art in terms of a pagan [or, one may add, Enlightenment] aesthetic, and taking no notice whatsoever of the complete revolution of our ideas about the nature of things that occurred, or should have occurred, after the first Pentecost (36).

²⁵¹ Ibid.

expresses that which it images. Is that getting us a little nearer to something? There is something which is, in the deepest sense of the words, *unimaginable*, known to Itself (and still more to us) only by the image in which it expresses Itself through creation; and, says Christian theology very emphatically, the Son, who is the express image, is not the copy, or imitation, or representation of the father, nor yet inferior or subsequent to the Father in any way - in the last resort, in the depths of their mysterious being the Unimaginable and the Image are *one and the same*.²⁵²

Having drawn on the incarnation as a resource for a theology of creativity, Sayers then applies this deep connection between the transcendent Trinity and its economic expression to an account of human experience which is mediated through creative expression. Against an overly Greek notion of a static deity, the Christian God is fundamentally creative in His innermost being, and thus His ongoing creativity is an outer expression of a perpetual inner *perichoresis*. But, unlike the neo-Platonic ‘One’ God’s involvement with the world is not merely an unconscious out-flowing of goodness which is, in a sense, fixed. Rather, the incarnation points to a unique event in the life of God and the world which brings about something ‘new’ for both parties. This incarnation is a part of the life of God, not merely a reflection of it. In the same way that the act of saying “I do” is both an expression of love for one’s wife and the means by which one becomes married, the incarnation *is* God’s love in a way that is not interchangeable with other actions. Sayers’ argument parallels in many ways the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose book *Truth and Method* argues that art is not a self-contained phenomenon but a genuine source of knowledge of the ‘other’. Gadamer sets out to oppose the “radical subjectivization of aesthetics” which followed Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. He asks,

²⁵² Ibid., 37.

Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but equally certainly is not inferior to it?²⁵³

For Gadamer, art *does* lay claim to truth, as it draws us into its own inner essence (*Wesen*) where in we experience a kind of ‘play’ which can alter our understanding of the world: “The work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person who experiences it.”²⁵⁴

Using Gadamer’s game terminology, the kind of artistry which Sayers describes is a form of gamecraft, wherein the artist is able to draw us into the ‘play’ of the poem, film, novel or play. Just as sports highlight certain abilities which players possess, within the internally coherent world of a work of art, we can perceive and experience structures, concepts, and values which might be more difficult to grasp outside of the microcosm of the work of art.

Yet Sayers is not arguing that we can construct works of art in order to express truths which we comprehend already, but rather than in constructing these works, we come to understand certain truths more clearly. The poet, Sayers writes, “is simply a man like ourselves with an exceptional power of revealing his experience by expressing it, so that not only he, but we ourselves, recognize that experience as our own.”²⁵⁵ Given this line of thinking, an experience is not simply translated into the language of creativity in order to be expressed artistically, but rather the creative expression itself enables a certain kind of experience. Sayers writes,

This recognition of truth we get in the artist’s work comes to us as a revelation of new truth... I am not referring to the sort of

²⁵³ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, NY: Continuum, 2004), 87.

²⁵⁴ Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, 200.

²⁵⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Towards a Christian Aesthetic”, 39.

patronizing recognition we give to a writer by nodding our heads and observing: 'Yes, yes, very good, very true - that's just what I'm always saying.' I mean the recognition of a truth which tells us something about ourselves that we had not been 'always saying' - something which puts a new knowledge of ourselves within our grasp.²⁵⁶

Key here is the idea that new knowledge is made available to us through creative expression. Just as Barth suggested earlier about Mozart, his music *makes audible* a certain "twofold yet harmonious praise of God" in which sadness and joy can both be present. Barth suggests that it is not simply that we find this truth *also* in Mozart, but that Mozart's music is a unique mediator of this insight. To hear Barth speak about Mozart, then, is not equivalent to hearing Mozart's music. The work of the art—like the work of Christ—*reveals* to us new truths by mediating those truths through themselves. It is not as if, as an act of communication, Christ reveals to us the Father's love and then is done with his work. But rather that Christ is the *manifestation* of this love in God and in the world. Christ's physical incarnation is likewise a statement of God's love for us which remains even after his ascension. That Christ retains his physical body suggests perhaps more strongly than any communicated idea that God loves us deeply. In an analogous sense, a sonnet of Shakespeare might be the best possible *expression* of his love, one which does not merely communicate the truths of Shakespeare's feelings after which it can be discarded, but remains a necessary link in the truthful expression of his love. Sonnet 18 is, perhaps, the perfect example of this:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;

256 Ibid., 40.

And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Here Shakespeare invests his admiration for the beauty of the beloved into the poem itself. The poem not only communicates Shakespeare's *internal* admiration for the beloved's beauty, but *externalizes* it in a beautiful manner (fitting form and content perfectly). But Shakespeare seeks to preserve this praise of beauty for all to share, and thus, in a sense, preserve the beloved's fleeting beauty, so long as the poem "lives." If one wanted to know how Shakespeare felt about his beloved, it would be difficult to find a better expression of his feeling than the sonnet *itself*. In this sense there is no "sneaking behind" certain expressions to find a more significant truth.

It is *this* irreducibility which aesthetic phenomena possess which can easily be overlooked in analytical circles. Though excellent at using precise language in well-structured arguments, analytic philosophers may, at times, lose sight of more aesthetic (read as 'tangible') elements of life. The ambiguities of life and literature are sometimes impossible to fully analyze. Sayers sums this up well in *The Mind of the Maker* when she writes, "To persist in asking, as many of us do, 'What do you mean by this book?' is to invite bafflement: the book itself is what the writer means."²⁵⁷ Elements of Christ's incarnation are likewise irreducible. It is possible to ask of Jesus' death, "What does it mean?"—providing answers like substitution, moral influence, or ransom—but the event itself has a significance which cannot be abstracted. This strikes very close to the position Eleonore Stump takes in

²⁵⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1987), 57.

her essays discussed in the above chapter. It is not that Job is given an answer, but rather that Job is given a vision of God, and thus a comforting presence in the midst of his intellectual confusion. Likewise, the mirror of evil immerses us in dark and heart-wrenching visions, but enables true goodness to shine forth more brightly by comparison. After almost a century of demythologizing in theology and deconstruction in literature, it can still be difficult to take Sayers' point here seriously. But for theological aesthetics to retain its importance it must be that there are certain insights which must remain 'sights'. If theodicy is to incorporate aesthetics, then, it must take seriously the idea that aesthetics may offer us insight which cannot be fully translated into analytic language.²⁵⁸

2.2. *Incarnation and Christian Aesthetics*

Balthasar describes beauty in similarly concrete ways. In his theological aesthetics, *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar too holds up the particular Christ as the concrete, *express* manifestation of God's glory. Where Sayers reflects on the incarnation as a model for creativity in general, Balthasar is more focused on the beauty of God's glory, as is revealed in Jesus. Beauty as a category is a powerful resource for Christian theology, in that it ties universal truths to the particulars of history. Where Sayers focused on the more *expressive* elements of the form, Balthasar's work is more focused on the *affective* quality of beauty. The beautiful is a form, and as we behold it we experience, not merely a disinterested satisfaction, but a stronger response which it is not inappropriate to call *erotic*:

We 'behold' the form; 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 the form as the splendour, as the the Glory of being. We are 'enraptured' by our contemplation of these depths

²⁵⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

and are ‘transported’ to them. But, so long as we are dealing with the beautiful, this never happens in such a way that we leave the (horizontal) form behind us to plunge (vertically) into the naked depths.²⁵⁹

In *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar seeks to give an account of the beautiful as a key element in our knowledge of God’s truth and goodness. If God’s glory is aesthetically beautiful, then our grasp and understanding of God’s being must remain sensuous. Thus the *erotic* quality of ‘enraptured’ contemplation mediates *agapeic* relationship. Not all surfaces are superficial in importance; the beauty of the beloved (as in Shakespeare’s sonnet) is truly significant. As beauty is “lifted from [religion’s] face as a mask,” Balthasar writes, “its absence on that face exposes features which threaten to become incomprehensible to man.”²⁶⁰ The nuptial quality of Balthasar’s theology is unavoidable. Marriage provides analogous understanding to both relationships in its commitment to particulars. Marriage’s emotional and biological factors of attraction, love, sex, family and death yet manage to transcend insecurity, romanticism, lust, stress, and sadness not by attending to larger matters, but by attending properly and precisely to the beloved as

²⁵⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1: 119.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 1: 18. William Lynch, in *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 1960), takes up a similar line in his discussion of Barth (though with greater explicit criticism). In keeping with his book’s attempt to affirm the role of the finite (particular) in the Christian imagination, Lynch traces a hook-shaped progression down into the dirty details of creation, and up again with a new insight. The incarnation is the paradigm case of this movement (described by Heraclitus as “The way up is the way down”) as Lynch argues, “Christ moved down into all the realities of man to get to His Father” (28). Barthian “Otherness”, for Lynch, implies a differently shaped symbol of two arrows pointing away from each other, which are conjoined, not by a “therefore”, but by a “nevertheless” (32). One example of this Protestant nevertheless Lynch finds in salvation, that “God loves us despite all” (31). On Lynch’s reading, Barth’s Otherness of God creates a double vacuum preventing commensurate connection between God and humanity. While first affirming Christ’s powerful particularity as savior, Barth’s Christ, Lynch implies, ultimately negates human particularity. Lynch quotes Barth saying, “Messiah is the end of mankind, and here also God is found faithful. On the day when mankind is dissolved the new era of the righteousness of God will be inaugurated” (32). This “nevertheless” is profoundly disruptive for a theological account of imagination which moves toward insight through the particular. Where an analogical account of God and creation can affirm a “real causality and creativity” between the finite and theological insight, a dialectical account, as Lynch has it, can have “no causal or cognitive relationship between the two”. Lynch goes too far, in that he seems to overlook the fact that Barth’s God has elected the finite for his purposes, and so has created a cognitive relationship between the finite and the divine, albeit a miraculous one.

uniquely “Thou”. Balthasar’s view of marriage is keenly perceptive of its agonies, while still positive about its effects:

What could be stronger than a marriage, or what shapes any particular life-form more profoundly than does marriage?... Marriage is that indissoluble reality which confronts with an iron hand all existence’s tendencies to disintegrate, and it compels the faltering person to grow, beyond himself, into real love by modeling his life on the form enjoined.²⁶¹

By placing Christian theology under the sign of beauty, Balthasar intends to likewise *enjoin* dogmatics to aesthetics, and therefore prevent the vertical knowledge of God from leaving behind its horizontal manifestation: “To dispel the charm of beauty by reducing its ‘appearance’ into some ‘truth’ lying behind or above it is to eliminate beauty altogether and to show that it was never really perceived in its distinctiveness.”²⁶² Beauty draws our attention to, and grounds us in the particular details of reality.

Central to Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Glory of the Lord* is the role of Christ as the “radiant form” of God’s self-revelation. The form is indissoluble, beautiful, and revelatory. Here we see a distinctively anti-Kantian strain. “We ‘behold’ the form”, he 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.”²⁶³ Opposed to the “free play” of judgment in Kant’s account of beauty, which renders an aesthetic verdict but nothing else, Balthasar’s account of perception gives priority to beauty’s sensuous qualities, but denies that beauty is mute to transmit further revelation of truth and goodness. A proper grasp of the “effect” of beauty, Balthasar writes, “will not be attained unless one brings to bear logical and ethical

²⁶¹ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1: 27.

²⁶² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 54.

²⁶³ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1: 119.

concepts, concepts of truth and value: in a word, concepts drawn from a comprehensive doctrine of Being.”²⁶⁴

Beauty is thus a call which establishes knowledge of God by creating a sense of and a desire for God’s goodness and truth. In this, Balthasar stands alongside other thinkers such as Iris Murdoch and Elaine Scarry, who both describe the deep connections between the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of reality. In *The Sovereignty of the Good*, Murdoch stakes a claim for the rightness of the Platonic tradition regarding the unity of the transcendentals:

Goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure. Plato, who tells us that beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love immediately by nature, treats the beautiful as an introductory section of the good. So that aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals.²⁶⁵

The appreciation of beauty, Murdoch indicates, is not just a symbol of morality, but is properly moral in itself. Beauty draws us out of ourselves in a very Christian way, in that it calls us to appreciate and love something beside ourselves:

Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness and join the world as it really is... ‘Good is a transcendent reality’ means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful.²⁶⁶

Elaine Scarry takes up a similar point in *On Beauty and Being Just*, when she notes that “beauty prepares us for justice... the fact that something is perceived as beautiful is bound up with an urge to protect it, or act on its

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 41.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 93.

behalf”.²⁶⁷ This truth can often be observed in human life, where the destruction of beautiful things is seen with deep moral disapproval. The anger we feel at the vandalism of Van Gogh’s *Night Watch* or the death of a young child surpasses the emotional or physical damage, and may be most keenly felt in the destruction of the beautiful. As in Shakespeare’s sonnet (quoted above) we feel the desire to preserve and protect beauty, not for ourselves, but for itself. Balthasar’s observations about the glory of God, then can easily be seen to be grounded in the common experience of beauty. That God’s glory is given both an *erotic* and *agapeic* quality is entirely fitting with the nature of beautiful and the moral call it places on us.

Balthasar further reflects that a Christian theory of beauty should take as its guide the person of Christ. Reflecting his Barthian influence, Balthasar is adamant that revelation is Christocentric, and makes little or no room for a natural theory of aesthetics:

[J]ust as we can never attain to the living God in any way except through his Son become man, but in this Son we can really attain to God in himself, so, too, we ought never to speak of God’s beauty without reference to the form and manner of appearing which he exhibits in salvation-history.²⁶⁸

Jesus’ passion and death are then included in our account of beauty, included as they are in salvation-history. Balthasar writes:

As Karl Barth has rightly seen, this law extends to the inclusion in Christian beauty of even the Cross and everything else which a worldly aesthetics (even of a realistic kind) discards as no longer bearable. This inclusiveness is not only of the type proposed by a Platonic theory of beauty, which knows how to employ the shadows and the contradictions as stylistic elements of art; it embraces the most abysmal ugliness of sin and hell into that divine art for which there is no human analogue.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 66.

²⁶⁸ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1: 124.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

In one sense, this flies in the face of classical aesthetics, which would have little place for what we would traditionally consider the true ugliness of Christ's torture and death. Yet Balthasar does not deny that the irreducibility of Christ's beauty indicates that it would be naturally incomprehensible. Trying to hold together a more Barthian doctrine of revelation and the Platonic/Medieval view of aesthetics, Balthasar emphasizes that we can speak meaningfully of God's glory with natural categories. He is keen to avoid placing theological aesthetics outside the realm of human understanding:

The fundamental principle of a theological aesthetics, rather, is the fact that, just as this revelation is absolute truth and goodness, so also is it absolute beauty; but this assertion would be meaningless if every transposition and application to revelation of human categories from the realms of logic, ethics ('pragmatics'), and aesthetics, if every analogical application of these categories, were simply forbidden.²⁷⁰

Those who have experienced the beauty of Christ have not had to abandon, but modify, their natural conceptions, as they have been "inflamed by the most sublime of beauties—a beauty crowned with thorns and crucified."²⁷¹ If Christ possesses not merely a type of beauty, but rather its greatest form, then the most excellent aesthetic judgment cannot exist apart from knowledge of Christ.

Balthasar's theological aesthetic thus attempts to attest the contributive role of the *horizontal* in God's *vertical* revelation. While self-authenticating, experiential and ultimately "from above", beauty also has a discernible structure which can be elucidated with creaturely categories like symmetry and harmony.²⁷² So God's action in creation gives us "true vision of the

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 607.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 33.

²⁷² Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Revelation and the Beautiful" in *Explorations in Theology, vol I, The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 105.

course of divine revelation”, Balthasar proclaims. “If there were no such contemplation, God’s revelation would not in fact be worthy of man”.²⁷³ For the dialectic of revelation “to be conformable to man and the world” it cannot be totally other; else, “it would be spiritualistic and irrational.”²⁷⁴ Against the modern aesthetic attitude, Balthasar’s nuptial theology uses beauty as a direct invitation to a deeper understanding of Being. To move from aesthetic delight to moral or cognitive reflection is not a violation of proper perception of the beautiful, but a proper response to it.

Though Balthasar’s navigation of Kant and Barth is nowhere stated as a goal, it is difficult not to see his theological aesthetic as an attempt to give an initiating priority to the beautiful - thus keeping us from being stranded in Enlightened subjectivity – yet without denying a commensurate quality between God’s action of self-revelation and creaturely ways of understanding. Experience of art and the natural world illuminate our understanding of beauty which, Balthasar positively affirms, “when we approach God’s revelation with the category of the beautiful, we quite spontaneously bring with us in its this-worldly form.”²⁷⁵ Here Balthasar attempts to maintain the tension between Barthian discontinuity and Scholastic continuity, while noting that “it is very difficult to retain the two dimensions simultaneously, that of the transcendent event impinging from above and that of an immanent object bound up with a certain structure.”²⁷⁶ He further comments that “All the compromises in Catholic thought thus stop short of this parallelism.”²⁷⁷ In an effort to navigate these two parallels, Balthasar affirms that “the beautiful can be materially grasped and even subjected to numerical calculation as a relationship of numbers,

²⁷³ Ibid., 114.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 115-6.

²⁷⁵ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1: 607.

²⁷⁶ Balthasar, “Revelation and the Beautiful”, 108.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

harmony, and the laws of Being”, while at the same time holding that the beauty of divine revelation cannot be *equated* with this-worldly accounts of beauty which may well gravitate toward the pretty over and against the truly beautiful.²⁷⁸ God’s work in Christ, though shocking, then, is thus not purely generative of an understanding of God, but also re-generative of pre-existing Divine-human relations:

Now, admittedly the divine principle of form must in many ways stand in sharp contrast to the beauty of this world. This contrast notwithstanding, however, if God’s will to give form really aims at man as God truly wants to shape him – aims, that is, at the perfecting of that work begun by God’s ‘hands’ in the Garden of Eden – then it appears impossible to deny that there exists an analogy between God’s work of formation and the shaping forces of nature and of man as they generate and give birth.²⁷⁹

Thus, though Balthasar begins by placing primary emphasis on Christ as the premier form of God’s beauty, he ultimately affirms natural beauty as analogous to divine beauty, and thus worthy of reflection.

A Christian aesthetic which places Christ as the center for reflection, then, helpfully responds to both Wildean aestheticism and Kantian aesthetics. By placing faith in the incarnation as a true expression of God’s glory, we establish an initial trust in ‘carnal knowledge’ of the invisible God. By giving Christ the premier place of honor in the realm of the beautiful, we thus send the message that morality does not need to be *circumvented* for purposes of aesthetic delight. Here is the greatest beauty yet perceived, which lures us into a deeper love and understanding of the Divine *Being*.²⁸⁰

3. Toward a Theological Aesthetic

²⁷⁸ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 1: 118.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁸⁰ Thus a Christian aesthetic, at the level of participation and appreciation, seeks neither the autonomy of the aesthetic *in itself* nor the autonomy of the critic *in himself*, but rather an ongoing relationship which is informative and transformative.

3.1. Neo-Aesthetics and Nuance

The proper starting point for theological aesthetics, then, is in theology, where we find the incarnation as a rich resource for establishing the importance of artistry, creativity, and beauty. Yet the powerful and suggestive work of Sayers and Balthasar needs further nuance. In *Religious Aesthetics*, Frank Burch Brown discusses both Sayers' claim that "Christian revelation discovers to us the nature of *all* truth", and Balthasar's claim that theological aesthetics "does not primarily work with extra-theological categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetics [but] develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself".²⁸¹ Though these arguments are laudable in their intentions, Brown argues, they are "specious" in their reasoning.²⁸² Regarding Sayers' statement Brown points out that Christian revelation has not shown us the truth about a great number of things such as "the nature of the truths of logic or quantum mechanics, of language or the interpretation of dreams."²⁸³ Regarding Balthasar's statement, Brown takes pains to argue that it does not stand to reason that "just because theology can make its own contribution to aesthetics, only aesthetics that begins with revelation can be pertinent to theology itself."²⁸⁴ Brown's critique is acutely correct and also slightly obtuse at the same time. It is true that both claims are slightly grandiose in tone, but it seems that Brown may have a bit of genre confusion. Both Balthasar and Sayers introduce a positively polemical note into the aesthetically stagnated theological conversation. Sayers addresses a wide audience, seeking to waken the crowd to pay attention to artistry. That Balthasar's work spans seven volumes does little to change the fundamental *simplicity* of his theological aesthetics—which

²⁸¹ Quoted in Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 19.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

hand-waves worries about scientific precision, in favor of simply taking beauty as the first word for theology and exploring it confidently as a resource. Neither thinker is concerned primarily to appeal to aesthetics as a shared value between Christians and non-Christians, and thereby build up a case for the Christian faith. Rather, both seek to *spur* Christians to recognize those aesthetic elements already present in Trinitarian theology.

Yet, there is danger in overconfidently taking the Christian faith as a guide to aesthetics. Brown's umbrage at Sayers and Balthasar lies in the way in which their quoted statements seem to *assume* too much about Christian theology's power *over* aesthetics. To speak of a Christian aesthetic may sound as if Christian thought were somehow in a position to survey aesthetics from above, and make pronouncements thereupon. It is *this* idea which Brown seeks to oppose, more than the overall contributions of Balthasar and Sayers. Arguing that even special revelation is already mediated by aesthetic factors, in his chapter "Can Aesthetics be Christian?" Brown makes the case that there can be no truly absolute starting point in the theology/aesthetics discussion, because our experiences of both are already affected, to some degree, by the other. Dubbing his approach "neo-aesthetics", Brown is determined to surmount the modern divide between aesthetic and practical, and any purely dialectical opposition between Christian truth and secular inquiry. This approach is helpful because it responds well to both Kantian aesthetics and any overly confident Christian aesthetic:

A more adequate understanding of the relation of the aesthetic realm and its truth(s) to that of the theological concepts is that they exist in mutually transformative, dialogical relationship. Aesthetic perceptions give rise to thought (to paraphrase a familiar slogan), and thought modifies aesthetic perceptions in such a way as to give rise to further aesthetic creation and insight.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 42.

Brown's passing allusion to Paul Ricoeur's writings is fitting, as Ricoeur also presses the idea that our sayings and doings display a freedom from antecedent forms of expression, and a dependence on these antecedent expressions.²⁸⁶ Our understanding is already shaped by symbols and ideas which 'give rise' to our thinking, but which we do not fully understand, and thus must seek to interpret. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur discusses this 'knot' of interpretation which we inevitably engage in when we seek to understand and interpret our experience. Thus, Ricoeur, "Such is the circle: hermeneutics proceeds from a prior understanding of the very thing that it tries to understand by interpreting it."²⁸⁷ For Christian theology, as we try and interpret the language of the faith—such as our understanding of God 'the Father'—we are already shaped by our prior understanding of what these symbols imply, even as we try to reform, redeem, or alter their meaning. Theological aesthetics is likewise engaged in this 'knotty' discourse—where the most basic elements such as creation, expression, beauty, and glory are already actively present in their natural state, giving rise to our ability to examine their proper significance.

In place of a single account of aesthetic perception (*following* Kant) what Brown proposes as a model for aesthetics sounds much like the kind of 'cumulative case argument' often put forward in discussions of epistemology. In *Faith and Criticism*, Basil Mitchell argues that, contrary to rigid notions of rationality,

Much of our reasoning is tacit and informal. It cannot be neatly displayed as a set of conclusions derived by a straightforward process of inference from clear-cut premisses... Thus most arguments are cumulative in form. A wide range of considerations of very varied

²⁸⁶ See Paul Ricoeur, "Nature and Freedom" in *Political and Social Essays*, eds. David Stewart and Joseph Bien (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974), 29-37.

²⁸⁷ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 352.

character is involved. No one of them suffices to generate the required conclusions, but, taken together, they converge irresistibly.²⁸⁸

Further, if, as Brown indicates, theological understanding arises from aesthetic perception, then we cannot speak too quickly about a purely theological account of aesthetics. If we are to have any powers of recognition of divine beauty, then it must be assumed that these powers may also respond to this-worldly beauty as well. For example, I find it significant that Jesus' analogies often centered on weddings, which represented not only moral principles such as fidelity, but the sensuous enjoyment of food, wine and celebration. For the image of kingdom of God as a wedding celebration to have purchase, it must be assumed that the hearers already have some *sense* of the delights of God's kingdom.

Brown is right, then to make a special point of affirming our natural, 'pagan' experience of the aesthetic. It is upon these desires, senses and values which a theological aesthetic begins to take hold and redeem. Writes Brown,

[I]t seems plain, that however illuminated the human mind may be by what some theologians call 'special' revelation, one is still human and usually responds to those media that speak most vividly to the human being as a whole.²⁸⁹

Artists who create beautiful objects can also be affirmed as agents of illumination, as they help to connect us to reality through media which we respond quite strongly to.

Though Brown took issue with him above, Balthasar would, I think, fundamentally agree with this idea. Though we must worry about theological aesthetics "degrading" into a purely this-worldly account of

²⁸⁸ Basil Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism: The Sarama Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 12.

²⁸⁹ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 75.

beauty, Balthasar writes with approval of the power of art to illuminate our understanding:

[A]ll those who have been once affected inwardly by the worldly beauty of either nature, or of a person's life, or of art, will surely not insist that they have no genuine idea what beauty is... This is why, when we approach God's revelation with the category of the beautiful, we quite spontaneously bring this category with us in its this-worldly form.²⁹⁰

It is safe, then, to take Brown and Balthasar to be in agreement that our experience of this-worldly aesthetics is not to be distrusted *a priori*.

Against any purist account of taste, Brown brings up multiple examples of aesthetic objects whose impact is mediated by non-aesthetic factors. We are invited to imagine Chartres Cathedral, identical in every respect, but constructed of space-age materials in Florida's Disney World. Brown argues that while the building might be identical in every sensory aspect, our aesthetic appreciation would undoubtedly be lessened. Unlike its French counterpart, "it would never occur to us to call the pseudo-cathedral sublime."²⁹¹ Brown's point with this example is that there is more to enjoying an aesthetic object than merely sensuous perception. Though Chartres Cathedral can be appreciated primarily as an aesthetic object—e.g. non-Christians can appreciate it apart from desiring to use it religiously—part of even this appreciation is affected by its age, history, and original purpose. Obviously many aesthetic works do possess a high level of stability in a variety of contexts. But the way that other aesthetic works change in significance and value quite radically, suggests that in practice, it will be impossible to bracket out all religious from aesthetic judgment. Brown writes,

²⁹⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1: 37.

²⁹¹ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 75.

Clearly a better model for thinking about aesthetic experience would be one that allowed for the integrity and uniqueness of works of art or aesthetic objects without completely severing their connection with what is not already inherently artistic or aesthetic. This would allow us to justify in theory our common perception that, for example, the beauty and sublimity of Chartres Cathedral - its grace, dizzying height, and powerful integrity - are at once aesthetic and religious, with its religious import modifying its aesthetic impact, and vice versa.²⁹²

Holding up as a model of such interaction, Frank Burch Brown gives the example of Sir Thomas Browne's comments on music. Where Chartres Cathedral suggests being seen in a religious light, Sir Thomas Browne notes that even "Taverne Musicke" can have some religious meaning.²⁹³ "It is an Hieroglyphicall and Shadowed lesson of the whole world, well understood, would afford the understanding," Browne writes in 1643, "In briefe, it is a sensible fit of that Harmony, which intellectually sounds in the eares of God."²⁹⁴ The example of drinking music here obviously provides analogous application to larger theological themes. Secular musical harmony is a "sensible fit" for the intellectual harmony of the world seen by God. But Frank Burch Brown is intent on pointing out that here may be a complex interaction which is multi-directional. Not only does Sir Thomas Browne's perception of the music affect his understanding of God (he perceives God's plan *as* music), but his beliefs about God's providence affect his perception of the music itself. Frank Burch Brown argues that to see only how the aesthetic modifies the conceptual is to miss an important alternative,

that the music really *sounds* different to Browne because he brings to the sound a mentality and sensibility that allows him to hear the

²⁹² Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 33.

²⁹³ Ibid., 30.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

graceful and harmonious features of the music as the adumbration of Grace and Harmony writ large.²⁹⁵

Just as when we see the moon on the horizon it looks *larger* than it does alone in the sky, religious ‘seeing-in-relation’ may alter our perception (‘seeing-as’) of aesthetic object themselves. Returning to the example of Mozart employed by Barth, it is undeniable that Barth *hears* Mozart’s music differently because of its rich theological connections. It seems very likely that Barth found more to appreciate aesthetically in Mozart’s music, because of his already present theological framework. Thus it may be too presumptuous to assume that Mozart can allow anyone with “ears to hear” an auditory insight into the scope of God’s providence – as if a good will and a little patience was all that was required. Very likely, a rich theological training (such as Barth himself had) might be necessary to hear the sounds of which he speaks.

Frank Burch Brown’s ‘Neo-Aesthetic’ approach thus similarly emphasizes the role of cognitive (and other non-aesthetic) elements in perceiving and valuing aesthetic objects. If our appreciation of *aesthetica* is so conditioned, this offers a more practical response to the duck/rabbit mentality. The modern separation of aesthetics from other aspects of life is simply untenable when we begin to consider the complex way that we interact with aesthetic objects. But a theological aesthetic must also acknowledge, right at the outset, that it is already shaped by both theology and aesthetics. A religious aesthetic then, seeks to examine the way that theology is shaped by, and shapes, aesthetic perception.

3.2. Theological Aesthetics in Outline

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 35.

Having dwelt for some time on aesthetics as an aspect of discourse which Christian theology fundamentally supports and enriches, it remains to spend a bit more time examining theological aesthetics with a mind toward application to aesthetic theodicy. Our above readings of Balthasar and Sayers stand clearly as an example of theological aesthetics, in that both seek to interpret aesthetics from a theological starting point. As such, both clear the way for the latter, an aesthetic theology. Perhaps most significantly, in the context of our discussion of John Hick's work, the theology of Sayers and Balthasar suggests that aesthetic considerations are not peripheral to our reflection on Jesus and the incarnation, but an important factor of it. In *Evil and the God of Love*, Hick suggests that since "our positive knowledge of God's nature and purpose still derives from His incarnation in Jesus Christ... any justification of evil must be a justification of it as playing a part in bringing about the high good of man's fellowship with God".²⁹⁶ In focusing on the incarnation as a fundamental resource for theological aesthetics, we can see that Hick's dichotomy is ultimately a false one. If Christ's incarnation has deep connections with theological aesthetics, then we are much more justified in pursuing it as a resource for theodicy.

Aesthetic theodicy, then, having a theological aesthetic in its background, seeks to interpret theodicy with the help of aesthetic methods. In his book, *Theological Aesthetics*, Richard Viladesau writes:

[Theological aesthetics] comprises both an "aesthetic theology" that interprets the objects of theology - God, faith, and theology itself - through the methods of aesthetic studies, and a more narrowly defined "theological aesthetics" that interprets the objects of aesthetics - sensation, the beautiful, and art - from the properly theological starting point of religious conversion and in the light of theological methods.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 204.

²⁹⁷ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*, 23.

Viladesau breaks this down even more helpfully into three main areas of discourse:

- First is a “theological account of human knowledge on the level of feeling and imagination”.
- Second is a “theology of beauty” which reflects on the role of beauty in our doctrine of God, as well as in our doctrines of revelation and theological method.
- Third is a “theological reflection on art and on the individual arts” which seeks to understand what role the arts play in revelation, conversion and theology.²⁹⁸

These three levels of discourse clarify how theological aesthetics can affect the discourse of theology in general and theodicy in particular. In the comparison between Kant, Sayers and Balthasar, much of the focus rested on the first issue, how our contact with aesthetics affects (or doesn’t) our knowledge of other areas. Balthasar, in placing theology under the banner of beauty, combines his theology of perception with a theology of beauty, and thus attempts to show how the best apologetic is a good systematic theology, by uniting a “theory of vision (or fundamental theology)” and a “theory of rapture (or dogmatic theology)”.²⁹⁹

In place of a precise account of aesthetics as a source of knowledge, I have opted to approach the first issue through the writings of Sayers and Balthasar, who offer a theological account which is based on a sort of “wager” on aesthetics as a source of genuine contact with reality.

Integrating the insights of Frank Burch Brown, I suggest that such a wager

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 23-4.

²⁹⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1: 126.

is not without thoughtfulness, but rather invites us to engage with the arts in order to find more connections between aesthetics and theological insight. This sort of messiness is appropriate, as Basil Mitchell suggests, because even within rational argumentation we find that many arguments depend more on an accumulation of details which must all be taken together. The inclusion of artistic considerations into any field opens the door to a certain degree of messiness. “Beauty crosses boundaries”, David Bentley Hart writes, “Among the transcendentals, beauty has always been the most restless upon its exalted perch.”³⁰⁰ Much the same could be said about aesthetics more generally as a discourse practice, where the inherent imprecision of this field undoubtedly wards off many theologians and philosophers. To attempt to pin down this ‘boundary-crossing’ discipline is surely impossible, yet a failure to discern its effects reconciles the discipline all the more to triviality and neglect. While various trends have no doubt contributed to the alienation of aesthetics, the field’s elusiveness is undoubtedly a root cause as well.

Second of Viladesau’s delineated areas is the theology of beauty. What ‘aesthetics’ denotes is theoretical reflection on sensation (roughly from *aisthetikos* or ‘perceptibles’, c.f. Baumgarten). Yet it has rarely been the case that this adapted term by Baumgarten has connoted *mere perception*.

Aesthetics has often focused upon art and artistic taste. Carrying on the classical and especially medieval interest, as Umberto Eco notes, aesthetics has often been centered around reflection on “a whole range of issues connected with beauty - its definition, its function, [and] the ways of creating and enjoying it.”³⁰¹ Philosophical aesthetics has gone back and forth on the concept of beauty in recent years, not only questioning its central role, but even doubting beauty’s relevance or validity altogether.

³⁰⁰ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 20.

³⁰¹ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1988), 2.

Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, in his excellent essay, “The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline”, writes that “one seldom finds [the concept of beauty] used in twentieth-century aesthetics. Its place has been taken by other words less weighed down by equivocation (notably the word aesthetic)”.³⁰² Though beauty is not the entirety of aesthetics, it has continued to remain fundamental, whether as a figure of adoration or scorn. Even, as Arthur Danto observes, in *The Abuse of Beauty*, the reactive works of artists like Marcel Duchamp (e.g. Duchamp’s “Fountain”: a readymade urinal presented as art) are still, in some sense “about beauty” in their rejection of the tradition.³⁰³

Questioning the role of beauty is not altogether inappropriate. Classic and medieval aesthetic theories focus on beauty to the exclusion of other related aesthetic values. And yet, while aesthetic theories sometimes strain under, as Frank Burch Brown phrases it, “tyranny of the beautiful”, it seems fitting that Christian aesthetics will always, in some sense, focus on beauty as crucial to its theorizing. Beauty and holiness, or worldly beauty and God’s creative action, have been linked in scripture (as in Psalm 29:2’s “worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” and Wisdom 13:5’s “from the greatness and beauty of the creation, the creator of these things can easily be recognized”). Likewise, the concept of “glory”, central as it is to Old and New Testament understandings of God, certainly carries with it an aesthetic element quite fitting with the concept of beauty.

Taking a page from Balthasar, it seems more appropriate to allow the riches of Christian thought to stretch and enrich our concept of beauty, rather than dispense with the idea as an unhelpful Greek import. Without the

³⁰² Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, “The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (Spring 1972), 178.

³⁰³ Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2003), 8-12.

notion of beauty as a key figure, with all of its self-evident allure, aesthetics will likely further sink into the background of Christian thought. Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, “Truth matters because of beauty.”³⁰⁴ Balthasar would undoubtedly agree with this assessment, and add that without beauty’s call, “the good also loses its attractiveness.”³⁰⁵ Much the same might be said about aesthetics, that without its most lovely feature, this difficult field would lose much of its allure. Given the biblical emphasis on “beauty” as well as “glory”, as well as the traditional connection of Christian truth and goodness with beauty, it is no surprise that theological aesthetics will remain centered, while certainly not exclusively focused, on issues surrounding beauty. Beauty must not be allowed to tyrannize the field, but its authority can hardly be ignored.³⁰⁶

Thirdly, as we seek to understand what role the arts play in revelation, conversion and theology, we must acknowledge, as Frank Burch Brown has in *Religious Aesthetics*, that aesthetic and cognitive categories are often interdependent. As such, much of his work is dedicated to finding paradigms wherein aesthetics, ethics and concepts can exist in the same space.³⁰⁷ Richard Viladesau’s work complements much of Brown’s thought. Often, Viladesau focuses on the way that aesthetic works mediate cognitive understanding, particularly the ways that artistic expressions “are themselves a way of thinking and communicating”.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1967), 267.

³⁰⁵ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 19.

³⁰⁶ Arthur Danto says it well in *The Abuse of Beauty*:

Beauty is but one of an immense range of aesthetic qualities, and philosophical aesthetics has been paralyzed by focusing as narrowly on beauty as it has. But beauty is the only one of the aesthetic qualities that is also a value, like truth and goodness. It is not simply among the values we live by, but one of the values that defines what a fully human life means. (15)

³⁰⁷ In *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste*, for instance, Frank Burch Brown seeks to give an account of artistic appraisal which allows moral considerations to play a part. He writes, “Taste then, unites delights with virtues. Good aesthetic taste values something intrinsically pleasing that, while valuable in its own right, is also good for human life” (xiii).

³⁰⁸ Richard Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

The wide variety of effects which aesthetic works may have is dizzying. Artistic media may “serve a complementary role to words and concepts”, Viladesau writes, “expressing ideas, illustrating them, extending their reach into the realm of affect and desire, sometimes adding to ideas another meaning that has an ambiguous relationship with their purely conceptual content.”³⁰⁹ Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Art in Action*, rejects the usual question, “What is art for?” as ridiculous, given the diverse purposes for which it is created. “Works of art are instruments” he writes “by which we perform such diverse actions as praising our great men and expressing our grief, evoking emotion and communicating knowledge”.³¹⁰ Following this, Wolterstorff provides a laundry list of functions: arts may benefit a society by confirming its ideas by embodying them in concrete ways; the arts may illuminate our understanding by showing us something new about reality; the arts may entertain us; the arts may model behavior for us through the imitation of human action; and the arts “can serve as instrument in our struggle to overcome the fallenness of our existence while also, in the delight which it affords, anticipating the shalom which awaits us.”³¹¹

3.3. Reordering and Enrichment

Within this range of possible effects, two main foci desire attention: re-ordering and enrichment. Writing about music, Jeremy Begbie highlights these two key benefits to doing theology through the arts, that “music can ‘take our time’ and give it back to us, enriched, re-ordered in some manner, and that its capacity in this respect can be of considerable theological interest.”³¹² In the context of Begbie’s work, music functions as a concrete

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 4

³¹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 84, 144-150, *passim*.

³¹² Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

example of the “fruitful transience” present in musical performance. Learning patience, as well as gaining a sense of the value of time as part of God’s good creation, music’s coherent chronological-embeddedness draws our attention to certain aspects of creation and engenders a sense of creation’s value. It *reorders* and *enriches* our perception. Begbie’s comments about music and time, though specific in context, are a good example of the benefits of aesthetic theology, in that we can experience both illumination and delight simultaneously. While aesthetic experience is not fully described by the effects of *reordering* and *enrichment*, these two categories help fill out the shape of much aesthetic experience. “Human experience is both cognitive and affective” John Navone writes, affirming the interdependency yet difference of these two criteria.

In being affected by a work of art, or some otherwise aesthetic object, we often experience a transfer of understanding similar to the way that metaphor works. Janet Martin Soskice in her magisterial study, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, points out that while metaphors have only one subject, they inevitably involve “at least two different networks of associations.”³¹³ By drawing together two differing networks, the metaphor intends to illuminate our understanding of a single subject. Thus, the metaphor from Shakespeare, “What light through yonder window breaks? / Tis the east, and Juliet is the sun”, draws together the worlds of the Capulet household and the sunrise, to generate a new understanding of Romeo’s effulgent feelings for his beloved.

Poetic ‘inspiration’ often consists of making such connections between two initially disparate worlds. New and striking metaphors can help us to recognize features of the world which we never before observed. Old and tested metaphors and similes, though no longer striking, become so

³¹³ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 50.

necessary in everyday speech that we find it difficult to avoid them: as Sally McFague writes, “modern languages are for the most part composed of dead metaphors; common sense or discursive language was once metaphorical but now has attained a univocal meaning.”³¹⁴ To speak of having a “heart of stone”, of avoiding something “like the plague”, of turning “on a dime”, of feeling your “blood run cold”, or of knowing “beyond a shadow of a doubt” is to invoke some poetic trope aimed at aiding our understanding of the world. Though these tropes have become clichéd through time (they are often no longer even recognized as metaphorical), their efficacy in mediating understanding remains.

In doing theodicy, it is often helpful and illuminating to find such connections, as new ways of understanding God’s work in the world are comprehended by alternate means. J. R. Lucas, in *Freedom and Grace* uses an artistic example to help “carry across” a specific idea to a theological context. Explaining how God can providentially oversee creation, while being unaware of the future free decisions of humans, Lucas writes,

God’s plan for the future must be like that of the Persian rugmakers, who let their children help them. In each family the children work at one end of the rug, the father at the other. The children fail to carry out their father’s instructions exactly, but so great is their father’s skill, that he adapts his design at his end to take in each error at the children’s end, and work it into a new, constantly adapted, pattern. So too, God. He does not, cannot, have one single plan for the world, from which we, by our errors, ignorances, and sins, are ever further departing.³¹⁵

Lucas’s example here helps to place within our grasp an additional theological understanding by means of artistic analogy.

³¹⁴ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002), ch. 3.

³¹⁵ J. R. Lucas, *Freedom and Grace* (London: SPCK, 1976), 39.

Yet, if it is incorrect to label all such comparisons strictly metaphorical, at the very least there is a quality to aesthetic theology which is *analogously* metaphorical. Conceptual models (such as the comparison of evolutionary progression to a tree) share much in common with metaphor. Again, as Soskice points out, as with metaphors, with models “we regard one thing or state of affairs in terms of another.”³¹⁶ ‘Metaphorical’ discourse this runs the range from large-scale comparisons of two networks of associations, to much more restricted comparisons with very focused connections. Where Lucas’s discussion of Persian rugmakers as *one* key has point of contact between the artistic and theological networks, illuminating one element of God’s providence, other metaphorical comparisons may be far more general, with multiple overlaps between the two networks of associations. Barth’s connection between Mozart’s music and creation’s finitude, for instance, draws together two such networks of associations, allowing for much wider overlap between the networks of Mozart’s music and creation’s light and shadowed sides.

Artistic metaphors and models thus invite us to *see things differently*. Yet these conceptual shifts will less likely be experienced in a significant way, without an *affective* quality within the subject. At the very least, one’s understanding of value will likely need to play an informative role in the reordering that may occur through aesthetic theology. Patrick Sherry, in *Spirit and Beauty*, points out that “beauty has an eschatological significance, in that it is an anticipation of the restored and transfigured world which will be the fullness of God’s kingdom.”³¹⁷ Sherry’s connection has a metaphorical cast to it, in that we are seeing a theological doctrine through a somewhat distinct concept. The joy and splendor of beauty help us perceive the delight of God’s new creation. Yet the transference of meaning which

³¹⁶ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 50.

³¹⁷ Patrick Sherry. *Spirit and Beauty*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2002), 176.

occurs would be impossible without a strong perception of the value of beauty as an experience. Similarly, Barth's use of Mozart would admit very little reordering of our understanding of creation without some notion of the beauty of *The Magic Flute* or other such works.

One powerful feature of artworks, natural wonders, and other aesthetic experiences, is their power to engender a sense of value quite naturally. Without ever considering the conceptual transformations which may occur through aesthetics, it is rare not to notice the enriching quality it has on our lives. Rarely do we meet someone who is not entranced with some form of the arts. Even those whose reading goes no further than mysteries or romance novels would undoubtedly acknowledge some excitement and delight. Jacques Maritain, writing on the nature of the arts, praises the power of music to do precisely this:

Music no doubt has this peculiarity that, signifying with its rhythms and its sounds the very movements of the soul – *cantare amantis est* – it produces, in producing emotion, precisely what it signifies. But this production is not what it aims at, any more than a representation or a description of the emotions is. The emotions which it makes present to the soul by sounds and by rhythms, are the *matter* through which it must give us the felt joy of a spiritual form, of a transcendent order, of the radiance of being.³¹⁸

Yet it is not music alone which has this power, Maritain also points to tragedy as well as a source of enriching emotion: “tragedy... purifies the passions, by developing them within the limits and in the order of beauty, by harmonizing them with the intellect, in a harmony that fallen nature experiences nowhere else.”³¹⁹ Beyond music or tragic drama, it must be assumed that a wide range of aesthetic objects can provide for us not only a

³¹⁸ “Thus music, like tragedy, purifies the passions, by developing them within the limits and in the order of beauty, by harmonizing them with the intellect, in a harmony that fallen nature experiences nowhere else” Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 62-3.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

reordering (Maritain's "form"), but also an enriching experience of tangible joy (Maritain's "matter").³²⁰

Another example of the enriching power of the arts comes from C. S. Lewis, who, in discussing fairy stories, praises their many features, but takes time to comment that fairy stories "can give us experiences we never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life', can add to it."³²¹ These experiences are more than just new vistas, however, but enable an enriched vision of that which we have already experienced. Elsewhere, Lewis describes the power of fantastic stories to enrich our enjoyment of mundane experiences. In the same way that a dinner of beef may be made more palatable to a child by imagining that it is buffalo, tales of the strange may well enliven our appreciation of the actual. Lewis phrases it this way, "This excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual."³²² Chesterton takes up a similar point in regard to fairy tales. For Chesterton, one of the key values of fairy tales is the ability they possess to reawaken a nascent wonder at God's creation. Dulled by familiarity, tales of the fantastic rekindle our original amazement at the world. He writes:

These tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water... All that we call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instant we remember that we forget.³²³

³²⁰ Some of Maritain's language here is undoubtedly influenced by the Thomistic notion of hylomorphism, that the rational principle organizes the matter of which it is constituted. Yet even without supposing anything like Thomistic hylomorphism, it is easy to see that cognitive and affective elements need to both be present in the application of aesthetics to theology.

³²¹ C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories Say What's Best to be Said", in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 48.

³²² C. S. Lewis, "On Stories" in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 14.

³²³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 59.

Here again we have an affirmation of *value*, in that fairy stories may add to our experiences and enrich (or re-enchant) our enjoyment of the world.

3.4. Artistic and Aesthetic Models: Collecting the Insights

Within the contexts of this study, the area of theology we wish to examine is theodicy which is shaped by larger scale artistic and aesthetic “models”. Harmony, tragedy and horror function as aesthetic and artistic categories which invoke a range of artistic works and critical theories. Large-scale aesthetic themes can function as metaphorical models, aiding our understanding of theodicy by bringing together two networks of associations. That large-scale artistic themes have often been invoked in theological discussion is not surprising, as they immediately spark to life the evil discussion and open up new conversations that can take place.

The use of artistic genre, especially, can provide an immediate accessibility and interest to our consideration of the world. Though Barth’s use of Mozart is compelling, our grasp of the connections he draws between the master composer and the scope of God’s providence is largely dependent on our knowledge of the music itself. Genres such as tragedy, comedy, horror, or fairy tale are more likely to engage a wider audience, as most culturally literate people have some exposure to specific works within these categories. In browsing for books or movies, contemporary people often think in terms of genre, seeking out a comedic film to enjoy with friends, or a tragic love story to stir the emotions.

Aside from their use in contemporary culture, genre has a venerable literary tradition. Before Aristotle and Plato, the Greek arts had separate muses to inspire different works: Thalia for comedy; Melpomene for tragedy; Erato

for erotic poetry, and so on.³²⁴ Plato, no true friend of the artist, acknowledged the muses in *Ion* as a source of inspiration (if inferior) and gave attention to the forms of art which they inspired; even adding to their pantheon a tenth muse, Sappho. That the Greeks recognized different muses standing behind different kinds of works is suggestive of the perennial human desire to categorize the arts.

Apart from heavenly inspiration, the form of a genre is a helpful guide to the creator of an artwork and the perceiver of an artwork. Since Aristotle's *Poetics*, the study of genre has played a continual role in Western criticism. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle strives to lay out the nature of tragedy's artistic imitation, noting what separates it from comedy is a particular "criticism of life", a difference in mimesis of manner and subject: notably, comedy "aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life."³²⁵ What is most striking about Aristotle's *Poetics* is the scientific tone to his criticism, as he seeks largely to describe the form of tragedy as if it were a living species, distinct from others, not because of any affectation or inspiration on the part of the artist, but because of the work's internal DNA. By ascribing to tragedy in particular a comprehensible structure, Aristotle allows the arts to be solidly seen as *techne*, a skill in imitation which may be studied and even mastered. Paul Ricouer's words echo this point, when he writes, "To master a genre, is to master a 'competence' which offers practical guidelines for 'performing' an individual work."³²⁶ Following Aristotle, poets, playwrights, and actors, then do not have to be mere madmen, which Plato's *Ion* seems to suggest, but can be true *craftsmen*.

³²⁴ Plato is aware of the muses as a fully formed set of nine, dubbing Sappho the tenth muse. An epigram in the *Anthologia Palatina* (9.506) ascribed to Plato states: "Some say the Muses are nine: how careless! Look, there's Sappho too, from Lesbos, the tenth."

³²⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), 3.

³²⁶ Paul Ricouer, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," *Philosophy Today* 17 (Summer 1973): 135

The benefits of genre for the audience, however, are less about proscribing or even describing what an artwork is or should be, and are more centered around a facilitation of significance. “Genres,” Larry Bouchard writes, “are generative and productive of meaning. They comprise traditional and formal means by which an author shapes the play of language into a particular work, and the ways a reader discovers and follows the work’s ordered play of expression”.³²⁷ Likewise, Northrop Frye, whose work, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, charts the divergent forms of mimesis down their evolutionary paths, arriving at four central mythoi (Comedy, Romance, Tragedy, and Satire) emphasizes the power of genre to enable deeper engagement by the audience or critic:

The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them.³²⁸

Genre, in this sense, helps mediate the reader’s understanding of the story by associating itself with other works with related meanings. In comprehending a work as satire, for instance, a reader can more fluidly comprehend the intention of the author and connect his work to the larger world of ideas. Without, for instance, recognizing Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* or *Gulliver’s Travels* as satirical, one may bypass the underlying point of the piece. The more ably we comprehend the genre, the more quickly we can extrapolate its deeper social purpose. Understanding the way that a comedy utilizes or subverts the traditions of humor can likewise increase enjoyment. In theology, utilizing genre categories can facilitate our

³²⁷ Larry D. Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 1989), 15.

³²⁸ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 248.

connection to the subject matter and our connection of the subject matter to the world.

To be sure, the use of genre is prone to the dangers of exaggeration (it may be too easy to speak blithely of “comedy” as if all instances of the form were perfectly unified). To compare life to ‘a comedy’, runs the risk of projecting onto life too many of our assumptions about comedy *and* about life. Life rarely is experienced as a pure comedy, or a pure tragedy. Comedies and tragedies, are likewise rarely ‘pure’ examples of the form. Metaphors and other similar tropes, of course, carry with them limitations. The now-familiar critique against masculine-gendered God-talk forces us to recognize the tentativeness of metaphorical models. Yet there is still much to be said for taking the risk. As Sallie McFague writes:

What, in fact, do we learn about the "principal subject" through metaphors? On the face of it, we seem to learn a good deal. To say God is "father" appears to be a direct assertion with no qualifications. Actually, however, what we *know* is the conventional wisdom associated with the subsidiary subject – we know about fatherhood and about God *only* through the screen of fatherhood, or as Black says, "the principal subject is ‘projected upon’ the field of the subsidiary subject."³²⁹

To engage in metaphorical theological discourse is to run the risk of “projecting” onto our subject matter (be it God or theodicy) unhelpful associations. McFague acknowledges this when she writes that ‘metaphorical knowledge’ is a “highly risky, uncertain, and open-ended enterprise – a maneuver of desperation”.³³⁰ For McFague, the risk seems worth it because, as she writes, “all that we *know* prior to the metaphor is, at most, inchoate and confused; and it is *only* in and through the metaphor that

³²⁹ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975), 44.

³³⁰ Ibid.

we can speak of it at all.”³³¹ The best route for avoiding the pitfalls of projection, then, is to allow metaphors to speak, but also to converse with each other. McFague calls for *many* metaphors, which “support, balance, and illuminate each other.”³³²

Large-scale aesthetic and artistic models run similar risks, of course, but possess many advantages which makes the risk worthwhile. Like McFague, the best way to utilize these models is to allow multiple visions to complement each other.

Paul Fiddes, in *Freedom and Limit*, reflects on the work of Shakespeare as a guide to the significance of genre for theology. “Shakespeare shows us that comedy and tragedy are two views of the same universe”, he writes, pointing to the bard’s skill for working within, yet subverting, dramatic genres. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*, Fiddes argues, there is a resounding note of triumph amidst the destruction, and in the comedies, such as *Love’s Labours Lost*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, there are sad, unresolved issues which remain as the story ends. Christian theology can appropriate these inner tensions within Shakespeare’s work, by maintaining a “line of tension” between artistic visions of the world. Literary imaginings, as Fiddes notes, are far less clear-cut than dogmatic theology, as artists rejoice in opening up new avenues of understanding: Literature emphasizes playful freedom of imagination, while doctrine aims to create a consistent and coherent system of thought, putting into concepts the wholeness of reality that imagination is feeling after.³³³

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Paul Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 7.

Yet, as Fiddes argues, theology is often in need of such openness and ambiguity, as real life is itself messy:

Creative literature can also help the theologian in deciding between various options of interpretation; there are alternative ways in which the multiple meanings of the metaphors and stories of faith might be fenced around by concepts, imaginative writing can enable the theologian to make judgments.³³⁴

Having thus attempted a brief survey of the field of theological aesthetics, it is now time to turn to aesthetic theology, specifically aesthetic theodicy. As Richard Viladesau describes it, aesthetic theology “interprets the objects of theology—God, faith, and theology itself—through the methods of aesthetic studies”.³³⁵ Having examined theological aesthetics as a background for this, we ought to then turn to the application of aesthetic studies to theodicy. We will want to make special reference, however, to the ability of large-scale themes to *reorder* and *enrich* our understanding, and so it is important to turn now to the work of some theologians who have used aesthetics to modify our theological understanding of evil.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*, 23.

PART II: TOWARD AN AESTHETIC THEODICY

CHAPTER 3

FEARFUL SYMMETRY: THEODICY AND AUGUSTINE'S VISION OF COSMIC HARMONY

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so. And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good..

GENESIS 1: 29-31, KJV

You have ordered all things by measure and number and weight.

WISDOM OF SOLOMON 11: 20, KJV

As his ways are plain unto the holy; so are they stumbling blocks unto the wicked. For the good are good things created from the beginning: so evil things for sinners. The principal things for the whole use of man's life are water, fire, iron, and salt, flour of wheat, honey, milk, and the blood of the grape, and oil, and clothing. All these things are for good to the godly: so to the sinners they are turned into evil. There be spirits that are created for vengeance, which in their fury lay on sore strokes; in the time of destruction they pour out their force, and appease the wrath of him that made them. Fire, and hail, and famine, and death, all these were created for vengeance.

ECCELESIASTICUS 39:25-29, KJV

1. Introduction

In Part 1, we attempted to make room within the theodicy conversation for aesthetic ways of seeing God's providence. As such, the foregoing discussion was largely theoretical, defending aesthetic theodicy against the *a priori* suspicion that it is unhelpful, distracting, or otherwise irrelevant. In

Chapter 1, we discussed the way that the structure of the theodicy question can affect, unsurprisingly, the sorts of answers which seem appropriate. In attempting to widen the scope of theodicy to include a variety of approaches (each of which seeking, in their own ways, to resolve this apparent tension between the idea of God and the fact of evil), we sought to open the field to a wider range of values which are relevant to this human question. Seeking to affirm a positive role for aesthetics and poetics in theodicy, we then discussed the way that natural and artistic aesthetic objects can re-order and enrich our understanding of the world, including God's providence.

We now turn to more *a posteriori* considerations, by examining specific theodicies which make use of aesthetic categories, in order to see how they affect the theodicy conversation. My thesis from the outset has been that theodicists should seek to incorporate aesthetic considerations into the theodicy discussion because they enrich the discourse and enable us to perceive more of God's providence. However, I am not arguing that aesthetic categories will enable an easy victory for Christian theologians and philosophers in defending God. In the next three chapters, I will examine three different 'types' of the aesthetic theme, only one of which may be said to be 'cheerful' in its use of aesthetics. The latter two themes enrich our understanding of theodicy, but may not be said to 'buttress' theodicy as it is often practiced by philosophical theologians. As aesthetic themes, the latter two are challenging, but I think that all three themes do enable a deeper understanding of God's providence, though they are not all intended to serve as an aesthetic argument for God's all-powerful love, but rather to enrich our vision of God's providence. What is more, these three differing themes are intended to function as conversation partners, enlightening and critiquing one another in order to enable a more fluid and lucid understanding of the aesthetic ways of envisioning God's providence.

In order to examine each of these related aesthetic theodicies, it will first be necessary to briefly situate them in context, then I will move to examine the shape of the respective theodicies in order to get a sense of their aesthetic themes, and finally, through conversation with the criticisms of these aesthetic theodicies, to glean what is best from their work.

Beginning with Augustine, the fountainhead of a grand tradition in theodicy, we intend to examine the aesthetic theme of 'harmony'. Though Augustine's works are diverse, I will argue that a basic pattern for a 'harmonious' aesthetic theodicy is present in a wide range of his writings, spanning many decades. Against those who would dispute the coherence of Augustine's writings, or the presence of a theodicy, I intend to defend the general outline of Augustine's aesthetic theodicy as drawn by John Hick. Hick's outline has the benefits of clarity, directness and relevance to the conversation.³³⁶

2. Theodicy on Mars Hill: *Defending God in a Classical Context*

It seems rare to find a theologian who cannot, in some way, improve upon the work of Augustine. Even those who have little or no familiarity with his work will gladly take issue with his person.³³⁷ Even those who praise the Bishop of Hippo highly nearly always reserve a breath or two for criticism. Augustine, unlike Aquinas, does not seem to have any 'pit bulls' at his side. Besides objections from feminists, pluralists, postmoderns and others who

³³⁶ As Augustine is but one propagator of the aesthetic theme of cosmic harmony (though the most prominent and influential) it is helpful to avoid spending too much time on theological fluctuations within Augustine's work, let alone digging deeply into biographical or historical details, however interesting, in order to spend time describing and questioning the core components of Augustine's aesthetic theodicy which he shares with many theodacists from the Middle Ages to the present day.

³³⁷ Perhaps the most egregious recent example is Colin Gunton's essay "Creation and Recreation. An Exploration of Some Themes in Aesthetics and Theology." *Modern Theology* 2 (1985): 1-19 which quotes from Augustine's *De musica*, extensively, but draws its understanding of *De musica* exclusively from quotations in Robert O'Connell's *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1978) which gives a rather esoteric interpretation of Augustine's aesthetics (cf. Robert F. Brown, "The First Evil Will Must be Incomprehensible: A Critique of Augustine" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 46: 3: 315-329).

do not share many of the basic tenets of Augustine's outlook³³⁸, even those who seek to defend Augustine on some dogmatic point must often qualify their praise because of the shifts in Augustine's theology.³³⁹

Most notably, Augustine is ambiguously situated in the philosophical debate about libertarian and compatibilist freedom. For instance, recent scholars have argued that Augustine is a compatibilist from start to finish³⁴⁰, or, alternately, that his compatibilist views are later developments.³⁴¹ For some, Augustine's compatibilism is seen as an unfortunate failing, in others, a sign of his maturity.³⁴² Augustine himself is vague on whether his later writings are in conflict with his earlier thought. Discussing *De libero arbitrio*, his central work on the will, in his *Retractations*, Augustine acknowledges that he said little about grace, except in passing, and that the Pelagians made use of this.³⁴³ But Augustine contends that even though this work was written

³³⁸ Eugene TeSelle gives a nice overview of a number of the contemporary challenges to the Bishop of Hippo's thought in *Augustine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006), 75-76. See also, Robert Dodaro, ed, et al. *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000) and Judith Chelius Stark, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Saint Augustine: Re-Reading the Canon* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

³³⁹ Balthasar acknowledges an ambiguity in Augustine's writings about when the shift from "philosophy" to "theology" took place, but he affirms that as early as Augustine's Cassiacum writings "Augustine is fully conscious of himself as a Christian and a believer" (*Glory of the Lord*, 2: 96). In coming into contact with the sermons of Ambrose and neo-platonic philosophy, Balthasar argues,

two things come into his field of vision simultaneously, philosophical form and the content it frames and structures, Christian teaching; both are equally strongly attested by the early writings. And if later, especially in his counter attack by the great heresies, the Christian content emerges ever more distinctly and strongly, it is never in the form of material additions, but as developments of parts and elements already clearly contained, albeit in outline, in the original conception (*Glory of the Lord*, 2: 96).

³⁴⁰ Katherin A. Rogers, "Augustine's Compatibilism," *Religious Studies* 40:4 (2004): 415-435.

³⁴¹ Lynne Rudder Baker, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge," *Faith and Philosophy* 20: 4 (2003): 460-478.

³⁴² See the above examples of Katherin Rogers and Lynn Baker, respectively.

³⁴³ *Retr.* 1.9

ABBREVIATIONS: CD: *De civitate Dei*; Conf: *Confessiones*; De Doct. Christ.: *De Doctrina Christiana*; De Mus.: *De Musica Ench.*; *Enchiridion*; LA: *De libero arbitrio*; NB: *De natura boni*; Retr.: *Retractations*; Trin.: *De Trinitate*; VR: *De vera religione*.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations of *De civitate Dei*, *Retractations* and *Confessiones* are taken from the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press); *De libero arbitrio*, *De vera religione* and *De natura boni* are from the Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition (Westminster Press); *Enchiridion* is taken from *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, trans. Henry Paolucci (Chicago: Gateway, 1961); *De Doctrina Christiana* is taken from *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); *De musica* is taken from *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, trans. Robert Russell, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 194.

against the Manichees, it applies just as much to the Pelagians, and thus makes no move to ‘retract’ or distance himself from the work. Yet, while Augustine seems comfortable with the way in which his earlier theodicy fits with his later theodicy, current scholars disagree on whether Augustine’s later compatibilism fits naturally with his earlier thoughts on evil, which seem, on the surface to be quite libertarian.³⁴⁴ Katherin Rogers contends that Augustine’s views on the will hold together, while G. R. Evans and Eleonore Stump find a shift in Augustine’s thought which is at odds with his earlier writings.³⁴⁵ Moving from *De libero arbitrio* to *De civitate Dei* and on to *Enchiridion* it is possible to chart the bishop’s change in tone, as he worries less and less about the role of the will, and emphasizes ever more strongly the divine prerogative of God to save whomever he wishes.³⁴⁶

Yet, despite the fact that there is no clear consensus on many of Augustine’s views surrounding the nature of the will, and despite the noticeable changes in Augustine’s thinking, even within his writings surrounding the problem of

³⁴⁴ G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 118.

³⁴⁵ Of the central questions Augustine addresses in *De libero arbitrio*, perhaps most troubling to him was the question of divine foreknowledge and human responsibility. How could we be free, he ponders, if God knows in advance what we will do? Yet, Augustine is insistent, that God’s knowledge in no way determines or undermines human agency. Yet, as G. R. Evans writes in *Augustine on Evil*, “Augustine was to shift his ground on the question of compulsion in his last years, as he became more and more firmly convinced that divine grace chose those it would rescue from the consequences of Adam’s sin, and made their wills capable of choosing the good whether they consented or not. God thus has not only foreknowledge but an active role in bringing about that which he foreknows, and because he is omniscient he is irresistible” (117-8).

I am inclined to agree with T. D. Chappell, who argues in *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom: Two Theories of Freedom, Voluntary Action, and Akrasia* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1995) that the seeds of Augustine’s later compatibilism were present, if not fully explored, in his earlier writings. Thus, Augustine’s more determined commitment to determinism in *De civitate Dei* and *Enchiridion* marks an outgrowth of Augustine’s thinking. Whether one takes that ‘growth’ to be a flower or a cancer depends greatly on one’s Christian tradition.

³⁴⁶ There is a distinct shift in tone, between Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio*, wherein he stresses the importance of active agency in humanity, else misery would not be justified, and *Enchiridion*, where Augustine’s concern to stress the goodness of God’s grace overshadows his concern to relate the justice of God to the specific end of each human life (see *Ench.* 98-99). This shift toward the big picture, without worry of the small, suggests that Augustine has ceased to worry overmuch about the nature of free will and has given over to a focus on the will of God as the arbitrator of our destiny. This turn can be seen earlier, as in *De civitate Dei*, where we note that Augustine has taken a more compatibilist-sounding approach to the question of human willing, focusing on the necessity of grace as both the material and efficient cause of right choosing (12.6-7). In *Enchiridion* we find this kind of argument repeated (*Ench.* 32), as Augustine finds the source of all humanity’s choosing in God’s divine prerogative.

evil, there is a widespread unity in the general pattern of his argumentation and reflection on evil, and especially within his reflections on theodicy and aesthetics. *The thread that runs through much of his writing is a continual desire, wherever possible, to discern the beautiful logic whereby God has providentially ordered the cosmos.* “No-one has praised God so assiduously as the supreme beauty or attempted so consistently to capture the true and the good with the categories of aesthetics as Augustine”, Balthasar writes.³⁴⁷

Furthermore, the continual desire to capture the true and the good within the categories of aesthetics plays a part in Augustine’s desire to defend God, and to illuminate the just governance of creation by God despite the presence of sin, corruption, and misery in the world. For Augustine, creation is filled with signposts which point to God’s goodness. We find them in nature, the principles that govern the arts, and in the natural intuitions of humanity. Yet we must look carefully to see this (sometimes hidden) beauty. “Anyone who thinks the oar is broken in the water and is restored when it is taken out has nothing wrong with his senses,” Augustine writes in *De vera religione*, “but he is a bad judge of what they convey to him... [in such a person] the mind operates perversely, for it and not the eye was made to contemplate supreme beauty.”³⁴⁸ Likewise in *De musica*, Augustine describes the way that our thinking must rise to a higher level, in order to discern the beauty in the whole: “In this array there are many things which to us appear out of order and confused, because we have been attached... to their order, their station in existence, according to our own limited merits, not knowing the glories which Divine Providence has in operation (*gerat*), concerning us. It is as if some one were put to stand like a statue in a corner of a fine, large house, and found that, being a part of it himself, he

³⁴⁷ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2: 95.

³⁴⁸ VR 62.

could not perceive the beauty of the structure, (*fabrica*).”³⁴⁹ Augustine, wherever possible seeks to see past the ‘broken oar’ of evil in order to discern the bigger and more beautiful picture.

I therefore support John Hick’s effort in *Evil and the God of Love* to see in Augustine a central set of concerns which form the foundation of an ‘Augustinian’ theodicy which can be gathered under an ‘aesthetic theme’.³⁵⁰ As discussed in Part I, Hick draws out three crucial facets of Augustine’s theodicy: *essential goodness of creation, the value of plenitude, and the just visitation of misery on the sinful*. Though somewhat simplistic, this outline marks out the key elements in Augustine’s theodicy which are not only important to his own work, but are also widely shared (if altered in some ways) by later theologians, (Boethius, Hugh of St Victor, Aquinas, and down the line to thinkers such as C. S. Lewis). These three focal points form the basis of this foundational aesthetic theodicy.

2.1. EXCURSUS: Answering Tilley’s Objections to an Amalgamated Theodicy

Despite the influence of John Hick’s work, and the praise which is often attached to his “near-classic survey” of Western theodicy, there are several objections to Hick’s amalgamation which must be addressed, and are helpful in the long run to discern the patterns of Augustine’s thought more fully. In *The Evils of Theodicy*, Terrence Tilley has questioned the very existence of an ‘Augustinian theodicy’, charging Hick with “attribut[ing] to Augustine a system of ‘theodicy’ which goes far beyond what he actually claimed and said.”³⁵¹ This accusation of Hick takes two forms. First, Tilley charges Hick and other theodicists with an attempt to shoehorn Augustine into the mold of theodicy, into which Augustine, *according to* Tilley, never properly

³⁴⁹ DM 6.30

³⁵⁰ As described in Part I.

³⁵¹ Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), 114

fits. Second, Tilley charges that the attempt to “amalgamate Augustinian ‘themes,’ ‘doctrines,’ ‘teaching,’ etc., into a single theodicy”, as Hick does, is a “diatessaron” which obliterates the unique character of the individual works from which these ideas sprang.³⁵² Since I aim to spend a fair amount of space discussing Hick’s argument against Augustine, while accepting Hick’s general reading of Augustine, I think that Tilley’s objection is worth disputing.³⁵³ In an effort to counteract Tilley’s work, I will oppose the ideas that Augustine’s writings ought not to be considered to contain a ‘theodicy’, properly speaking, and that Augustine’s writings are not unified enough to allow for *harmonization*. I believe that both positions are mistaken, and intend to briefly rebut them. This refutation, however, is doubly helpful as a way to look at some of the elements of Augustine’s theodicy which might escape our attention otherwise. It is my purpose for this first section then, to defend *a priori* Hick’s amalgamation, and also to provide a helpful context for Augustine’s own thoughts on beauty and evil, by showing them to be driven by a central concern - to ‘make credible’ the Christian faith.

2.1.1. *Is Augustine’s Theodicy not a Theodicy?* To make his case against Augustine’s theodicy, Tilley first lays out a strict definition of the practice:

A successful theodicy demonstrates either that a person can justly move from the data of the actual world, including its evils, to the claim that an omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent deity created it; or that the actual world is as good as or better than any other

³⁵² One is left to assume, by Tilley’s use of the word, that a “diatessaron” in theodicy would be as unwelcome in Western Christianity as has been the *Diatessaron* of Tatian.

³⁵³ Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 5. Underlying Tilley’s critique of Hick, I believe, is not primarily a desire to defend Augustine against false reading (Tilley finds much of Augustine’s work objectionable) so much as a desire to undercut theodicy, which he believes harmful:

[T]heodicy can be unmasked as a discourse practice which obscures evils and marginalizes the agents of reconciliation. My conclusion is that theodicy as a discourse practice must be abandoned because the practice of theodicy does not resolve the problems of evil and does create evils.(5)

Essentially, Tilley’s argument seems to be that by holding up Augustine as a propagator of theodicy, contemporary thinkers wrongly invoke precedent for their position, both obscuring Augustine’s meaning and perpetuating the harmful practice of theodicy at the same time.

possible world ; or that its picture of the world is at least as plausible as any other available alternatives.³⁵⁴

In his attempt to argue that Augustine offers no theodicy, Tilley turns to a number of key Augustinian sources where he points out that Augustine's treatment of evil therein attempts none of these tasks.³⁵⁵ Discussing, at length, the *Enchiridion*, Tilley reads Augustine's handbook for Christians as offering a 'defense'. Using Plantingan terminology, then, *Enchiridion* is only defending "the compatibility of belief that God exists and that there is evil in the world".³⁵⁶ According to Tilley, the discussion of evil in *Enchiridion* should only be taken to be a possible explanation, not one that purports to say what God's reasons "really are", and thus, is not theodicy. Likewise, according to Tilley, passages from *De civitate Dei*, ought not be used to apply to theodicy, because Augustine here is writing a apologetic account of history, not a justification of God, strictly defined. Other works are likewise placed beyond the pale for theodacists: *Confessiones* is too autobiographical, and *De libero arbitrio* and *De natura boni* are too stridently polemical to be mined for content of Augustine's genuine thinking.

As discussed in Chapter 1, I believe 'theodicy' should be viewed as a rather wide field whose general aim is to alleviate (not necessarily to dispel or destroy) tension between the idea of God and the fact of evil. Included in this definition would be the idea of a merely logical defense, a la Plantinga,

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 131.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 131.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 133. Contra Tilley, the distinction between theodicy and defense does not, I believe, have to do so much with 'warrant' as 'commitment'. The defender of God undertakes an entirely oppositional stance. He or she simply aims to defeat objections to God's existence, as in the case of the free will defender who proposes a merely *possible* reason why God might allow evil - even if he or she is not committed to that reason. As such, this is what Plantinga undertakes when he proposes his free will defense, and it is correct to say that a free will defender need not be committed to believing that there really *is* free will. But Plantinga is too bold in stating that a theodacist "tries to tell us what God's reason for permitting evil *really is*." (28). Theodacists must not, however, put forward only reasons for evil which they think "really are" God's reasons, but rather put forward reasons which they think are likely to be God's reasons. This is a subtle, but important distinction, touching on the nature of theological inquiry itself. Tilley inherits Plantinga's mistake here when he suggests that Augustine's *Enchiridion* is a defense, and not a theodicy, because, as Tilley describes it, the *Enchiridion* is a "statement of faith and a defense of its coherence". It seems to me that a statement of faith entails more commitment than a mere defense can provide.

but also even more modest attempts. Under my rather latitudinarian criteria, Augustine *does* offer a theodicy. But even under Tilley's criteria, a pattern of thought in Augustine's work may well be described as 'theodicean.'

Specifically, when Tilley defines a successful theodicy as one which demonstrates that "its picture of the world is at least as plausible as any other available alternatives" it is hard not to think of Augustine's struggles against Manichaenism in *Confessiones* or *De libero arbitrio*, or of his grand work, *De civitate Dei contra Paganos*, which pits Christian truth against Pagan falsehoods.

In his *Retractations*, Augustine writes that *De libero arbitrio* was composed to dispute with the Manichees "who deny that evil derives its origin from the free choice of the will and who contend accordingly that God the creator of all things is to be blamed."³⁵⁷ In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine sought "to write against [pagan] blasphemies and errors" and to "refute them".³⁵⁸ Further, as Michael Patrick Foley has argued, Augustine's first entry into theodicy, *De ordine*, is fundamentally a response to Cicero's three theological dialogues, *On the Nature of the Gods*, *On Divination*, and *On Fate*.³⁵⁹ A large number of Augustine's most significant writings on evil are situated in the context of defending Christianity against other theologies. If theodicy thus attempts to, as Tilley says, "demonstrate" Christian truth, against "other available alternatives", then Augustine's work repeatedly can be said to do so. Thus I take Tilley's attempt to be de-theodicize Augustine's work to be misled; an unnecessary imposition of strict criteria on Augustine's work.

Further, when Tilley writes that *De civitate Dei* "is not a theodicy but a highly politicized apologetic theology of history" he seems to reflect a rather modern segregation of the categories of history and theology. These

³⁵⁷ *Retr.* 1.9.

³⁵⁸ *Retr.* 2.69.

³⁵⁹ Michael Patrick Foley, "The 'De ordine' of St. Augustine", PhD diss., Boston College, 1999.

days, it would be uncommon for a historian to mix together apologetics and theodicy, but this does not mean that Augustine's historical polemic is not also intended to defend God's goodness. Specifically, Tilley seems to overlook the fundamentally religious context within which Augustine's theology of history is written.³⁶⁰ In *Retractations*, Augustine notes how the first five books of *De civitate Dei* were written to refute those who believed the misfortunes of sacked Rome were due to the prohibition of the worship of the pagan gods.³⁶¹ Augustine's goal is so situated in his context that his purposes often seem odd to contemporary readers. In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine begins with a rather unusual perspective, arguing that those who suffered at the hands of Visigoths ought, if they were wise, to attribute their pains

to that divine providence which is wont to employ wars to the castigation or humiliation of morally corrupt characters, as well as else to provide a trial by such affliction for righteous and praiseworthy men, and after they have been approved, either to translate them to a better world or to keep them longer on this earth for further services.³⁶²

Going further, by citing Horace and Virgil, Augustine attacks the notion that piety toward the Roman gods would have saved them from their misfortune. If, as Virgil notes, piety to the gods did not save Troy, why should it have saved Rome?³⁶³ Here Augustine must take a position rather foreign to moderns, in that he must put forward his theodicy, not against sheer atheism, but against competing theisms. The context of Augustine's writings in *De civitate Dei* is nearly opposite to modern theodicy. In discussing the problem of evil, it is necessary to keep in mind the difference between 'responsibility' and 'culpability'. Where contemporary theodacists,

³⁶⁰ Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 115.

³⁶¹ *Retr.* 2.69.

³⁶² CD 1.1.

³⁶³ CD 1.3.

often sparring against their atheistic colleagues, are primarily concerned to explain why the Christian God is not *culpable* for occurrent evil, Augustine, sparring against polytheistic worship, must argue why the Christian God is *responsible* for occurrent evil. Phrased more succinctly, contemporary theodicy is more about *avoiding blame* for evil, where *De civitate Dei* must begin by *laying claim* to evil.

Since the existence of the supernatural was then not generally a live option for debate—it was simply assumed—it should be no surprise that Augustine’s notion of theodicy is markedly different from Terrence Tilley’s or even John Hick’s. Both thinkers use a set of definitions for theodicy which are primarily derived from an Enlightenment context, where the authority of the church is no longer assumed, and thus theodicy must begin from scratch, appealing to ‘universally’ held facts and assumptions. Notably, Hick assumes that, given the problem of evil, the default setting for human belief is atheism when he writes: that “theodicies proceed by bringing other facts and theories into account so as to build up a wider picture which includes the fact of evil but which is such that it is no longer more natural to infer from it that there is no God than that there is.”³⁶⁴ But this is not Augustine’s context. The default setting in the early Christian era was undoubtedly polytheism. St Paul’s passage in Romans 1 is often invoked these days as a challenge to atheists, to convert wonder at nature into thankfulness to God. But for Paul and Augustine, who cites the passage at length in *De civitate Dei*, the theological error in question was not sterile atheism but fecund idolatry: “images made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things” (Romans 1:21-24).³⁶⁵ Paul’s apologetic on Mars Hill is likewise situated, when he observes an altar to an “unknown god” and utilizes it in advocating monotheism:

³⁶⁴ Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 371.

³⁶⁵ CD 8.10.

Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” (Acts 17:24-5)

Here Paul plays upon the pagan desire for knowledge of new gods, which, in its own way, is as much an obstacle as a stubborn refusal to stretch one’s religious ideas at all: as we read in Acts 17:21, “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” Romans especially were known for seeking out new gods, as the pagan orator Caecilius writes, “[Romans] search out everywhere these foreign gods, and adopt them for their own; nay, they have even erected alters to the *unknown* gods.”³⁶⁶ Against this background, it is easy to discern Augustine’s perpetual desire to situate evil in the context of the Christian story, so as to prevent evil from pointing toward another theology.

A second and perhaps equally powerful force is at work in Augustine’s theodicy. Besides seeking to avoid a pagan solution to the problem of evil, Augustine strives to show Christian theology to be a *fulfillment* of the best of pagan thought.³⁶⁷ In this vein, Augustine navigates the waters of Paganism, seeking to find points of connection wherever he can (yet unafraid to demolish pagan obstacles):

For we ought not to refuse to learn letters because they say that Mercury discovered them; nor because they have dedicated temples to Justice and Virtue, and prefer to worship in the form of stones things that ought to have their place in the heart, ought we on that

³⁶⁶ Quoted in Jonathan Kirsch, *God against the Gods* (NY: Viking, 2004), 63.

³⁶⁷ Notably, *De civitate Dei* leans heavily on the work of Varro, whom Augustine himself called “the most learned of the Romans”, specifically the distinction Varro draws between the divine and human elements of the city (19.1). As Eugene TeSelle points out in *Augustine the Theologian*, Varro also, “influenced Augustine, to write a series of books on various disciplines, to see that the soul could ascend by degrees, and to strive to see the universe as rightly ordered” (NY: Herder and Herder, 1970), 45-47.

account to forsake justice and virtue. Nay, but let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master; and while he recognizes and acknowledges the truth, even in their religious literature, let him reject the figments of superstition, and let him grieve over and avoid men who, "when they knew God, glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things."³⁶⁸

Thematically, from the very beginning, it is easy to see that Augustine seeks to, in Pauline language, “take captive every thought”, Pagan or Christian, ethical or aesthetic and in order to reflect upon, and to reflect back, the glory of God. On Mars Hill, it may be said that Paul inaugurates this tradition, (which Augustine cites approvingly in *De civitate Dei*) when he quotes Epimenides and Aratus in Romans 17:28: “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”³⁶⁹ That Augustine sought to find resonance between pagan philosophy and Christian theology is fitting with the pattern of thought held by early Christian apologists. As Hans Urs von Balthasar states, the theological projects of Justin, Origen, and Athanasius (to name a few) share similar objectives, to make the Christian message ‘credible’ by showing it to fulfill the partial understanding of the divine nature obtained by natural observation (Rom 1:20). “Against this backdrop”, Hans Urs von Balthasar notes, “Christianity represented not only a fulfillment, but also a call to conversion, insofar as all of the fragmentary *logoi* absolutized themselves and thus put up a sinful resistance to the true Logos”.³⁷⁰ Thus, the sort of argument which Paul gives on Mars Hill is also present in the early Christian

³⁶⁸ *De Doct. Christ.* 2.18.28.

³⁶⁹ CD 8.10

³⁷⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 15.

philosophers who sought to show that Christianity fulfilled many of the Pagan values, as a key point of connection to enable conversion.

Key to the Pagan philosophy of the time, especially the Pythagorean, Platonic and Plotinian tradition, was a keen emphasis on the study of beauty. Sextus Empiricus (speaking of the philosophy of the Pythagoreans) asserts, “No art comes about without proportion, and proportion resides in number.”³⁷¹ Plato, in *Timaeus*, writes, “Now all that is good is beautiful, and what is beautiful is not ill-proportioned. Hence we must take it that if a living thing is to be in good condition, it will be well-proportioned.”³⁷² And Plotinus, who we must pass over far too quickly, says in the *Enneads*, “being beautiful is being well-proportioned and well-measured.”³⁷³

Athenagoras, the 2nd-century theologian, explicitly draws on Platonic categories in praising the beauty of creation and its craftsman:

The world, to be sure, is beautiful (καλός) and excels in its size, in the arrangement of the things in the ecliptic and about the pole, and in its spherical shape... Thus if the world is a harmonious (ἁρμονοῦν) instrument rhythmically moved, I worship not the instrument but the one who tuned and strikes the strings and sings to its accompaniment the melodious strain... If, as Plato says, the world is God’s craftsmanship, though I admire its beauty (κάλλος), I reverently draw near to the craftsman.³⁷⁴

Athanasius also display this aforementioned trend well, as they both draw upon Greek conceptions of beauty and yet also seek to affirm, against Greek theology, the truth of Christianity:

³⁷¹ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Ancient Aesthetics*, trans. Adam Czerniawski, et al. (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 86.

³⁷² Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald J. Zehl (Cambridge: Hackett, 2000), 83. (87c-d)

³⁷³ Plotinus, *Enneads* in *Philosophical Classics*, vol 2, *Medieval Philosophy*, Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann eds., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 45. (1.6.1)

³⁷⁴ Athenagoras, *Legatio and De Resurrectione*, ed. William R. Schoedel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 33.

But since there is not disorder (αταξία) but order (ταξίς) in the universe, and not chaos but symmetry, and not confusion but system and a harmonious ordering of the world (παναρμόνιος σύτταξις), we must consider and form an idea of the master who unites and binds the elements together, bringing them into harmony (συμφίωσις).³⁷⁵

And the universe is good, as it was so created and thus we see it, since this is what he wills; and no one could disbelieve it. For if the movement of creation was meaningless and the universe was carried about haphazardly, one could well disbelieve our statements. But if it was created with reason, wisdom, and understanding and has been arranged with complete order, then he who governs and ordered it can be none other than the Word of God (Λόγος).³⁷⁶

For if there were many leaders of creation, then such order in the universe would not be preserved; but all would be in disorder on account of the many leaders...³⁷⁷

These writers, existing in the midst of a pagan world, are thus offering an apologetic offensive. By attempting, as the Greek philosophers had done, to offer a picture of the world which is unified and orderly, they seek to fulfill the requirements of philosophy, while also asserting an argument for the primacy of the Christian paradigm. Invoking Greek concepts these theologians proceeded with a heartening trust. “Everything that is good and beautiful belongs to us” Justin Martyr writes.³⁷⁸ Augustine stands in this tradition. As Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz notes, Augustine “took over the aesthetic principles of the ancients, transformed them and transmitted them”.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁵ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 103.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 111.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁷⁸ Quoted in Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 17.

³⁷⁹ As Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz notes, Augustine “took over the aesthetic principles of the ancients, transformed them and transmitted them in their new form to the middle ages.” From *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, *Medieval Aesthetics*, trans. R. M. Montgomery (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 48.

Balthasar describes the drive of such reflections: “The Christian message could thus be made credible, both because it unified what was fragmented and also because it ransomed what was held captive by converting what was perverted.”³⁸⁰ The Greek ideals of beauty, truth and goodness, organized under a logos (as in the *Timaeus*) were thus turned on their head, in an effort, as Balthasar writes, not to pacify the Greeks, but to show that the pagan philosophy “failed to recognize that which is clearly there to be seen” and was thus “punished with humiliating idolatry”.³⁸¹ So strong was his confidence in the way that Christian truth fulfilled these Greek categories, Augustine was convinced that if Plato and his followers were alive in the Christian era they would quickly become Christians, as he notes, many recent Platonists had done.³⁸²

With this apologetic emphasis in mind, Augustine’s frequent appeal to the category of beauty is yet another attempt to assert the truth of Christianity, not a mere attempt to embroider the edges of his theology with aesthetic concerns.³⁸³

2.1.2. Inconsistency in Augustine. This brings us to Tilley’s second argument against Hick’s amalgamation. Tilley brings up the critique (discussed briefly above) that Augustine’s works, in a theological sense, “are too inconsistent

³⁸⁰ Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 16.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 17. One is reminded, by comparison, of the apologetic Paul gives upon Mars Hill, which seeks to find commonality with pagan piety (the worship of an unknown god, the poet’s confidence in one in whom we live and move and have our being) in order to demolish pagan idolatry (temples built by human hands).

³⁸² VR 4.5-7.

³⁸³ Thus, in his own way, Augustine appeals to the data of the world in order to make the Christian message credible. John Hick, for instance, integrates the scientific theory of evolution into his theodicy for much the same reason. By incorporating widely held notions of the nature of reality into one’s theodicy, one commends the response to evil as credible.

I hear Tertullian clearing his throat somewhere in the distance, preparing to ask what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, and rush to point out that the background for Augustine’s reflections on beauty, however, was not merely derived from the philosophical tradition. Scripture inspires Augustine’s reflections on the goodness of the world (CD 11.23), on how measure, number, and weight (in other words, beauty) originates in God (NB 3, CD 5.11, *Conf.* 10.27), and how nature points to God, in its own way (*Conf.* 10.6, 11.4, VR 42-3, *Trin.* 15.1, CD 11.4).

to yield a coherent position”.³⁸⁴ Tilley saves his strength however, to argue that assuming even a unified theology, an amalgamation of Augustine’s writings constitutes a sort of “diatessaron” (i.e. an unhealthy compression of sources which destroys the unique purposes for which they were written).³⁸⁵ Tilley argues:

Augustine did not write a theodicy. He wrote numerous works to various audiences, for various purposes, and with various illocutionary forces which touch on God and evils at various points and in various ways.³⁸⁶

Thus, to extract from these books nuggets of wisdom for our contemporary struggle to defend God’s goodness (as Hick does) is to do violence to Augustine’s work.

The fuel powering some of Tilley’s critique of an ‘amalgamated’ Augustinian theodicy is speech-act theory. In the first three chapters of his book Tilley argues that speech act theory “shows the actions we perform in speaking and gives a way of understanding their power and moral worth.”³⁸⁷ Believing that theodicists have ignored the basics of speech act theory, Tilley argues that theodicists have misunderstood Augustine’s writings, which were written for speculative, polemical or ecclesiastical purposes. Thus, that Hick “never adverts to the differences among these communicative actions” fundamentally deforms his understanding of Augustine’s work.

Tilley intends this as his trump card against Hick, that in Augustine’s works, his views on evil are not put forward “with equal and identical assertive illocutionary force”, but by opening the door to a consideration of the differences between Augustine’s works, I believe Tilley ultimately weakens his own case. Firstly, unless one assumes that a theodicy must have a certain

³⁸⁴ Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 117

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 115.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 115.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 3

illocutionary character (assertive/declarative or institutionally/non-institutionally bound), which I do not, then this accusation has little weight. Set as he is against theodicy – for Tilley, it is “a discourse practice which obscures evils and marginalizes the agents of reconciliation” – one would hope that the diversity of Augustine’s reflections on evil might suggest varying approaches to the subject, including autobiography. By retaining a rigid definition for theodicy, which he unmercifully declares “evil”, Tilley in the end seems in danger of creating a straw man out of the practice.

Secondly, if we accept Tilley’s point that there is great variety in Augustine’s works (both theologic-ally and locution-ally) which prevents us from pretending as if each were identical, then by examining a range of differing texts, covering a span of decades, we discover a rather observable pattern to Augustine’s reflections. If we select *De libero arbitrio*, *Confessiones*, *De civitate Dei*, and *Enchiridion*, works which all, admittedly, have different ‘illocutionary forces’ (roughly, taking Tilley’s criteria: polemical theology, autobiography, polemical history, and authoritative instruction) what is perhaps most destructive to Tilley’s argument is how consistently Augustine handles the problem of evil in all of these contexts. Without casting the net too widely, it is fair to say that these works represent a good range, and yet we find that the nature of evil, the goodness of the world, and the importance of the will (however construed) are all handled with seriousness and with similar results. In each case, but in varying ways, Augustine seeks to understand where evil fits within Christian truth. But even more notably, if we look through the lens of Augustine’s aesthetic apologetic we find, from the very beginning, a concern to ‘make credible’ the Christian mysteries through continued appeal to the categories of beauty. Beginning with his lost work on ‘The Beautiful and the Fitting’, through his later most Christian doctrine, Augustine is desirous to understand the beautiful logic of God’s goodness. That Tilley himself is rather tone-deaf to the strains of beauty running

through all of Augustine's work - especially *Enchiridion* in which, Tilley notes, the "aesthetic theme... is not an important motif" – means that he must miss this vital unity that spans the variety of Augustine's work.³⁸⁸ As I will show in the next section, I believe Tilley's attempt to reprimand Hick's amalgamation is misguided, and that Hick has correctly discerned the shape (if not the significance) of Augustine's aesthetic theme.

On the whole, however, Tilley's argument is helpful to bring to light significant differences between Augustine's writings on evil and current theodicy, as well as an important pattern in Augustine's thought which can be overlooked. So, while I do not think that Augustine's work must be said to fit perfectly into the frameworks of contemporary theodicy, I believe that by casting him against the background of pagan religion and philosophy, we can see that his work goes beyond merely defending the logical coherency of Christian belief, to contrasting it positively against other pagan beliefs, and finally to establishing its credibility by appeal to the central philosophical notions of his day. That there is, contra Tilley, real coherence in Augustine's thoughts on evil must be defended in the next section by quotation of a range of consistent sources, but at the very least, I believe that Tilley's case that amalgamating an Augustinian theodicy does violence to the thinker can be dismissed. Thus, I take Hick's summary to be warranted. If Augustine, in a variety of differing illocutionary acts, returns again and again to a set of very similar ideas, then it can be safely assumed that continuity in his thinking is more strongly affirmed *because of*, rather than *in spite of*, the differences in these writings.³⁸⁹

3. Augustine's Aesthetic Theodicy: *The Grammar and Poetics of Evil*

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 119.

³⁸⁹ Etienne Gilson in *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, remarks that all of Augustine's thought is but one long proof for God's existence consisting of various stages (quoted in Frederick Copleston, *The History of Philosophy*, vol. 2 [NY: Image, 1993], 70.)

3.1. *Privation.*

Augustine's response to the problem of evil is deservedly influential. In his writings he carries the question forward carefully, making sure to address a range of issues which are fundamental to the problem of evil discussion. The first element of Augustine's theodicy, *evil as privation*, resolved a basic challenge which evil posed to the goodness of God, if it possessed a nature. The problem of evil, at its most basic, runs like this: If a good and powerful God created everything, *unde malum*, whence evil? Is evil a part of God, or a necessary element in creation? Or, is evil a separate thing neither in God nor a part of creation, but self-existent? What we mean by evil fundamentally affects the issue at hand. To grant evil a nature suggests that the creator God is, in a completely unqualified sense, the creator of this *thing* called evil.

Augustine saw, he writes, with "imperfect piety" that a good God would not willingly create such a substance, and thus gravitated to the Manichaeans' "fabulous opinion" (that evil, like the good, is an ultimate and eternal force unto itself) as a way of resolving the problem.³⁹⁰ If evil is the self-existent opposite the good, then the good needs no justification for allowing it to exist. Problematising Augustine's theology was a belief that both God and evil necessarily possessed a *corporeal dimension*. Augustine writes,

I believed evil (*mali*) to have been a kind of substance (*substantiam*), and had a bulk of earth belonging to it, either deformed (*deformem*) and dense (*crassam*), which they called earth; or else thin and subtle, (like the body of the air)... I supposed two bulks, contrary to one another, both infinite, but the evil to be lesser and the good to be larger...³⁹¹

This picture thus seemingly grants evil not only a nature but almost the form of a monster: whether grotesque and heavy like 'the Blob' or thin and

³⁹⁰ *Conf.* 5.10

³⁹¹ *Conf.* 5.10.

airy like a wraith. Thus Augustine, understandably, felt that a dualistic system was necessary to acquit God of creating evil. He felt it “safer for me to believe thee never to have created any evil,” he writes, “than to believe that any could have come from thee created of that condition”.³⁹² It is striking here to note how Augustine, as J. Patout Burns notes, “never really abandoned” the Christian conviction that “God was all-powerful and exercised governance over the world.”³⁹³ Thus it is not surprising that in the end Manichaean metaphysics failed to satisfy him theologically. Even within the Manichaean view that evil is pre-existent, and occupied physical space, there was still, for Augustine, a challenge in affirming God’s (or ‘the Good’s’) benevolence and power. Self-existing evil challenged God’s goodness, as Burns goes on to write, because “a God who was the all-powerful creator and ruler of the world would have the power to destroy evil root and branch, and replace it with a good reality”:³⁹⁴ or as Augustine says it, “Was he not able so to turn and change the whole lump, that no evil should have remained in it, seeing he is able to do anything?”³⁹⁵

Augustine’s breakthrough is, as Balthasar notes, contemporaneously theological and philosophical.³⁹⁶ Through Ambrose, the problem of divine corporeality was overcome, as Augustine came to understand that the “image” in which humans were created did not entail that God himself was carnal.³⁹⁷ Augustine’s metaphysical breakthrough came through Plotinus (to whom he alludes in *Confessiones* 5.14), whose declaration that evil is “non-being” provided the second insight.³⁹⁸ Augustine’s dual discovery, then, that

³⁹² *Conf.* 5.10.

³⁹³ J. Patout Burns, "Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil," in *The Ethics of St. Augustine*, ed. William S. Babcock. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 68.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁹⁵ *Conf.* 5.10.

³⁹⁶ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2: 96.

³⁹⁷ *Conf.* 6.3.

³⁹⁸ *Ench* 1.8.6; cf. CD 11.22.

God may have substance without being physical, and that evil might have a description without having substance, unlocks the first element in his theodicy. Taking and transmuting Plotinus' insight, Augustine writes in *De natura boni*, that "nothing is evil save a diminishing of good".³⁹⁹ To become evil is to become *less* than what one was created to be; to become, not the good thing that God made, but something else, a perverted thing of our own doing.

Perhaps the most apt description for Augustine's insight is provided by Rowan Williams who calls this metaphysic a "grammar" of evil. The descriptor is an especially apt one as Augustine helpfully *parses* out the problem of evil discussion like a good teacher of rhetoric. Evil is never the subject of any action. We can never say "Evil *did* x". Nor even, in some sense, is evil a noun - there is no undistilled 'evil' which we could see, taste, or touch. There is also no verb "to evil" - in that all sins must be done by means of some other action such as talking, thinking, or moving) . To say that someone sinned only begs the question, of "How did they sin?" Thus, regarding the subject, verb and object of any statement, there can be no place for evil. But there may be a disjunctive quality between subject, verb and object. The phrases, "Philip worshipped God" and "Philip played Frisbee" both consist of only positive terms. Yet these phrases, consisting of exactly the same terms, "Philip played God" and "Philip worshipped Frisbee" indicate a state of affairs which, because they are disordered, are evil, and therefore degrade the subject, verb and object through their

³⁹⁹ NB 17.

disjuncture.⁴⁰⁰ Rowan Williams says this much more simply when he writes, “Evil is not some kind of object... but we give the name of evil to that process in which good is lost.”⁴⁰¹

The emphasis with which Augustine takes up this metaphysical point is understandable, given his cultural and autobiographical context. The definition of evil is *the* crucial battleground on which Augustine fights off the Manichaeans. Evil has “not merely no such existence as the Manichees introduce,” he writes, “but no such existence as anyone can imagine.” But the logic of *privatio boni* retains its force regardless of context. Assuming that qualities such as power, knowledge, and the ability to form intentions are intrinsically good, it is nonsensical to describe any force as capital-‘E’ evil. Such a force would retain these positive qualities on a metaphysical level and thus be partially good. In the 5th century or the 21st, evil must be

⁴⁰⁰ Though many Christians understandably have a difficult time understanding this concept, it does not fly in the face of the scriptural witness. The bible’s portrayal of evil is never one of sheer opposition to the good, as if that were possible: but frequently as the misplaced desire for some experience/possession/value, which possesses positive value. The fall from paradise is more than rebellion, it is a desire for that which is good, but forbidden. The person of Satan is not an inverted angel, but a perverted angel, retaining good qualities such as beauty. The creature Leviathan is likewise seen as a destructive force and also playful companion.

That Hebrew and Greek words for sin likewise imply ‘twistedness/flip’, or ‘missing the mark’ (חטא, ἁμαρτία) suggests that Augustine’s definition of evil is fully compatible with a biblical theology.

Yet, writers from time to time have felt it necessary to express disapproval with the evil as privation. John Cowburn, for one, suggests that the essential nature of evil is a mystery, even to God (*Shadows in the Dark: The Problems of Suffering and Evil* [London: SCM Press, 1979], ch. 8.) In *Evil and the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Intervarsity Press, 2006), N. T. Wright proclaims, “Evil is the force of anti-creation, anti-life, the force which opposes and seeks to deface and destroy God’s good world of space, time and matter, and above all God’s image-bearing human creatures” (pg. 89). Perhaps Wright can now, in this time, get away with suggesting this mythological definition for evil without doing much damage to Christian theology: if so, it is possible to portray evil in more poetic and figurative terms as a sort of ‘negative potency’ (rather an absolute negation) only because dualism has been so thoroughly trounced.

⁴⁰¹ Rowan Williams “Insubstantial Evil” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000).

a *privatio boni*, not the opposite of the good as a negative, but the opposite of the good as a negation.⁴⁰²

The goodness which created things possess is definable in specific terms:

“From him comes every measure, every form, every pattern, and apart from his measure (*modus*), form (*species*), and pattern (*ordo*) nothing can be found existing or imagined to exist.”⁴⁰³ Augustine does not imply here that as a thing becomes evil it becomes somehow less extant—a more vaporous version of itself—but rather that it loses good attributes which it once possessed. Augustine continually adds, however, that a thing which has lost all its goodness would be non-existent. He writes in *Confessiones* about things, “whatsoever are, are good (*bona*), and the evil which I sought, whence it should be, is not any substance.”⁴⁰⁴ In affirming that the various levels of creation are all good, Augustine draws on the Plotinian notion that even lower things possess goodness by having a “certain degree of unity and a certain degree of Existence and by participating in the Ideal-form”.⁴⁰⁵ In affirming that existence terminates when privation is absolute, Augustine, however, opposes the Plotinian conception that the scale of goodness, descending from the highest to the lowest, terminates in an existent evil. “The Good is not the only existent thing,” Plotinus writes, “As necessarily as there is Something after the First, so necessarily there is a Last: this last is Matter, the thing which has no residue of good in it: here is the necessity of Evil.”⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² The nature of Plotinus’ ‘Matter’ (ὕλη) has been debated. But whether it is, as W. R. Inge argues, a sheer negation, or, as A. D. Sertillanges argues, a form of evil with positive powers, is largely beyond the scope of our concern (for more on this see, Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love*). It is significant to note, however, that Augustine avoids all such interpretations by refusing to give, or even hint at, any substance for evil (even a very shadowy and negative non-being) which would enable us to pinpoint its location. To remain in existence at all, the shreds of goodness must also remain. Whenever things shall be “deprived of all their goodness,” Augustine writes, “they shall also have no being” (*Conf.* 7.12.)

⁴⁰³ CD 11.25

⁴⁰⁴ *Conf.* 7.12.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ench.* 1.7.2

⁴⁰⁶ *Ench.* 1.8.7, c.f. 1.8.10.

Thus Augustine navigates his contemporary context in producing a definition of evil which is fully compatible with Christian theology. However, this definition does not overturn the problem of evil. As many commentators have pointed out, denying *being* to evil is not a sufficient apologetic in and of itself. So long as any state of affairs can be meaningfully called ‘evil’, whatever the nature of the cause, one must wonder why it is allowed. The lynchings of minorities are just as troubling if they arise from the *absence* of tolerance as from the *presence* of racism. Madden and Hare raise the problem well when they write,

Suppose, for example, one accepts St. Augustine’s definition of *evil* as “the privation of good”... The problem of evil still remains, however, because one now has the problem of asking why, in the present world, there is so much *prima facie* gratuitous absence of good, so much apparently needless privation.⁴⁰⁷

Madden and Hare are correct to raise this objection, as the ontology of evil is sometimes taken to be an argument in Augustine’s theodicy, rather than an undergirding element in his theology.⁴⁰⁸ Augustine’s metaphysic of evil is not intended to complete a Christian theodicy, but to avoid the immediate trap which, various non-Christian philosophies would offer. The remaining elements of Augustine’s theodicy, however, flow from and depend on this initial step.

But the significance of Augustine’s definition of evil does not stop with his avoidance of Manichaeism or Plotinian theology, but continues as he successfully integrates Greek metaphysical aesthetics. Among the attributes of being, *beauty* is clearly present. For Augustine, creation’s most basic construction can be said to have an aesthetic dimension. Each thing, being what it is, is already in possession of this form of sensible goodness.

⁴⁰⁷ Edward H. Madden and Peter H. Hare, *Evil and the Concept of God*, (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1968), 4-5.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Augustine's Latin already implicitly suggests this metaphysical aesthetic, as Carol Harrison notes,

Shape and form - *species* and *forma* - give Latin its words for the beautiful - *speciosus* and *formosus*; they are also the Latin words for the transcendent archetypes of reality, the Platonic forms... Latin holds together what other languages might allow to drift apart: actual shapes, ideal ultimate realities, and beauty as characteristic of them both.⁴⁰⁹

Augustine likewise makes this connection explicit, "Every corporeal creature, when possessed by a soul that loves God, is a good thing of the lowest order, and beautiful in its own way, for it is held together by form and species."⁴¹⁰

Plato had already said as much in *Timaeus* (a book which was widely influential in the Middle Ages as one of the few available Latin manuscripts by the Greek philosopher): "Now all that is good is beautiful, and what is beautiful is not ill-proportioned. Hence we must take it that if a living thing is to be in good condition, it will be well-proportioned."⁴¹¹ Augustine's metaphysics of form is therefore aesthetic by birthright, as he repeatedly emphasises that measure, proportion, order and number are likewise involved in overlapping ways to suggest the beautiful:

For all bodily beauty is a good congruence in the members, joined with a pleasing color."⁴¹²

Examine the beauty of bodily form, and you will find that everything is in its place by number.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁹ Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 2.

⁴¹⁰ VR 40.

⁴¹¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald J. Zehl (Cambridge: Hackett, 2000), 83. See also Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*, 98, and C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 43.

⁴¹² CD 22.19.

⁴¹³ LA 2. 16.

This Platonic aesthetic is not, however, an addendum for Augustine on the scriptural affirmation of creation's aesthetic goodness. Though we find few references to creation's beauty in scripture, the strong affirmation of God's glory, and the "beauty of holiness" make it easy to find a clear consonance between the idea of beauty, God's being and right behavior. A reading of the Septuagint reveals a likewise explicit connection between creation's goodness and creation's beauty. Surveying creation, God deems it "καλα" (beautiful, fair, good), implying in the Greek, like the Latin and the Hebrew, a deep connection between *being* and *beauty*.

3.2. *Plenitude*

In a number of ways, the issue of metaphysical evil, which Augustine deals with in a variety of texts, is inaccessible to modern readers. Where moral and natural evil seem more obviously straightforward, the question of metaphysical evil is often barely understood. The Catholic Encyclopedia defines metaphysical evil succinctly as the problem of finitude and limitation.⁴¹⁴ But even with this clear definition, it can be difficult to see exactly why this feature of reality would ever be considered a problem. The general irrelevance of the issue is further backed up by the contemporary literature, where the issue of finitude is rarely raised - either by atheists or theists. That something is *less* than it could be does not register these days as an objection on the philosophical radar.

The problem of metaphysical evil is also easier to ignore in the comfortable Western world, where we live relatively free from lice and other pests, without high rates of infant mortality, with air conditioning for the summer and heating for the winter. In our present situation as Westerners, we are simply not faced with the fierceness of nature in the way that the ancients

⁴¹⁴ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1915, s.v. "evil".

and medievals were, and thus perhaps a bit more inclined to praise nature as we would a domesticated pet. In a world without air conditioning or pesticide, even the wealthiest of rulers would still have had to contend with the difficulties of creation far more often than the average modern-day American. Living in an age with far less sanitation, Augustine is not merely being rhetorical when he asks, “who would not rather have bread in his house than mice, or money rather than fleas?”⁴¹⁵

Perhaps as a result of an evolutionary paradigm combined with a modern environmentalist awareness, it seems unlikely that many contemporary people would - either because of a sense of the scientific necessity of lower forms of life, or out of an attempt at egalitarian appreciation - “rashly dispraise” lower forms of life, or lower forms of matter. That Augustine feels it necessary to warn against this suggests that we have lost much of the world-view in which Augustine worked.

Deeper reasons behind the disjuncture between Augustine’s concerns and our own are fairly discernible. Where Medievals were concerned with metaphysics, moderns and postmoderns tend to have different concerns (epistemology and hermeneutics, respectively).⁴¹⁶ Susan Neiman affirms this shift, if reflecting perhaps an overly restricted view of philosophy. She writes “Leibniz was clearly the last philosopher to give a metaphysical, as opposed to a purely theological, account of evil, before philosophy deemed both to be out of bounds.”⁴¹⁷ If we must disagree that theology is not “out of bounds” for philosophers (I cite Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne and

⁴¹⁵ CD 11.16.

⁴¹⁶ There is some difference of opinion as to how the term ‘metaphysical evil’ is used. It is invoked in the recent literature, but most often, the authors are not using the term in the same way as Augustine and other Medievals. In Jennifer Geddes’ *Evil After Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives and Ethics*, (London: Routledge, 2001), she seems to define metaphysical evil as “an assenting attitude toward moral and radical evil” in line with Nietzsche’s existential voluntarism (50).

⁴¹⁷ Susan Neiman, “What’s the Problem of Evil?” in *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. María Pía Lara (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 28.

Marilyn Adams as evidence), we must also agree that overarching concern for metaphysics in philosophy has lost its sway. This has no doubt contributed to the vestigial quality of this element of the discussion, even among those philosophers who are still concerned with metaphysics (Anglo-American analytic philosophers especially), the issue still lacks the force it had in the Medieval period. Even for the metaphysically-inclined, the nature of any finite creature's goodness is not a hot topic.⁴¹⁸

Yet despite the distance from which many of us must view this matter, the subject of finitude, the attendant question of metaphysical evil, and the principle of plenitude is crucial for tying together Augustine's ontology of evil and formulation of moral evil. Against the background of its time it also has a certain apologetic warrant, as Balthasar mentions.⁴¹⁹ Yet commentators often overlook the issue when discussing Augustine, and so it will be necessary to try and see why Augustine on numerous occasions, reflected on the subject, and what he made of it.⁴²⁰

First, the problem of metaphysical evil, and Augustine's responding solution to it again must be situated in his philosophical context. In *De civitate Dei*, after expounding on the goodness of all created things, he turns to potential objections from "certain heretics" who, in inquiring into the origin of the

⁴¹⁸ In *Anselmian Explorations*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1989) Morris rejects what has often been called "The Great Chain of Being", a single scale of commensurate value running from the lowest levels of existence to the highest. Morris's rejection of the great chain of being is fairly simple, in that he opposes the idea that there is a single system of value. "It just makes no sense to ask which is of greater intrinsic value, an aardvark or an escalator" (101).

Defenders of medieval metaphysics, like Katherin Rogers, have argued that, besides being an elegant and logical system, the great chain of being "jibes well with moral intuitions of many" (77-78). We very naturally, if tacitly, rank beings in this scale. If, as Rogers poses, we were driving along a dark road at night, and saw an aardvark in front of us, yet knew that in swerving to avoid the aardvark we would hit the bicycle, most of us would naturally avoid hitting the living, feeling creature. That we can make similar choices with a range of other objects, for Rogers, suggests that we intuitively possess a sense of commensurate, and comparable value across creation.

⁴¹⁹ Hick devotes a fair amount of time to discussing the problem, though Tilley (incorrectly) accuses Hick of citing Augustine on this view only once (Hick cites Augustine at least three times)

⁴²⁰ NB 8. See also *Conf.* 7.5; LA 3.9

universe, do not discern this goodness. The heretics in question here are most likely Manichaeans, to whom Augustine later in the chapter refers by name, and their objection to the inherent goodness of all things is based upon, according to Augustine, a lack of “a religious eye”.⁴²¹ Augustine writes of these heretics, that they fail to see how the universe’s good order includes finitude. Seeing only “our mortal state, which cannot do without the flesh and is a brittle thing” these heretics miss how lesser things contribute “to the universe as if to their common polity (*publicam*)”.⁴²²

I admit that I do not know why mice and frogs were created, or flies or worms. Yet I see that all things are beautiful in their kind, though on account of our sins many things seem to us disadvantageous. For I observe the body and members of no living thing in which I do not find that measures, numbers, and order contribute to its harmonious unity. I do not understand where all these things come from if not from the highest measure, number and order, which lies in the immutable and eternal sublimity of God. If those silly chatterboxes would think of this, they would stop bothering us and, considering all the beauties, both the highest and the lowest, they would praise God their craftsman in all of them.⁴²³

Whether invoking the image of a city or of nature itself, Augustine pushes us to dig deeper in our understanding in order to see the underlying consonances between all things. Augustine’s overall position may well be summed up in the following quote:

Hence, does God’s providence advise us not to dispraise anything rashly, but to seek out the use of it warily, and where our wit and weakness fails, there to believe the rest that is hidden, as we do in other things past our reach: for the obscurity of the use either exercises the humility, or beats down the pride, nothing at all in nature being evil (evil being but a privation of the good), but everything from earth to heaven ascending in a scale of goodness,

⁴²¹ CD 11.22.

⁴²² CD 11.22.

⁴²³ *De Genesi adversus Manichaeos*, 1.16.25-26. Here Augustine draws upon language from *The Wisdom of Solomon*, which describes this three-part ordering of creation (Wisdom 11:20).

and so from the visible unto the invisible, unto which all are unequal.⁴²⁴

In *Confessiones*, having just affirmed that all things created are “very good”, Augustine moves on to the common sense objection that to us, some things do not appear to be very good, but rather, evil. Augustine goes far enough to admit that some parts of creation seemingly clash together, but that this clash does not discredit the goodness of creation. His language is notably mild regarding creation’s difficult spots. “But in some particulars of the creation,” Augustine writes, “some things there be that agree not with some other things (*non conveniunt*), they are conceived to be evil.”⁴²⁵ Aware of the dangers of creation, (he cites dragons, deeps, hail, fire, snow, ice, stormy wind, mountains, beasts, and creeping things, along with nice things such as hills, fruitful trees, cedars, cattle and flying fowl) Augustine affirms that all of these things praise God in their individual excellence and collective excellence.

Augustine’s defense of the clashes within God’s creation seems close to Austin Farrer’s discussion of the “mutual interference of systems”, in *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, wherein Farrer discusses the natural way that parts of God’s creation collide unknowingly, causing distress and destruction. Like Augustine, Farrer upholds creation’s plenitude as a good which outweighs any natural evils. “The grand cause of physical evil,” Farrer writes, “is the mutual interference of systems.”⁴²⁶ In a diverse creation, Farrer argues, it is inevitable that some species will feed on other species, or that hot and cold weather fronts, though good in themselves, will collide and form tornadoes or hurricanes.

⁴²⁴ CD 11.22.

⁴²⁵ CD 7.13.

⁴²⁶ Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (London: Collins, 1962), 50.

In defense of creation, Augustine argues for the value of all of creation's variety. Though carnivorous animals may be inferior to angels, or cloudy days to sunny days, he presses, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Augustine writes "[though] those superior things were better than these inferior things, but yet all things together [were] better than those superior by themselves".⁴²⁷ Phrased more simply, Augustine is arguing "*non essent omnia, si essent aequalia*" (if all things were equal, all things would not be), and all things together are better than a lesser number of higher things alone.⁴²⁸ Thus we should not impugn the divine wisdom in creating weeds, fleas, or raccoons since we can discern why God would desire nature's variegated and humble beauty over a more austere set of celestial beings. Augustine here articulates a definitive rationale behind God's good act of creation – more is better. In this, Augustine is treading upon a philosophical path which, though often helpful, is also lined with traps.

The Platonic view, represented in *Timaeus*, however, led to a difficult challenge within Christian theology. Plato's god, never jealous of anything created (for that would be a fault) could do nothing less than create the best, and thus "wanted to produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow."⁴²⁹ Entailed in producing this excellent product is a creation which exhausts all possibilities for proportions, ratios, and mixtures of essential elements. In *The Discarded Image*, C. S. Lewis describes Plato's guiding principle here as "The Principle of the Triad", which is well described in *Timaeus*: "it is impossible that two things only should be joined together without a third. There must be some bond to bring them together".⁴³⁰ This principle, together with the Principle of

⁴²⁷ *Conf.* 7.13.

⁴²⁸ CD 11.22.

⁴²⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 15-6.

⁴³⁰ Quoted in C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 43.

Plenitude, fit together very naturally, for if the former is physical the latter is aesthetic. Lewis describes the classical position: “If between aether and Earth there is a belt of air, then, it seems to Apuleius, *ratio* herself demands that it should be inhabited. The universe must go fully exploited.” Here Platonic physics and aesthetics fit together with Platonic theology to suggest that the creator must, by his benevolence, fill creation to the brim with every variation and combination of elements.

That the supreme good must do the best leads quite naturally into neo-Platonic theology, which states that “the One” must simply emanate creation in all its variety by its very nature. Plotinian theology sees creation as a cascade of substances, from the highest to the lowest, flowing downward automatically from the highest being. As Frederick Copleston describes it,

In the Plotinian emanation-theory the world is depicted as proceeding in some way from God without God becoming in anyway diminished or altered thereby, but for Plotinus God does not act freely (since such activity would, he thought, postulate change in God) but rather *necessitate naturae*, the Good necessarily diffusing itself.⁴³¹

The question raised by this tradition is essentially the old Euthyphro dilemma with minor variations. Is God somehow bound to create “the good”, or is what God creates, *de dicto*, “the good”? To praise creation as fulfilling an aesthetic principle (*filling* creation with variety) seems to indicate that for God to do otherwise would be less than fully praiseworthy. Abelard describes this tension well, when he writes, “We must inquire whether it was possible for God to make more things or better things than he has in fact made... Whether we grant this or deny it, we shall fall into many difficulties

⁴³¹ Frederick Copleston, *The History of Philosophy*, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Image, 1993), 74.

because of the apparent unsuitability of the conclusions to which either side leads us.”⁴³²

On the one side, affirming that God could not have made better things, leads toward a Leibnizian affirmation of the necessity of this world as the only creatable world. Christian philosophy has sometime veered toward this view. Which is often labeled under the moniker of ‘the principle of sufficient reason’ (though it may perhaps also go under the name of act utilitarianism). It is, in many ways, a very natural position to take regarding the divine creativity. On the other side, voluntarism affirms that God could have, should he have decided to do so (*hoc volo, sic jubeo*), created a world entirely the opposite of this one. This naturally leads to exactly the sort of question Leibniz asks, “why praise him for what he has done, if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the contrary?”⁴³³

The principle of plenitude rather naturally introduces this problem, creating a tension between the nature of the goodness of creation and God’s freedom to create as He wishes. In his classic book, *The Great Chain of Being*, Arthur Lovejoy suggests that from Augustine onward, all medieval philosophy suffers from this “internal strain” between optimism and voluntarism. Lovejoy describes this problem as a “fruitful inconsistency” which Augustine embraced, which sought to hold on to the contingency of creation, and yet affirm the perfection of creation. If once one has admitted the world to be a manifestation of “the good” Lovejoy notes, “this means that in it all genuine possibility must be actualized; and thus none of

⁴³² Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1982), 71.

⁴³³ Gottfried Wilhelm Freiherr von Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* in *Discourse on Metaphysics and The Monadology*, trans. George R. Montgomery (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 2.

its characteristics or components can be contingent, but all things must be precisely what they are.”⁴³⁴

Yet, against Lovejoy and Platonic philosophy, I do not find that the idea that God’s creation is invested with rationally-discernible excellence demands the position that God must therefore create, or even that God must create a world of maximum goodness if he creates. Augustine’s thinking does not seem to be troubled with this question, and his handling of the matter avoids falling prey to the difficult conundrums which accompany it. In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine offers a simple discussion of God’s creation as reported in Genesis:

In fact there were three chief matters concerning a work of creation that had to be reported to us and that it behoved us to know, namely who made it, by what means, and why.⁴³⁵

The answer to all three of these questions are minimalistically drawn from Genesis. Who? “God.” How? “God said, ‘Let it be’” Why? “Because it is good.”⁴³⁶ There is something refreshing in Augustine’s sparsity of prose here, as he seem to willfully avoid straying into territory which is, on either side, littered with mines. Thus he writes with a sense of finality that “Nor is there any originator more excellent than God, any skill more effective than God’s word, any purpose better than that something good should be created by a good God.” Even when addressing the thought of Plato himself, Augustine seems to deliberately avoid straying into questions of the world’s optimality, but rather retains what he sees as the kernel of Plato’s thought, which in his eyes is essentially Christian:

Nor is there any originator more excellent than God, any skill more effective than God’s word, any purpose better than that something

⁴³⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard: Harvard University Press; 1976), 70.

⁴³⁵ CD 11.21.

⁴³⁶ CD 11.21.

good should be created by a good God. Plato too gives this as the proper reason, beyond all other reasons, for the world's creation, namely that good works might be created by a good God. He may have read our passage, or may have got knowledge of it from those who had read it, or else by his superlatively keen insight he gained vision of the unseen truths of God through understanding God's creation, or he too may have learned of these truths from such men as had gained vision of them.⁴³⁷

Augustine's handling of the matter is, to my mind, the best Christian response, which (with the Greeks) powerfully affirms the beautiful and good *logic* by which creation was necessarily made, without giving way to excessive worries about whether a better world might have been made instead.⁴³⁸ Thus Augustine's view of creation does not entail a best possible world scenario, but the simpler and more Biblical affirmation of the world's goodness and beauty (which is compatible with the model of non-maximal goodness which I offered in Chapter 1).

Yet, as noteworthy as these issues are, the more suggestive element of Augustine's principle of plenitude is the way that he ties it in so closely to his moral philosophy. Notably, Augustine ties the variety of creation to the nature of virtue, describing the true nature of virtue as "a due ordering of love".⁴³⁹ This *ordo amoris* must be exercised in a world filled with diverse values, because, though all things are good in themselves, it is a perennial possibility to love improperly. Augustine states this more mellifluously when he writes of each created thing, "it can be loved in a good way and in a bad way - in a good way, when due order is preserved, in a bad way, when due order is disturbed."⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ CD 11.21.

⁴³⁸ Yet Augustine is not silent on the matter of optimality, as in *De Genesi adversus Manichaeos* (1.2.4) Augustine writes that God could have created other than he did, thus, at least in his own thinking, closing the door on the "principle of sufficient reason".

⁴³⁹ CD 25.22.

⁴⁴⁰ CD 25.22.

We must not hate what is below us, but rather with God's help put it in its right place, setting in right order what is below us, ourselves, and what is above us, and not being offended by the lower, but delighting only in the higher. "The soul is weighed in the balance by what delights her", *delectatio quippe pondus est animae*. Delight or enjoyment sets the soul in her ordered place. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also".⁴⁴¹

For Augustine, the *metaphysical* goodness of creation, the fruitful and delightful pleasures of creation's beauty, functions as a medium for *moral* activity. Creation's varied goodness demands a proper responsiveness - an *ordo amoris* - in which "Reason judges by the light of truth," as Augustine writes, "and correctly subordinates lesser things to those that are greater."⁴⁴² The Augustinian account of human virtue, then, is deeply connected to creation's delightful properties. Being situated in a world filled with different natures, learning to 'weight' each nature as it deserves is a moral, as well as aesthetic, activity.

Notably, however, Augustine's aesthetic finds no place for the enjoyment (*frui*) of these lower beauties, only a rather severe sounding use (*uti*): "I am saying that we enjoy a thing which we love for itself, and that we should enjoy only a thing by which we are made happy, but use everything else."⁴⁴³ This principle, then effectually rules out the 'enjoyment' of all earthly beauty, higher or lower, and seems to suggest that a proper "ordering of the loves" would render any earthly loves deeply insignificant. Augustine's thinking about worldly aesthetics is often rhapsodic and withering in nearly the same breath. In one of his most famous passages from *Confessiones*, Augustine waxes on the beauty of God, poetically reflecting on the irony of his own sin:

⁴⁴¹ *De mus.* 6.10.29.

⁴⁴² LA 3.5.

⁴⁴³ CD 1.32,35.

Late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved you! And, look, you were within me and I was outside, and there I sought for you and in my ugliness I plunged into the beauties that you have made. You were with me, and I was not with you. These outer beauties kept me far from you, yet if they had not been in you, they would not have existed at all.⁴⁴⁴

Beauty is equally delightful and dangerous, a reflection of God's being and yet also a distraction from that being. Thus, though we may well love beauty, a deeper understanding of created beauty calls us to its creator:

See, there are the heaven and the earth...They cry aloud also that they did not create themselves: "We exist because we were created; therefore we did not exist before we were in existence, so as to be able to create ourselves." And the voice of the speakers is in the very fact that they are there to be seen... It was you, Lord, who made them, you who are beautiful (for they are beautiful), you who are good (for they are good), you who are (for they are). But they have neither the beauty, nor the goodness, nor the existence which you, their creator, have; compared with you they are not beautiful, not good, not in existence. This, thanks to you, we know, and our knowledge compared with your knowledge is ignorance.⁴⁴⁵

For Augustine, all beauty is a scattered reflection of the divine beauty, which must, on reflection, force our vision away from it, an incomplete reflection of its source, to the originating light. Frederick Copleston describes this reflection on beauty as part of the search for God, "The mind, therefore, finding both body and soul to be mutable goes in search of what is immutable."⁴⁴⁶

The value of beauty, then, one might glean from such passages, is of a sheer signpost, painted by God to point us on to himself, but terribly misused if we stop to focus on it for more than a moment. There is something correct in Augustine's emphasis, but also troubling. Frank Burch Brown has

⁴⁴⁴ *Conf.* 10.27.

⁴⁴⁵ *Conf.* 11.4.

⁴⁴⁶ Copleston, *The History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, 71.

helpfully criticized Augustine's writings such as these as perhaps unhelpfully worded. As Augustine notes, we are to use created beauty and enjoy God alone, but Brown wonders if this is even possible, given the truly aesthetic nature of beauty:

Augustine himself states that we are to "use created things that are lower than ourselves... What Augustine neglects to emphasize is that one cannot even perceive the beauty of these objects without focusing on them attentively and delighting in them, rather than focusing only on God and delighting only in sheer holiness (whatever that might mean). It is thus in God's interest, as it were, that we allow ourselves to enjoy and love created things as conditional "ends in themselves"...⁴⁴⁷

One is inclined to agree with Brown here, that Augustine's stridency against enjoying created things may cause problems for his own position, in that we may not be able to "use" a flower to move us closer to God, if we do not first "enjoy" it fully. That Augustine seemed to be aware of and sensitive to created beauty cannot be ignored, thus his tacit aesthetic may seem to be much closer to what Brown is suggesting, but even if it is not, there is in the idea of the "ordo amoris" a sense in which we can love even the least of creation, so long as we love it rightly. Brown ultimately suggests new terminology which is perhaps more fitting for this adapted position, when he writes that a Christian can join God's affirmation of creation as good or "καλα" and, as such, can enjoy created beauty "with God."

In any case, however one construes the moral nature of aesthetic use/enjoyment, there is clearly an option for perversion, a "disordered love" which violates creation. Moral trespass and the resulting punishment must both be understood against the background of Augustine's moral/aesthetic vision of plenitude.

⁴⁴⁷ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 115.

3.3. *Perversion and Punishment.*

The most famous and central aspect of Augustine's aesthetic theodicy is his view of sin and the attendant consequences. The 'Free Will Defense', so widely used, is most powerfully and influentially found in Augustine's works. In the writings of Plantinga and others, Augustine's thoughts on the will are often utilized to argue within a greater-goods defense of evil.⁴⁴⁸ The free-will defense straightforwardly argues that the possibility of sin is entailed in the endowment of free will, and that this good capacity outweighs the disvalue of moral evil. Hence, God is not unjust for creating a *free* humanity which quickly becomes *fallen* humanity. This moral focus does no injustice to Augustine's theodicy, and the free will defense can be helpfully employed in even the narrowest of moral contexts, but it is helpful to broaden the scope of Augustine's views on sin to include his wider concerns about the order and beauty of the universe.

As we have laid out, Augustine's thinking on creation and evil leads him to deny evil a nature. On top of this, Augustine finds beauty in the panoply of natures brought about by God, and thereby defends creation in even its basest variety from the accusation of evil. Finally, Augustine sets this model in motion, by describing the beautiful order which creation remains, despite the defects and defections of the human will.

As we discussed above, Augustine's moral/aesthetic picture of virtue fits well with his principle of plenitude. Loving rightly, the soul finds its delight in God. Loving wrongly, the soul defects from the highest good in favor of some lower beauty. Turning to our own "private goods" is a sinful

⁴⁴⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 27.

defection away from the “unchangeable and common good”.⁴⁴⁹ As such, the sinful soul becomes disordered, and its desires disproportionate.

Willful defection, then, necessarily entails a ‘defect’ in the sinner, and a violation of right order. As Augustine understands it, misery is also a negative state of affairs, an evil in itself, but it may be fittingly applied to those who violate the right ordering of things. Augustine’s analogy is of a household, in which there is a drain (presumably some form of household *cloaca* for refuse and human waste), which it is dishonorable for a person to clean out. Yet also within this household there may be a sinful slave, who, as punishment, is fittingly assigned the task of cleaning the drain.

Considered separately, these two factors are negative, but taken together, as Augustine says “The slave’s dishonor and the cleansed drain together form one whole.” Thus a right order is restored to the household by the appropriate punishment of the slave and the cleaning of the drain. Sin and misery are paired in this way.⁴⁵⁰

Fitting with Augustine’s sense of beauty as “congruence” “order” “proportion”, the sinful soul is therefore *ugly*. Yet, as Augustine phrases it well in *De musica* the stain of sin does not mar God’s grand artwork: “God made sinful man ugly, but it was not an ugly act to make him so.” As Augustine saw in his early but ‘misplaced’ aesthetic treatise *De pulchro et apto*

⁴⁴⁹ LA 2.19.

⁴⁵⁰ As in Ecclesiasticus 33:12-15: “...All his ways are according to his ordering: so man is in the hand of him that made him, and he will render to him according to his judgment. Good is set against evil, and life against death: so also is the sinner against a just man. And so look upon all the works of the most High. Two and two, and one against another...”; and in 39:30-36: “Good things were created for the good from the beginning, so for the wicked, good and evil things. The principal things necessary for the life of men, are water, fire, and iron, salt, milk, and bread of flour, and honey, and the cluster of the grape, and oil, and clothing. All these things shall be for good to the holy, so to the sinners and the ungodly they shall be turned into evil. There are spirits that are created for vengeance, and in their fury they lay on grievous torments. In the time of destruction they shall pour out their force: and they shall appease the wrath of him that made them. Fire, hail, famine, and death, all these were created for vengeance. The teeth of beasts, and scorpions, and serpents, and the sword taking vengeance upon the ungodly unto destruction.”

(*On the Beautiful and Fitting*), there is a difference between that which is beautiful in itself and that which finds its rightness by relation to other states of affairs. The universe remains unmarred by ugly sin because of the fitting punishment which follows any sin:

Again, if there were sins and no consequent misery, that order is equally dishonored by lack of equity. But since there is happiness for those who do not sin, the universe is perfect; and it is no less perfect because there is misery for sinners. Because there are souls whose sins are followed by misery and whose righteous conduct is followed by happiness – because it contains all kinds of natures – the universe is always complete and perfect. Sin and punishment are not natural objects but states of natural objects, the one voluntary the other penal. The voluntary state of being sinful is dishonorable. Hence the penal state is imposed to bring it into order, and is in itself not dishonorable. Indeed it compels the dishonorable state to become harmonized with the honor of the universe, so that the penalty of sin corrects the dishonor of sin.⁴⁵¹

In *De vera religione* Augustine summarizes his aesthetic theme (as described by Hick). The universe, when seen from the vantage point of totality, remains beautiful, just, and rationally ordered by the providence of God. “All have their offices and limits laid down so as to ensure the beauty of the universe”, Augustine writes, “That which we abhor in any part of it gives us the greatest pleasure when we consider the universe as a whole.” To furnish the aesthetic metaphor in *De vera religione*, Augustine invokes painting, as black pigment may be lovely when fitted into a larger composition, so sin may likewise find its place in God’s masterpiece.⁴⁵² Though the world is filled with a mixture of victory and defeat, happiness and misery, pain and pleasure, Augustine remains confident that, in all these cases, “there is no evil except sin and sin’s penalty, that is, a voluntary abandonment of highest being.”⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ LA 3.26.

⁴⁵² VR 76.

⁴⁵³ VR 76.

So, human sin being integrated into a *chiaroscuro* composition, the contemplative Christian finds beauty and order within creation. This symmetry within the composition of the universe is the goal of Augustine's contemplation:

In all arts it is symmetry that gives pleasure, preserving unity and making the whole beautiful. Symmetry demands unity and equality, the similarity of like parts, or the graded arrangements of parts which are dissimilar. But who can find absolute equality or similarity in bodily objects?... True equality and similitude, true and primal unity, are not perceived by the eye of flesh or by any bodily sense, but are known by the mind.⁴⁵⁴

The free-will theodicy which Augustine draws upon has a venerable tradition and a great deal of explanatory power. From the very first chapters of scripture, human choosing is closely correlated to the onset of misery and destruction, but Augustine's heavy reliance on human sin as the sole source of misery remains troublesome. Though he does make room for sin to spread outward and infect the lives of others, Augustine never adverts to the implication that some may well suffer unjustly. Rather, in *De libero arbitrio* especially, Augustine appeals to the fall as the source all our ill, a grand catastrophe from which humankind labors to recover. The justice of this is never questioned in Augustine's thought, and so a more nuanced picture of sin and punishment is left to others to develop. As unbelievable as Augustine's suggestion that all misery is the result of sin is, his further suggestion that all misery follows immediately on sin is even more preposterous. "[T]here is no interval of time between failure to do what ought to be done and suffering what ought to be suffered," Augustine writes, "lest for a single moment the beauty of the universe should be

⁴⁵⁴ VR 55.

defiled by having the uncomeliness of sin without the comeliness of penalty.”⁴⁵⁵

Balthasar, commenting on Augustine’s aesthetics, takes time to express his umbrage at Augustine’s attempts to ‘close the gaps’ of his philosophy, by reducing the data of the world and of scripture to a single vision of harmony. That “immanent evil” if viewed from a God’s view, becomes good, is, for Balthasar, an unfortunate holdover from the influence of Plotinus, whose theodicy of pure contemplation is thrown “like a cloak” over the tragic occurrence of evil. Even Augustine’s discussion of the plot of scripture suffers the defect of this transcendent vantage point, Balthasar argues, since not even “the great aesthetic turning point of Christian salvation history, the dialectic of the Testaments, receives full justice... [because] the kingdom of God is always present, veiled, un-recognized, both before and after Christ, but present.”⁴⁵⁶ Yet, Balthasar interjects,

The dilemma we have outlined is not Augustine’s last word. It is possible to be true to him without accepting the tragic consequences of his static model of the world, since all that is really positive in his thought is contained in the dynamic of the light of truth and love.⁴⁵⁷

I am inclined to agree with Balthasar here, that Augustine’s insistence on the moment-to-moment quality of cosmic justice is not central to Augustine’s aesthetic theodicy.

Though Augustine grants that he never receives a pure vision of cosmic harmony, postulating, at times, possibilities, rather than observations or deductions, (in *De libero arbitrio*, for instance, Augustine opines that the death of children is possibly a punishment for the parent’s sin) there is no doubt

⁴⁵⁵ LA 3.15.

⁴⁵⁶ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2: 143.

⁴⁵⁷ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2: 129.

that Augustine believes he can see large portions of this moral/aesthetic vision.⁴⁵⁸ Fitting together his vision of sin and punishment in symmetrical balance with his vision of the plenitude of the universe, Augustine weaves the place of miserable souls into the ‘pied beauty’ of the universe itself:

But the analogy suggested from the celestial luminaries teaches us this lesson. When you contemplate the differences between bodies and observe that some are brighter than others, it is wrong to ask that the dimmer ones be done away with or made equal to the brighter ones. All must be contemplated in the light of the perfection of the universe; and you will see that all differences in brightness contribute to the perfection of the whole. You will not be able to imagine a perfect universe unless it contains some greater things and some smaller in perfect relation one to the other. Similarly you must consider the differences between souls. In them you will also discover that the misery you lament has this advantage. The fact that there are souls which ought to be miserable because they willed to be sinful contributes to the perfection of the universe. So far is it from being the case that God ought not to have made such souls, that he ought to be praised for having made other creatures far inferior to miserable souls.⁴⁵⁹

Invoking plenitude, Augustine thus fits his model of contrastive beauty together with his model of creation’s comparative beauty: each thing, being what it is (beautiful), if fitted in the (beautiful) scale of creation, and even so far as it defects from its original place, is yet fit into some other, though lower, place within God’s design.

3.4. Reflecting on the Aesthetic Theme.

Though multi-layered and (in our contemporary context) somewhat counter-intuitive in places, Augustine’s cosmic symphony, as an aesthetic model, is fundamentally straightforward. For the bishop of Hippo all evil is integrated seamlessly into a larger, more complex and beautiful whole. That

⁴⁵⁸ LA 3.68, and CD 12.4.

⁴⁵⁹ LA 3.23.

there are remaining questions, variant interpretations and notable fluctuations in Augustine's thought is beyond doubt, but the central aesthetic motif is nevertheless established: in the words of Hick, that "seen in its totality from the ultimate standpoint of the Creator, the universe is wholly good; for even the evil within it is made to contribute to the complex perfection of the whole."⁴⁶⁰

Augustine's 'theme', then, is less an aesthetic metaphor than an aesthetic metaphysic. Yet we can clearly see, through Augustine's repeated appeal to artistic analogies, that he intends the arts to reflect and illuminate our understanding of cosmic justice, helping us to discern that, though the oar 'looks broken' it, in fact, is perfectly whole. Through appeal to artistic works and aesthetic principles, Augustine intends to make credible the claim that God is perfectly good, and his creation is providentially ordered. Stated simply, Augustine's aesthetic theme aims to show the universe to be an awesome place.

As developed above, it is especially noteworthy that Augustine's aesthetic theodicy is part of his opposition to and interaction with Pagan philosophy. As Carol Harrison notes, in *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*,

In order to assess these [aesthetic] ideas fairly...one must set them in the context of Augustine's anti-Manichean, anti-dualistic polemic, where he was at pains to illustrate God's providential working and ordering throughout his entire Creation: spiritual and material, good and evil. This aesthetic is therefore not so much a justification of evil, as a consideration of its place in God's universe—not as a hostile, alien principle which thereby tells against God's omnipotent rule (as

⁴⁶⁰ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 88.

in Manicheism) – but as something which is comprehended in His beautiful, providential ordering of it.⁴⁶¹

To see the universe as a song, or a painting, or a sculpture, which is beautiful, further intuitively allows us to feel the rightness of the whole, by invoking that which is delightful. The big picture Augustine paints, because of his frequent appeals to specific art-forms and aesthetic categories, cannot be confused with anything but a beautiful work of art.

4. The Betrayal of Beauty: Problems with Augustine's Poetics of Evil

A key underlying purpose of Augustine's thought on evil can be discerned, then, as being driven by the theological and apologetic concerns of his day, and the outworking of this in Augustine's theodicy can be seen as an attempt to account for moral, metaphysical, and aesthetic dimensions of the cosmos. This is no small task, indeed, and one which we and Augustine do not hesitate to consider incomplete.⁴⁶² Yet there are more issues within Augustine's writing on the matter, and the best route to continue exploring Augustine's aesthetic theme of cosmic harmony is to do so in conversation with his critics.

The very notion of an aesthetic theodicy is one which naturally troubles contemporary thinkers. In his *Essays on Aesthetics*, Jean-Paul Sartre takes time to discuss the work of Titian, the famous 16th-century painter. "Titian spends most of his time soothing princes, reassuring them through his canvases that everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds," Sartre writes, "Discord is but an illusion...Violence? only a ballet danced half-heartedly by spurious he-men with downy beards." As such, Sartre sees

⁴⁶¹ Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 111.

⁴⁶² Note the passage from LA. 3.22, where Augustine expresses modesty about why infants suffer.

in Titian's desire to create beauty a perpetual downplaying of the harshness of reality. Such art, he writes, "borders on the apologetic, becomes a theodicy: suffering, injustice, evil do not exist; nor does mortal sin... The result is treason of the worst sort: the betrayal of Beauty."⁴⁶³

Sartre's flowing indictment of Titian here is specifically aesthetic – Titian's *art* betrays reality – but its deeper point is clearly applicable to the aesthetic theme developed by Augustine: as Augustine uses beauty as a tool to see past the apparent discord, the 'broken oar' in the water, to catch sight of a more fundamental unity. The criticism of Augustine's aesthetic theme, in one way or another, echoes some version of Sartre's accusation of Titian. True, this beauty is consoling, but is it *too* consoling?

The perennial desire of humans to 'look on the bright side' of things may well have its dark side, if in straining to see some ultimate beauty we blur the reality of suffering. Discussing Augustine's theodicy, Frank Burch Brown notes that the "attempt to weave apparent evil and ugliness into the beauty of the whole fabric of creation presents difficulties of its own, since it can seem to 'aestheticize' and trivialize evil and suffering."⁴⁶⁴ Likewise, we read Richard Viladesau praising the power of beauty, yet worrying about the danger of beauty's betrayal. "[T]he experience of beauty may calm our hearts' fears," he writes, "[b]ut as with every 'theodicy,' [as with] that contained in sacred art, one must beware the twin dangers of an implicit masochism, on the one hand, and, on the other, a facile acceptance of evil and suffering – especially that of others – as being part of 'God's plan.'"⁴⁶⁵ Theologians ought rightly to be wary of de-emphasizing human suffering in

⁴⁶³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Aesthetics*, ed. Wade Baskin (NY: Citadel, 1963), p. 41.

⁴⁶⁴ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste*, 105.

⁴⁶⁵ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (NY: Paulist Press, 2000) 55

their work, and so the proper question to now explore is *how* might Augustine's aesthetic theme trivialize suffering and evil?

In an effort to look more deeply at Augustine's aesthetic theme, we will examine three related critiques. First, we will turn to the work of Madden and Hare, whose work, *Evil and the Concept of God*, attacks, from outside the faith, the Augustinian notion of a harmonious universe. Next, we will examine internal critiques of Augustine's aesthetic theme, such as the problematic nature of *concordia discors* for a morally-valid theodicy discussed by Pannenberg, Mackie and Balthasar. Then we will examine the critique of John Hick, raised above, in more detail.

4.1. Higher Harmony and Moral Sense: The Critiques of Madden and Hare

In their book, *Evil and the Concept of God*, Edward Madden and Peter Hare argue that "the theistic effort to take the problem [of evil] seriously fails. Each solution offered fails, in turn, to do the job required of it and no combination of them is sufficient to solve the various problems of physical and moral evil."⁴⁶⁶ In an attempt to argue this point, the authors range over a host of issues and arguments surrounding the problem of evil. Among them Madden and Hare treat the issue of cosmic harmony, and though their discussion is concise, the issue that they raise for Augustine's position is the first and most fundamental question for examination: Does cosmic harmony undercut moral effort?

In their work, Madden and Hare distinguish helpfully, as John Hick does, between two versions of "ultimate harmony". On the one hand we have "All's well in God's view", a position which affirms that, given the right

⁴⁶⁶ Madden and Hare, *Evil and the Concept of God*, 12.

perspective, the universe displays perfect moment-to-moment harmony; on the other, we have “All’s well that ends well”, wherein the universe is leading toward, but does not yet display, this attractive order.⁴⁶⁷ Madden and Hare describe well the “all’s well in God’s view” position like this:

Just as a chord when heard in isolation may sound dissonant but when heard in context sounds harmonious, so it is with evil: An event seen in isolation is called evil by man, but this event seen in relation to all other events is called good by God.⁴⁶⁸

This is the Augustinian aesthetic theme as we have defined it, and Madden and Hare make a basic attempt to undercut the position, by arguing that ultimate harmony undercuts our deepest moral intuitions, and thus is antithetical to classical theism.

Madden and Hare take aim at what they see as an implicit fatalism in Augustine’s thought. If, as Augustine affirms in *Confessiones*, there is ultimately no evil in the world, then, as they argue, “any efforts to remove *prima facie* evil are necessarily morally wrong. Any reform movement is by its nature pernicious.”⁴⁶⁹ If this were indeed so, that any efforts to remove evil were pernicious, this would have serious ramifications for any decent system of ethics. The authors suggest, in fact, that this negative ramification can already be seen in the Christian *laissez-faire* attitude common in American politics.⁴⁷⁰ Following this line of thought, if the suffering of the poor, or the plight of ‘crack babies’ can be incorporated into a lovely cosmic whole, then doing something for them will not raise the total excellence of the universe even a fraction, it is already as good as it gets. As such, Madden and Hare present the most obvious and direct accusation against ultimate

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 60-1.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 61.

harmony, that it leads to social and moral unconcern for others, by assuming that cosmic harmony undercuts the personal responsibility in the face of evil. But is this the case?

In response to Madden and Hare, it must first be said that even *assuming* that there is “really no evil in the universe” it is difficult to see how any act of justice *could* be morally pernicious as they indicate. Barring any details of a more specific theology, and assuming that the world is, in fact, “ultimately harmonious”, no attempts at meddling or reform could *disrupt* the harmony of the universe. Assume, for example, that one saw an infant crawling across a busy street, about to be struck by an oncoming station wagon. Even if one believed strongly that there was no evil in the universe, and that all was harmonious, including the impending death of this little child, how could it be morally *wrong* to rush into traffic and rescue the infant, as Madden and Hare suggest? One could not *introduce* evil into the universe, on this scenario, because, again, there can be no evil in the world. It would be more accurate to voice the more modest proposal that cosmic harmony merely *undercuts* the impetus to do moral actions, as one can neither improve nor lower the ultimate excellence of the universe by personal action. This criticism, though modest in tone, seems sufficiently harmful to the Augustinian picture.⁴⁷¹

But digging more deeply into the theology of Augustine, we must argue that Augustine’s system does nothing to promote fatalistic moral laxity. If misery is meted out according to just desert, as Augustine puts forward in *De libero arbitrio*, then an initial suggestion might be that all who suffer do so justly, and thus there is no need for us to prevent evils wherever we see

⁴⁷¹ In fact, this criticism is very much akin to the general criticism against theodicy itself. If God is justified in creating the world and allowing what goes on in it, is there any deep reason for changing the world?

them. But Augustine's vision of cosmic harmony does little to undercut the desire for justice, if we believe that in doing so we are 1) observing the commands of God, and 2) acting as a tool of God to bring deliverance from misery, and 3) helping to prevent our own misery by abstaining from sinful actions and performing good ones.⁴⁷² By tying misery to sin, as he does explicitly in his writings, Augustine creates a personal and charitable impetus for justice. If God has decreed that we prevent murders, give to the poor, and tend to those in prison, then by failing to do so we ourselves may become sinful and miserable. To use an artistic analogy of Augustine's, if a beautiful picture can be composed of both black and white paint, we cannot make it less beautiful by choosing to be either black or white. However, we *ourselves* may desire not to be the miserable, dark paint for good reasons. Just because God is a grand enough conductor such that his desired harmony cannot be disrupted by meddlesome musicians does not mean that there is no reason not to be meddlesome. Therefore, Madden and Hare's fundamental objection to the "all's well" view, does not hold up as a discouragement to our moral efforts in a specifically theological context

⁴⁷² Further, if God has made us instrumental to the spread of His kingdom, including the deliverance of people from misery (as they are delivered from sin), then we ought never assume that relieving the suffering of others is *prima facie* morally pernicious.

such as Augustine's, nor does it render our efforts to stop evil morally pernicious in a more generally philosophical context.⁴⁷³

The external critiques of higher harmony, by no means exhaustive, fail to connect with the realities of Augustine's position, and so do not do anything much to damage it. It is therefore more helpful to turn to critiques which, because they focus on internal elements of Augustine's argument, are more formidable.

4.2. Concordia Discors: The Problem of Aesthetic Contrast

In Chapter 1, I argued that aesthetic values functioned rather poorly in theodicy when held up on their own as morally sufficient reasons. In that context, I held up process theodicy's appeal to beauty as an ever-present value which can contribute to any situation, no matter how bleak.

Undiscussed, however, was the often-invoked value of aesthetic contrast.

This raises the question: Does evil *contribute* to the beauty of the universe?

And if so, is evil necessary to the beauty of the world, as the color black is

⁴⁷³ Three other objections Madden and Hare raise are linked, and therefore worth discussing all together. All three rest upon the idea that what seems to us as evil is, in the ultimate sense, good. Assuming ultimate harmony, then, according to Madden and Hare, would result in a disjunctive dual vision, where we naturally perceive events as evil but must also believe them to be, in the grand picture, good. Three problems arise for Madden and Hare. First, that such a disjuncture would constitute systematic deception, inasmuch as the ultimate truth about the universe would be veiled behind so much *apparent* evil. Second, that God's understanding of morality and goodness, assuming this disjuncture between our understanding of evil and his own, would be so alien as to be meaningless. Third, if God's morality is so different from our own, we, like J. S. Mill, are reasonable to reject such a God all together. These three points together make a fairly effective case against the *bare* assertion of ultimate harmony, but it must be noted that Augustine's affirmation of ultimate harmony is not a purely fideistic trust, but rather part of an attempt to discern the higher harmonies through reasoning observation. It must be assumed that God would have a higher level of moral understanding, foresight, and scope of knowledge; thus it not unreasonable to argue that if there is a higher harmony it would be difficult for us to understand it. The nature of arts such as poetry provide an analogy for how we might only perceive one part of a piece as disordered and ugly, but on gaining sight of the whole, will see that there is unity throughout: if all we could understand were the individual syllables, we would not be able to hear the beauty of the poem, but the faculties of reason and memory allow us to grasp the larger whole and hear the "rhymes" within creation. By invoking punishment as the symmetrical response to sin, Augustine thus intends to allow us to hear part of God's ultimate harmony, not merely assume that such a harmony is possible without any vision of it (Ibid., 54-78).

necessary to the beauty of Rembrandt's chiaroscuro paintings? And finally, does this constitute a morally sufficient reason for God's allowance of evil?

To be sure, there are some initial benefits which we can think of for contrast within God's creation. Contrast provides the most accessible aesthetic notion one can invoke in discussions of theodicy. Folk wisdom often dictates that contrast is necessary in order to heighten or perceive value (e.g. pain is necessary to enjoy pleasure, bad smells in order to enjoy good smells, bad weather in order to enjoy good weather, etc.). Leibniz describes the idea clearly when he writes "a little acid, sharpness or bitterness is often more pleasing than sugar; shadows enhance colours; even a dissonance in the right place gives relief to harmony".⁴⁷⁴ Augustine himself recognizes the value of contrast. Describing the fall of Adam and Eve he writes of the benefit of their knowledge of good and evil: "For experience of discomfort in sickness gives a clearer insight into the joys of health as well."⁴⁷⁵

Some theologians have argued that the aesthetic analogy of contrast functions to provide, not so much an explanation for evil, as Thomas Oden notes in his *Pastoral Theology*, as a sense of comfort in the midst of evil. Since, as Oden writes, "suffering puts goodness into bolder relief... when it must be faced, it may increase our capacity for joy."⁴⁷⁶ However the danger and difficulty of this position quickly surface as we may begin to wonder whether, if evil is psychologically necessary for enjoyable contrast, we can ever be released from its effects? Oden notes the limited nature of the analogy, and encourages pastors to use it "sparingly".⁴⁷⁷ But if the contrast

⁴⁷⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 130.

⁴⁷⁵ CD 14.27.

⁴⁷⁶ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 237.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

argument raises troubling questions about God being complicit in the occurrence of evil, we may well wonder, should we use it at all?

J. L. Mackie, in his famous essay, “Evil and Omnipotence” discusses the argument that “contrasts heighten beauty” such as in Mackie’s example of “a musical work [where] there may occur discords which somehow add to the beauty of the work as a whole.”⁴⁷⁸ Thus, as Mackie lays it out, first-order goods and evils can combine to make up a second-order good, a nicely contrastive “complex pattern”.⁴⁷⁹ Mackie acknowledges the relative strength of this argument, in that it takes a seeming evil and puts it to some good purpose, but he notes that the natural conclusion of this view is that God does not share our moral motivations to minimize suffering and injustice, and thus has a morality which contrasts *unpleasantly* with our own. As Mackie writes, a God who promotes first order evil “is not in our sense benevolent or sympathetic: he is not concerned to minimize evil... but only to promote good.”⁴⁸⁰ Lying behind Mackie’s critique is a sense that God’s omnipotence dictates against God being required to allow first-order evils in order to attain second order goods. If God is omnipotent, why can he not bring about the level of value he desires without bringing about evil?⁴⁸¹

This is indeed a troubling question, and one which the fictional Ivan Karamazov forcefully and famously deals with in Fyodor Dostoevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Speaking with his brother Alyosha, a Christian monk, Ivan lays out a laundry list of atrocities perpetrated upon children. Ivan then wonders why they might have to suffer so terribly. Surely not, he conjectures, to “pay for the eternal harmony... Why should they, too, furnish

⁴⁷⁸ J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, in *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 53.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 59.

material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future?”⁴⁸² If “higher harmony” requires the suffering of innocent children, Ivan proclaims, he “renounces” it altogether. What Ivan is rejecting here, then, is not so much the idea of harmonious contrast in general, but the notion that the horrors which are perpetrated upon the innocent are intended to feed into this higher harmony. This is an astute point to draw, as a general discussion of beautiful contrast may well overlook the reality of suffering as it is experienced in real life.

Wolfgang Pannenberg and Hans Urs von Balthasar both raise the troubling issue of Augustine’s sometime endorsement of evil as beneficial and necessary to the ultimate harmony of the universe. In his discussion of theodicy and creation, Pannenberg notes the theological necessity for Augustine of maintaining that God foresaw and ‘oversaw’ the fall. To do otherwise, Pannenberg observes, would open the door to “Manichaean objections”. If God did not, in some sense, permit the fall, then evil could be viewed as being a separate force, coming from outside of God’s control. Yet, as Pannenberg notes, Augustine sometimes moved beyond the position of mere permission, into God’s approving of evil for some higher purpose. Pannenberg writes, “Unfortunately we cannot deny that in [certain] places Augustine justified that which seems to be evil as part of the multiple perfection of the universe”.⁴⁸³ Likewise Balthasar observes, “The weighing of the formulation [of ultimate harmony] varies between the simple statement that God’s unshakable order includes equally good and evil...and the much more extreme statement that beauty even requires its opposite.”⁴⁸⁴ Both cite relevant passages of *De civitate Dei*, where Augustine draws our eye

⁴⁸² Fyodor Dostoyevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*, in *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 15.

⁴⁸³ Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 168.

⁴⁸⁴ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 128.

to the value of contrast, with Balthasar further noting where Augustine emphasizes the necessity of contrast in lovely objects. For instance, Augustine:

Thus as these contraries opposed do give the saying an excellent grace, so is the world's beauty composed of contraries, not in figure but in nature. This is plain in Ecclesiasticus, in this verse: 'Against evil is good, and against death is life; so is the godly against the sinner: so look for in all the works of the highest, two and two, one against one.'⁴⁸⁵

Likewise, in *De ordine*, Augustine seems to suggest that the beautiful depends on the antithetical: "The beauty of all things is derived, as it were, from antithesis, or contrasts."⁴⁸⁶ That Augustine invokes Ecclesiasticus here, a work that focuses on the punishment of sinners by things 'created' for their chastisement further suggests the necessity of contrast in God's ultimate design, and that within the beautiful there must be contraries, light as well as dark, and thus that a beautiful universe requires evil of some form or other.

Yet, as both Pannenberg and Balthasar advert, Augustine never gives full expression to this notion, as suggestive as his writings may sometimes be. This was left to Aquinas and others such as Hugh of St Victor to say more strongly that evil is somehow necessary to God's good ordering of the world.⁴⁸⁷ Augustine himself, when he dwelt on the issue most thoughtfully, however, desired to take the opposite opinion. In *De libero arbitrio* Augustine pauses after musing poetically on the place of evil in God's *carmen universitatis* to temper such reflections:

⁴⁸⁵ CD 11.18.

⁴⁸⁶ DO 1.7.18.

⁴⁸⁷ In *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei* 1.4.13. Hugh of St. Victor writes, "Yet he wills evil to be, and in this he wills nothing except good, because it is good that there be evil..." (*Hugh of Saint Victor on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari [USA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951].)

But one who does not quite understand what has been said may have this urge against our argument: If our being miserable completes the perfection of the universe, it will lose something of its perfection if we should become eternally happy. If the soul does not come to misery save by sinning, are sins also necessary to the perfection of the universe which God has made. How then does he justly punish sins without which his creation could be neither complete nor perfect? The answer is: Neither the sins nor the misery are necessary to the perfection of the universe, but souls as such are necessary which have power to sin if they so will, and become miserable if they sin...⁴⁸⁸

That *De ordine* and *De civitate Dei* suggest a necessity of contrast cannot be denied, and we may, if we so choose, lay at Augustine's feet an apparent inconsistency, but it is suggestive that when Augustine dwelt on the nature of contrast most thoroughly he sought to deny the implication that contrast was an essential part of God's design. Chiaroscuro contrast, to use the language of the philosophers, seems to provide for Augustine a sufficient, but not necessary, condition for beauty.

But the best defense of this chiaroscuro contrast is precisely how Augustine so often uses it, not as a defense of God in the sense of being an excuse, but as a way of seeing the scope of God's providence, even in the midst of evil. To construe the mixture of evil and goodness in the world as a mosaic (*De ordine*), a painting (*De civitate Dei*), or as a mixture of stars in the night sky (*De libero arbitrio*), is, in the way Augustine primarily uses these examples, a way of *aesthetically seeing*, not an act of *explicitly justifying*, God's goodness.

4.3. Hick and The Aesthetic Theme

Hick's critique of Augustine's aesthetic theme has been with us since the beginning of the thesis – being held up as a key example of opposition to aesthetic considerations in the theodicy discussion – and now deserves a

⁴⁸⁸ LA 3.26.

more detailed examination. For Hick, it is not primarily that Augustine's *use* of aesthetic considerations is faulty (though he thinks that as well), but more so that *any* such considerations distract us from God's agape for human persons. By trying to see the cosmic harmony in creation's variety, or sin's punishment, Hick is arguing, we are losing focus on theodicy's purpose. "A Christian theodicy must be centered upon moral personality," Hick writes, "rather than upon nature as a whole, and its governing principle must be ethical rather than aesthetic."⁴⁸⁹

Because of the heavy influence of Irenaeus on Hick, it is ironic that Hick takes his stand not just against Augustine's "aesthetic theme" of perfectly-balanced harmony, but also against Irenaeus's "aesthetic theme" which includes an eschatological dimension. The Irenaean alternative to the static Augustinian picture, resembles more of a beautiful symphony, than a beautiful painting, but even so, Hick warns, this improved version of the aesthetic theme is still open to the same basic objection. "[I]f God is personal," Hick writes, "we must see man as standing in a quite different relationship to Him from that in which the material universe stands to its Creator". The propositions which follow are that we should see "human life [not] as a link in the great chain of being" but rather as central to God's intention for fellowship; and that we should not be "upholding the perfection of the universe as an aesthetic whole" but rather as "suited to the fulfillment of God's purposes for it".⁴⁹⁰ For Hick, God's purposes center around creating persons with whom He can have fellowship.

Theodicy's concern, then, according to Hick, is *relational* instead of *creational*, and *ethical* rather than *aesthetic*, and hence any cosmic aesthetic, no matter how skillful or sensitive, cannot effectively communicate God's agape for

⁴⁸⁹ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), p. 204.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

humans. Yet, Hick argues, even we concede that something *could* be made of the aesthetic themes of Augustine or Irenaeus, it would be trivial. Such considerations would be peripheral to the rational discussion. “Whatever realms of life and dimensions of meaning there may be beyond our present awareness and concern”, Hick writes of the aesthetic theme, they have little to do with “the high good of man’s fellowship with God”, and are therefore beyond the scope of theodicy’s concern.⁴⁹¹ Aesthetic considerations, if at all possible, are therefore relegated to the scholastic dust pile, with other questions like “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

We have tried to suggest in Part I that theodicy should not marginalize aesthetic concerns out of *a priori* suspicion or because aesthetics only has marginal value for theology. Given the right framework, aesthetic considerations are perfectly amenable to the goals of theodicy, and provide a rich resource for theological insight. Yet Hick’s accusation of Augustine runs deeper than these initial doubts, and attacks the very nature of Augustine’s aesthetic of cosmic harmony.

4.3.1. Hick and the Aesthetics of Theodicy. Hick challenges Augustine’s aesthetic theme in two key ways. First, because theodicy’s concern is relational, rather than metaphysical, Augustine’s concern to defend creation’s beauty undermines the theodicist’s goal to communicate God’s concern for *us*. Thus, Hick cites Adolph von Harnack approvingly:

Augustine never tires of realizing the beauty (*pulchrum*) and fitness (*aptum*) of creation, of regarding the universe as an ordered work of art, in which the gradations are as admirable as the contrasts. The individual and evil are lost to view in the notion of beauty; nay, God himself is the eternal, the old and new, the only, beauty. Even hell, the damnation of sinners, is, as an act in the ordination of evils (*ordinatio malorum*), an indispensable part of the work of art. But,

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 204.

indeed, the whole work of art is after all – nothing; a likeness, but ah! only a likeness of the infinite fullness of the one which alone *exists*.⁴⁹²

To worry overmuch with creation's beauty, as Hick and Harnack suggest, is to overlook the individual who suffers the effects of evil. By analogy, Augustine in this sense would be like a fireman who arrives at the scene of a house fire and first rapturously takes several photographs of the lovely effect of the flames against the sky.

To be sure, focusing on the beauty of the whole must entail ignoring some of the suffering of its parts. But are evil and individual suffering lost to view in Augustine's aesthetic theme? In raising this question, Hick's critique against Augustine is the most effective so far, because it is an *aesthetic* critique. Hick accuses Augustine of blurring our sensitivity to evil because of his use of aesthetics, and thus strikes at the heart of aesthetic theodicy. That Augustine runs foul of this very problem, an instinctive turning away from suffering to reflect on cosmic beauty cannot be denied. There is little place in any of Augustine's works for a detailed examination of individual suffering. Yet, it must be argued that an incomplete aesthetic is not the same as a flawed one. There is a place within theodicy for examination of the beauty of the whole, and it must be argued that seeing humanity through the lens of created beauty does not automatically diminish our value.

⁴⁹² Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 5 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1898), 114-5. Here, I will again refer to Sohn's thesis on aesthetic theodicy, because Sohn's objection to Augustine's theodicy mirrors Harnack's. Sohn's key objection to Augustine's theodicy is that it is globally focused (i.e. God is concerned about the big picture) and not individually focused. Sohn wants to re-sketch aesthetic theodicy so that "God overcomes evil globally-cosmically through saving all human beings" ("Beauty and Evil", 88). Here Sohn seems to agree quite strongly with Harnack (and Hick) in finding that the individual is lost to view in Augustine's thought. However, unlike Hick, for Sohn, the main problem is not so much with Augustine's aesthetics, as with his theodicy as a whole. As Sohn concludes, he cannot make sense of either an exclusivistic position on salvation, or the notion of divine apathia (91). Thus, as I indicated above, Sohn seeks out other theistic models for God (process and Hegelian) in order to resolve these issues. Regarding Augustine's aesthetics, Sohn ably describes the details of the Bishop of Hippo's use of beauty, but in the end offers more of a critique of Augustine's classic theism, than a critique of his classic aesthetics.

C. S. Lewis's work, which precedes Hick's own, helpfully anticipates some of Hick's objections. Lewis, in a variety of works, has sought to use cosmic beauty as an aesthetic motif in theodicy, most notably in *The Problem of Pain*. For Lewis, God's unfathomable love is difficult to conceive, and, he writes, "can be apprehended only by analogies: from the various types of love known among creatures we reach an inadequate, but useful, conception of God's love for man."⁴⁹³ The first rung on this ladder of analogies, is of the love of an artist for his creation. St. Peter's analogy of the church as a spiritual house, of which we are "living stones" is, Lewis admits, limited by the static quality of the analogy (1 Pet. 2:5). Humans here are only sentient bricks, useful for supporting something else, but not very valuable for their unique characteristics. What architect is concerned about individual stones? This seems exactly the sort of "aesthetic theme" to which Hick originally objected. For Hick, the problem with Augustine's principles of plenitude and punishment, which sought to incorporate humans into an aesthetic scheme, was that they downplayed the dynamic purpose for which God made us. Yet Lewis does not, unlike Hick, abandon the analogy as useless because it is impersonal. He writes,

it is an important analogy so far as it goes. We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character.⁴⁹⁴

Lewis here affirms the impersonal artistic analogies drawn by Augustine, but overcomes some of Augustine's problems by delving more deeply into the nature of the art which we are. What Lewis sees correctly is that the question is not *whether* we should see ourselves as God's artwork, but rather *what kind* of artwork are we? A decorative ashtray? A limerick? Or an epic

⁴⁹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 30.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

poem? In Lewis's view, we are not merely a sketch which God has idly drawn to amuse himself, but a masterpiece, over which "he will take endless trouble" and to which he would "thereby *give* endless trouble".⁴⁹⁵ Lewis thus overcomes some of the problems of Augustine's aesthetic theme, not by making his analogies less aesthetic, but by delving more deeply into the quality of our beauty. Highlighting the deep love God has for us *as Creator*, Lewis bypasses the facile notion that to be a work of art is always to be dispensable. Who could calculate what *Paradise Lost* was worth to Milton, or the Mona Lisa to da Vinci?

Yet Lewis does not stop with artistic analogies, but counts many more ways in which God loves us, as a master loves a dog, as a father loves a son, and as a man loves a woman.⁴⁹⁶ Each analogy captures some aspect of the intolerable compliment which God has paid us by loving us so much. Though he affirms that the romantic analogy is the most useful for theodicy, as it stresses both the commitment of the relationship and the desire within that commitment for perfection, Lewis also acknowledges that the romantic metaphor is also the most dangerous, as it invites us to imagine that humanity, like the beloved, is the focus of all God's attention.⁴⁹⁷ To see humanity only as a work of art would be troublingly incomplete. But to see God *only* as a lover would be to imagine ourselves equal with God, or perhaps to fancy God as somehow emotionally codependent with his frustrating human creations. Whatever their limitations, then, creational analogues may help to offset the personal analogies, which would collapse the distance between God and humanity.

This suggests a new approach with regard to Hick's criticisms, as well as the problems with an Augustinian aesthetic which focuses too much on the

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 30-1.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 33-4.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

beauty of everything and not enough on the reality of suffering. An opposite approach to Hick's would be to enrich the aesthetic picture of the world with a wider range of aesthetic motifs.

4.3.2. *Hick and the Problem of Plenitude*. Secondly, a problem which Hick finds with plenitude is that it implies a chain of being with humans merely 'filling one of the slots'. "Perhaps the most fundamental criticism", Hick writes of Augustine's theme,

is the impersonal or subpersonal way in which God's relation to His creation is prevailingly conceived... God's goodness and love are understood – as they are typically understood throughout medieval theology – primarily as His creative fecundity, His bestowing of the boon of existence as widely as possible. (199)

Siding with Hugh of St Victor, Hick believes humans to be central to God's purposes in creation. According to Hugh of St Victor, the rest of creation was designed with Adam and Eve in mind. Whether or not this is true, however, indicates little as to the benefit of reflecting on creation. Without plunging into deep speculations, whether or not the variety of creation was intended as an environment for humanity to flourish one can still maintain that humanity 'fits' into a certain place within creation, and, taken together with all creation, the effect is rather beautiful. Bracketing out worries about plenitude's internal consistency as a doctrine highlights what I take to be Hick's deeper worry, and more fundamental difference from Augustine. In keeping with his emphasis on soul-making, Hick seems to take issue with the loveliness of creation, as if it contradicts the very purposes for which creation was made.

The general thrust of Hick's "soul-making" theodicy is that God desires us to grow to maturity, into the "likeness of Christ", and that this process of

perfection often requires pain and struggle. In his work he skillfully responds to David Hume, who attacks creation, comparing the world to a house where the “windows, doors, fires, passages, stairs, and the whole economy of the house were the source of noise, confusion, fatigue, darkness, and the extremes of heat and cold”.⁴⁹⁸ If there were an all-knowing, all-powerful creator, Hume is suggesting, then this being would be able to rig all the “secret springs of the universe” in order to avoid pain and keep all men happy. Responding to Hume, Hick writes:

Such critics as Hume are confusing what heaven ought to be, as an environment for perfected finite beings, with what this world ought to be, as an environment for beings who are in the process of becoming perfected.⁴⁹⁹

Here Hick rightly points out that there may well be good reasons for creating a world with suffering. If God wants not merely to pacify us, but rather to perfect us, then this world may well be the creation of a good God. But the repeated stridency with which Hick avoids discussing the goodness of creation is troubling. When discussing the beauty and variety of all lower forms of life, Hick can take confidence in only two roles for nature to play: to provide the evolutionary material which produced humanity, and to provide a dangerous world in which humans may grow to maturity through difficulty. Universal beauty, for Hick, downplays the central importance of the universe as a vale of soul-making. “Instead, then, of thinking of the origin and fate of human personality as a function of an aesthetically valued whole,” Hick writes, “we should see the great frame of nature, with all its sources of evil, as the deliberately mysterious environment of finite personal life.”⁵⁰⁰ Hick repeatedly emphasizes that we can really know very little about God’s purposes for the rest of creation,

⁴⁹⁸ Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 68.

⁴⁹⁹ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 293-4.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

seeing only that part of the story which concerns ourselves. That God has for us a special purpose is beyond question, but it seems troubling that God only has a loving purpose for *us*, and this loving purpose expresses itself almost exclusively in suffering.

What Hick fails to grasp, ultimately, is that a satisfactory Christian theology must give us a bigger sense of God's person and purposes beyond the merely moral (and therefore any theodicy must, in some sense, reflect this). We must know that God is interested in more than reforming our characters. We must also begin to sense what it is that God *needs* to break us and put us back together. If God has no other purposes besides our ethical development, then we may begin to question the value of ethics to begin with. As Balthasar writes, if beauty is "lifted from [religion's] face as a mask, its absence on that face exposes features which threaten to become incomprehensible to man."⁵⁰¹ The same goes for theodicy, in that if beauty is altogether removed from the picture, the portrait of God's purposes, person and providential plan may become cold and undesirable.

Lewis is again a helpful conversation partner as he also points out that pain is a tool that can be used by God for bringing us into right relationship. Lewis admits that while pleasures can be ignored, pain cannot. "God whispers to us in our pleasures," Lewis writes, "speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."⁵⁰² But what of a God who *only* shouts to us, and never whispers? That the character-building quality of beauty is lacking from Hick's "soul-making" theodicy may well lead us to think that God is *obsessively* concerned only with our moral development, like a domineering parent who is not concerned with his children's ultimate flourishing. That Hick emphasizes the formative aspect

⁵⁰¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:18.

⁵⁰² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 81.

of suffering is both appropriate and biblical (Rom. 5:3-5), but that he emphasizes this so exclusively leaves his theodicy impoverished. Defending God's goodness solely in moral terms can lead to a picture of God which is cold, harsh, and generally not *worth* defending.

That Augustine's vision of plenitude *is* morally beneficial, a training ground within which we can learn to value creation rightly, suggests that appreciation of creation is part of our development in virtue itself, and thus, contra Hick, upholding the aesthetic qualities of creation is fully compatible with a person-focused theodicy. That nature is so varied, ranging from rocks and plants all the way up to animals, humans and angels, does not only signify that we are merely one link in this chain, but may have a positive, personal dimension. It is nonsensical to think that human life is best understood by humanity focusing exclusively on *itself*. A more sensible suggestion is to attempt to situate human persons within the wider world in order to perceive their place more fully. In this, one is reminded of the paintings of Frederic Edwin Church, who is best known (as befits a Hudson River school artist) for his landscapes. In his best-known paintings, Church creates immense outdoor scenes, but frequently places small figures in each painting. As in Church's landscape, "The Heart of the Andes", a tiny figure kneeling by the cross is barely glimpsed amidst verdant wilderness {*figures 1 and 2*}, but nevertheless plays an important part in the composition as the eye moves from the cliffs closest to the viewer, up the river and further back to the more immense mountains behind, and finally to the ice-capped mountain {*figures 3*} which logically must dwarf these closer mountains in size. Moving back and forth between medium, large, and gigantic objects, the viewer is continually drawn to the presence of the tiny person and white cross as an *integral* part of the picture - a continual point of intellectual interest and aesthetic fascination. In an analogous way, the importance of human personhood, morality, or any other aspect of traditional theodicy is

not *denied* by the inclusion of aesthetic considerations, but may rather be seen again with renewed freshness and insight. Widening the circle to include the aesthetic theme offers us deeper insight into the problem of evil, including the human and moral dimensions at the center of the question.



{figure 1}



{figure 2}



{figure 3}

4.4. Conclusion.

⁵⁰³ Frederic Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes*, c. 1859, oil on canvas, 168 x 302.9 cm The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (figs. 1, 2, and 3)

Augustine's theodicy of cosmic harmony presents a lovely vision of reality, where all of creation continually reflects God's goodness in its perpetual aesthetic excellence. However, Augustine's picture remains incomplete, because such a picture of perfect harmony evades our vision, and fails to connect with much of how we experience the world. To turn *continually* to the perpetual order of the universe may obfuscate and obscure our attempts to see God's ongoing work in the world.

Recall that Hans Urs von Balthasar, in discussing the strengths and flaws of Augustine's aesthetic theology, observes of Augustine's reading of scripture, that not even "the great aesthetic turning point of Christian salvation history, the dialectic of the Testaments, receives full justice... [because] the kingdom of God is always present, veiled, un-recognized, both before and after Christ, but present."⁵⁰⁴ Balthasar's accusation is mild, but effective, in that he accuses Augustine, not of favoring the aesthetic over the personal, but of missing the deeper and more beautiful picture of God's great work of salvation in history. If we are constantly trying to see the big picture, we can miss, not only the tragedies of the world, but also many of the triumphs that rise out of these tragedies. To step back from the evils of the world can also cause us to step back and miss seeing the smaller goods.

Thus, in turning to other aesthetic themes, we hope to gain a more nuanced and holistic picture of what God's providence entails.

⁵⁰⁴ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2: 143.

CHAPTER 4

POETIC INJUSTICE: THEODICY AND WENDY FARLEY'S TRAGIC VISION

*Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.*

SHAKESPEARE
Hamlet

*The worst is not,
So long as we can say, "This is the worst".*

SHAKESPEARE
King Lear

*Death, that hath suck'd the honey of thy breath,
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
Thou art not conquered.*

SHAKESPEARE
Romeo and Juliet

1. Introduction

1.1. Augustine Among the Tragedians

Turning from Augustine's harmonic theodicy, we now wish to look at alternate visions of the problem of evil, which may complement, inform and critique our understanding of aesthetic themes therein. As we concluded the last chapter, we heard the concerns of John Hick and Hans Urs von Balthasar, that Augustine's aesthetic theme obscures our perception of human suffering. Concluding his comments on Augustine, Balthasar notes that Augustine's theodicy throws a "cloak over tragedy", in failing to discern the deeper reality of suffering. Yet, as Balthasar rightly sees, the proper response to a failing of aesthetic vision is not to abandon artistic reflection, as Hick's work suggests, but to seek out an aesthetics which is more truthful to God's work in the world. That Balthasar invokes tragedy here, if only briefly, is nevertheless suggestive for our study. In the recent

literature on the problem of evil, the genre of tragedy has provided a *locus* for serious reflection and may perhaps provide an aesthetic theme which compensates for some of Augustine's mistakes.

Echoing Balthasar and Hick's concerns, contemporary theologian Wendy Farley has likewise contrasted the aesthetic themes of harmony and tragedy. "[A]esthetic metaphysics turns our eyes to the beauty of the cosmos," she writes, "by rendering particular sufferings invisible."⁵⁰⁵ Observing the failings of the classic emphasis on cosmic harmony, Farley's response is to turn to tragic poetics. As a mode of perception, tragedy is firmly planted in the midst of suffering, seeking not to stand apart, or above, but to witness responsively and intimately. For Farley, an emphasis on tragedy allows more room for consolation, because it "enters into the hiatus between the longing for justice and the reality of suffering," and thus resists the short-fallings of traditional theodicy's "cool justifications of evil".⁵⁰⁶ Tragedy seems to provide a good conversation partner for Augustine's aesthetic theme, in that it not so much *rebuts* as *refocuses* our perception of evil and providence, and thus *reorders* our perception. As Augustine and those in his tradition rave about the beautiful "big picture", those who emphasize the tragic vision focus on the dark details of human life. Though there is no single definition of the "tragic vision" as embraced by theology, one key element of this theme must be *an attempt to take suffering seriously as an irreducible human experience*. This attempt to 'read' reality in this light is different from an Augustinian theodicy, which seeks to balance the theodicy equation by appeal to the common denominator of sin. Tragic theodicists such as Wendy Farley find no such perfect balance, but rather focus on the remainder which is left over, the excess of unexplained human agony.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 22.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-3.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

It is worth noting at the outset that comparing these two themes is not an altogether foreign juxtaposition – especially not for Augustine. The Bishop of Hippo was aware of tragic drama, even offering a perceptive analysis of the most fundamental aspect of its poetic power. Writing in his *Confessions*, Augustine reflects on his youth, that when he attended the theater he reveled in the sad spectacle it offered. Augustine is attentive to the pleasure of this form of theater, and (much in the same way that Aristotle does) describes its power to move us to pity (*miser cordia*), and provide a cathartic experience:

What is the reason now that a spectator desires to be made sad when he beholds doleful and tragical passages, which himself could not endure to suffer? Yet for all that he desires to feel a kind of passionateness, yea, and his passion becomes his pleasure too.⁵⁰⁸

Here Augustine stands with other thinkers such as Aristotle, Hume, Frye and Murdoch in identifying what is sometimes called, “the paradox of tragedy”: a perception of pain which provides a form of pleasure.⁵⁰⁹

Yet, within the context of Augustine’s theology, the pleasures and pains of the stage are only a *darkened* form of amusement. On moral principle, Augustine expresses umbrage at taking pleasure in others’ misery. Pity may be felt for those in need, he argues, but we should never *desire* to feel pity at someone’s sorrow. By contrast, Augustine praises God’s own incorruptible mercy, which loves perfectly, yet without sorrow. By far the more troubling aspect of tragedy, however, Augustine sees in his own life, as he describes tragic pleasure as little more than the enjoyable scratching of the “filthy scab” which was his soul. Such ‘scratching’ delighted and relieved his inner corruption, but did nothing to heal it.⁵¹⁰ Thus, what Aristotle finds to praise

⁵⁰⁸ *Conf.* 3.2.

⁵⁰⁹ James Shelley, “Imagining the Truth: An Account of Tragic Pleasure” in *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts*, eds. Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2003), 177-185.

⁵¹⁰ *Conf.* 3.1,2.

about tragedy, its cathartic power, Augustine sees as tragedy's most dangerous aspect. That stage plays can ease our emotional distress, without healing the source of our inner turmoil, is, for Augustine, disgusting.

Little more needs to be said about Augustine's views on tragedy, except that he seemed to find nothing on the tragic stage to fit into his aesthetic vision of God's providence. If the tragic vision is, as Miguel de Unamuno describes it, a distinct "sense of life", then it is safe to say that Augustine, for better or worse, lacks this sense.⁵¹¹ Kathleen Sands, a feminist theologian, describes Augustine's resistance as a rejection of any sense of life which was open to polyvalent interpretation:

Augustine's disdain for tragic and comic dramas, with their quite contrary goals, was therefore not coincidental... His theory of sin, like the rationalistic and dualistic interpretations of evil that generated it, was an effort to repudiate the tragicomic reality of elemental contradiction, an effort to fix life's moving questions by anchoring them speculatively to the story's anticipated end.⁵¹²

To be sure, Augustine is aware of suffering, and one can feel in his *Confessiones* the compassion of a man who lost his beloved mother, dear friend, and only son. But his sense of sadness at the evil in the world never leads him to embrace that sadness as a meaningful part of the world-story. Suffering is never given any real sway or significance. Specifically within his *theodicy*, suffering plays no more significant role than as a kind of waste product generated by sin, which must be processed philosophically, ethically, and aesthetically in order not to contaminate creation's beautiful ecology. For Augustine, though the problem of suffering must be *dealt with*, it is no more fitting a subject *for reflection* than sewage.⁵¹³

⁵¹¹ Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fitch (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 2006) 15.

⁵¹² Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 19.

⁵¹³ Cf. LA 3

1.2. *Theodicy and the Tragic Paradox*

1.2.1. *Tragedy and Pain.* The aesthetic theme of tragedy within theodicy aims to correct, or contradict, this trend in classical theodicy by finding value in reflecting on suffering. If we must find a poetic banner to fly over tragic theology, we may perhaps turn to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the prince, dying, charges Horatio, "absent thee from felicity awhile... to tell my story." Hamlet here clearly recognizes the difficulty which Horatio will have to endure in recounting the sad events in Elsinore. That Hamlet charges him "in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain" suggests the agony of the world but also the difficulty of speaking through racking sobs of grief. Yet it is assumed here in *Hamlet* that there is value in recounting even sad tales such as these, though they force us to 'absent ourselves' from happiness for a while. Taking this as a very preliminary guide to tragedy, we may say that in the art-form, and, by extension, the vision of life, is an attempt to see something we do not naturally desire to see: suffering.

Thus, at the beginning, we must say that at the core of the tragedy there is something which places even more pressure on the theodacist. Suffering is undesirable, an evil which can be defeated, but which still *hurts*, forcing us to ask more urgently the perennial 'why' question. However we define the tragic, in drama or theology, at the core of our understanding of the theme must be an attempt to resist softening the painful reality of suffering, at least for a time. In order to work – even if it offers only the cathartic release of emotions – tragedy must first grip us through an encounter with the agony of another. This experience must be, in some sense, painful. Iris Murdoch comes close to saying this when she writes, "Tragedy must break the charmed completion which is the essence of lesser art".⁵¹⁴

⁵¹⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1994), 104-5.

Here it is *brokenness* which Murdoch points toward, in that tragedy offers us a unified vision of a shattered whole. She describes the form as something inherently uncomfortable, that keeps us gripping the seat, never fully relaxed. As she writes, “The statement must be impressive but not too complete... The intelligent truthful creator must keep his material open enough, must keep, as it were, pulling it apart.” Northrop Frye likewise points to a unique quality in tragedy which sets it apart from other literary genres. For Frye, the varied ‘mythoi’ of Western literature fit with the four seasons, comedy (spring), romance (summer), and satire (winter), all offer a vision of life which is, in some sense, desirable. Even satire, as Frye explains, offers a kind of icy humor. Yet, “Without tragedy,” Frye notes, with its autumnal sadness, “all literary fictions might be plausibly explained as expressions of emotional attachments, whether of wish fulfillment or of repugnance: the tragic fiction guarantees, so to speak, a disinterested quality in literary experience.”⁵¹⁵ In essence, Frye sees tragedy as the only poetic genre which shows us something we do not want to see.

This suggests, then an inherent tension between tragedy and theodicy. If theodicy is at heart an attempt to maintain the credibility of God’s *good news*, and tragedy is at heart an attempt to tell us the *bad news*: the two must be, at least in part, at odds with one another. We may well ask at the outset, in accord with Augustine, what tragedy as an aesthetic theme may contribute to theodicy? This chapter, concluding with a discussion of the work of Wendy Farley, is an attempt to answer this question.

1.2.2. Tragedy and Pleasure. The second dimension of tragedy in art, so far as it embodies the tragic paradox of which Augustine speaks, is that it also gives *pleasure* at the perception of suffering. Augustine found this sort of pleasure immoral, as if it were a more rarified form of the gladiators in the

⁵¹⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 206.

coliseum, but others have found within tragedy great value, suggesting hidden powers of consolation within the spectacle, which are not visible from the vantage of cosmic harmony. Though thinkers have differed on the consolations of tragedy (ranging from mere catharsis to supreme consolation for all life's evils), many theologians have found, by looking through the lens of tragic poetics, positive meaning for the Christian faith despite the vision of suffering it provides. Romeo, in seeing Juliet, whom he takes for dead, utters words which encapsulate this triumphant quality "Death, that hath suck'd the honey of thy breath / Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty. / Thou art not conquered".⁵¹⁶ Tragedy offers us a sad spectacle which yet retains a beauty which is not defeated, despite the prevalence of evil.

This exultant quality to the tragic vision is the necessary accompaniment to the attendant agony of the form, and has significant import for aesthetic theodicy. If tragedy can help us to see suffering clearly, and yet see, in the midst of suffering, positive meaning for humanity, then it is worth exploring. In order to explore the tragic vision, I will first briefly look at the poetics of tragedy (a complicated and varied literature to which I cannot do justice), then I will briefly turn to various versions of the tragic vision, Christian and otherwise, in order to gain a sense of the way that tragedy is interpreted philosophically and theologically. Concluding this examination, I will look at the work of Wendy Farley as a preeminent attempt to use the tragic vision as a resource for theodicy. Finally, by examining some of the critiques of the tragic vision, I hope to emerge with some positive insights which deepen aesthetic theodicy and ultimately fit together with the best of Augustine's model of the world, as well as an understanding of what tragedy yet lacks as an aesthetic theme.

⁵¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.

2. Tragedy and Philosophy

2.1. *Tragedy and Theory.* Given its frequent overuse in contemporary discourse, where everything from school shootings to the elimination of a sports team from the semi-finals may well be called ‘tragic’, it is important, in looking at tragedy, to spend some time with the traditional significance of the word.

Chaucer’s monk in *Canterbury Tales* gives voice to a simple and straightforward perception of the form of tragedy as we encounter it in art:

Tragedie is to seyn a certain storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen of a heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.⁵¹⁷

For all its simplicity, Chaucer here gives a good description of the form as it is commonly perceived; specifically, this brief definition gets correct the centrality of *plot* in tragic theory: tragedy is a certain ‘*storie*’. Though there are paintings and photographs which grip us with pity and fear, when we speak of tragic art, it is normally in terms of a temporal progression of a narrative. Whether speaking of a miscarriage, a drug addiction, a car accident, or a divorce, when we apply the modifier ‘tragic’ it is often in response to something that has happened over a course of time. Moreover, things have gotten worse (something has ‘*yfallen*’), and ‘*myserie*’ of one sort or another has ensued, ending in a more ‘*wrecched*’ state of affairs.

This emphasis on ‘*storie*’ in Chaucer accords with Aristotle’s writings, who calls plot the “soul of tragedy”.⁵¹⁸ Aristotle enumerates three key elements to the tragic plot: reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*), recognition (*anagnorisis*), and

⁵¹⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Alfred W. Pollard (London: Macmillan, 1907), 365.

⁵¹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 13.

a scene of suffering (*pathos*).⁵¹⁹ The stories of Oedipus, Hamlet, and Beowulf all follow this pattern, as they depict the fall of a royal person, who succumbs to the defeat: each take on a task for which they are uniquely situated and qualified (to discover the cause of the plague on Thebes; to scour the ‘rottenness’ of Denmark; to destroy the monsters), yet which even they cannot accomplish.

If the focus of Aristotle’s or Chaucer’s poetics, the downfall of a great *man*, is less commonly invoked in our anti-authoritarian age, works such as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and James Cameron’s *Titanic*, both sad stories of ‘star cross’d’ lovers whose romance ends poorly, retain their significance as examples of the tragic theme. Lost love is immediately recognizable and perennially relevant to us, as we often see the heights of youthful optimism clash with the sad social contingencies of a world where race, class, and other differences keep couples apart. The tragic conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet* includes all three elements, as the clever plan to unite the two offspring of warring families falls through: the crucial message does not arrive (*reversal*). Romeo takes Juliet for dead and commits suicide; subsequently, Juliet wakes sees her dead lover and likewise kills herself (*recognition and suffering*).

Returning to the beginnings of tragic theory, one finds in Aristotle a clear and coherent account of the form in his *Poetics*. In seeking to elucidate the poetic logic of tragedy, Aristotle is entirely more positive about the rationality of artistic creation than is Plato in *Ion*, who describes the artist as little more than an unknowing captive of the muse, whose creative powers are largely irrational.⁵²⁰ Aristotle’s requirements for tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude,”

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵²⁰ Plato, *Ion* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 15.

which conforms to the unities of place, time, and character, as well as the necessities of the tragic plot as described above, and a list of other necessary elements, is therefore a high compliment to the form as a skillful enterprise worthy of reflection, and beneficial for viewing.⁵²¹

By offering an essentially cognitivist account of drama, which argues that the emotional effect of the drama is based on its interaction with our beliefs about the world, Aristotle helpfully pairs together the structure of the play and its effect on our emotions. A well-crafted tragedy will result in a natural “tragic wonder”, in which we feel terror and pity.⁵²² This feeling of sympathy toward a character, and yet antipathy toward the events of the play, has held strong through the years as a helpful mark for understanding tragedy. Like the paradox of ‘tragic pleasure’, but distinguishable from it, the dual emotions described by Aristotle dictate a structure to the proceedings, and proscribe certain plots. The philosopher, for instance, notes that the downfall of a purely virtuous man arouses neither pity nor fear, but provides only “shock appeal”; while the ruination of a villain, though morally satisfying, elicits no “tragic wonder”. The notion that tragedy could consist of the good fortune of a villain, Aristotle finds merely silly.⁵²³ An effective tragedy requires a delicate mix of ingredients in order to fill us with a sense of commiseration and fear.

Here Aristotle is not alone, as I. A. Richards notes that the relation between pity and terror gives tragedy its “peculiar poise”.⁵²⁴ For Aristotle, the perfect alloy of pity and terror arises when a great man falls, but this man is flawed with error or frailty. Aristotle spells out why the fall of Oedipus or Thyestes should elicit fear and pity: our sense of fear is derived from the

⁵²¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 10.

⁵²² Ibid., 19.

⁵²³ Ibid., 22-23.

⁵²⁴ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 231.

injustice of the suffering before us; our pity is derived from our identification with the one who suffers. Iris Murdoch describes the tension between the pitiable injustice and fearful identification as a basic conflict of justice: “Tragedy is a paradoxical combination of a fearful sense of rightness (the hero must fall) and a pitying sense of wrongness (it is too bad that he falls).”⁵²⁵ Tragedy often plays on these contrasting values. Oedipus falls from the heights of greatness to the depths of misery. Tragedy gives us pleasure, but at the sight of agony. The tragic hero is both innocent *and* guilty.

Yet, though Aristotle’s *Poetics* represents a monumental kick-start to critical reflection on the genre, his description of and prescriptions for tragic art are, at places, unhelpfully restrictive. The norms which Aristotle lays out for tragic drama, such as the necessary magnitude of the drama, the unity of time and place, and the nature of the reversal, tend to apply best to his most frequently mentioned tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, and with lesser success to other tragedies of the stage. The problem of tragic poetics often revolves around this dilemma, as Northrup Frye notes that “most theories of tragedy take one great drama as their norm”.⁵²⁶ Thus, as helpful as Aristotle’s initial account may be in identifying the features and function of tragedy as he sees it, it cannot be applied equivocally to tragic art. Indeed, finding a single account of tragedy, or even a solid definition of the genre has proved contentious or even unhelpful. Terry Eagleton, in his recent survey of the state of tragic theory, spends an entire chapter charting the mistakes of countless attempts to find the “Holy Grail of a faultless definition”.⁵²⁷ Even so, the temptation to make pronouncements on what is or is not tragic

⁵²⁵ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1994), 214.

⁵²⁶ Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 212. Aristotle focuses on *Oedipus Rex*, while Hegel famously saw Sophocles’s *Antigone* as the height of tragedy and height of all art.

⁵²⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 5.

is perennial in even the most perceptive critics. Iris Murdoch attempts to draw this line when she writes,

To say of this and that that it is not tragic, or not a tragedy, implies a positive concept. Yet it may be easier to see why certain sad or frightful things in art are not tragic, than to say what sort of art is tragic. Someone has got to die, it has to be a play, it has to be poetry, it has to be very good.⁵²⁸

Yet, suggestive as Murdoch's description is, death and tragedy do *not* always go hand in hand. To be sure, death is (for most dramatists) a definable *conclusion* to the story, and thus ending the story '*wreccedly*', but tragedy for Aristotle did not require death, but only downfall. For instance, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, if a problematic play, is widely considered tragic despite the fact that the protagonist lives.

This temptation to exclude certain plays from being truly tragic extends to other thinkers as well. Milton, like Murdoch, felt it necessary to rule out certain forms of tragedy. For Milton, the comic or the vulgar was unseemly to the dignity of the form. Yet, again, Shakespeare's work proves to be a fly in the ointment of Milton's theory as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* should all be, in a Puritan fashion, *scolded* for inclusion of low and funny characters in the midst of the darker story. As Paul Fiddes has shown, the works of Shakespeare often display a line of tension between tragedy and comedy. The comedies contain dark elements, the shadow of death, and tragic characters, while the tragedies contain jokes, humorous characters, and notes of lightness and victory: as Fiddes notes, "Shakespearian comedies do not end in total sweetness and light..." and there is "a movement towards fulfillment and triumph in tragedy".⁵²⁹ This intermixture of tragic and comic elements in Shakespeare provides a powerful warning sign for literary

⁵²⁸ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 98.

⁵²⁹ Paul S. Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 75, 81.

critics not to pronounce too strongly about what constitutes ‘proper tragedy’. If our best definition of tragedy excludes the best of tragic drama (and it is hard not to affirm Shakespeare as one of the form’s guiding lights) then some part of the equation has gone wrong.

Seeing the shortcomings of tragic critical theory, we side with John Kekes, when he writes that

The attempt to define ‘tragedy’ yields diminishing returns. The more embracing the definition is, the less likely it is that all the plays that fall under it will have philosophically interesting features. On the other hand, if we restrict the term to plays possessing the deep significance that concerns us here, then we are bound to exclude plays legitimately regarded by knowledgeable and thoughtful literary critics.⁵³⁰

Kekes puts his finger on the problem of definition here, as he highlights the importance of “philosophically interesting features”, which complicate definition. Tragedy has often been as much of interest to the philosopher as to the critic (beginning with Plato and Aristotle).

Further, the various dramas of the stage, ranging from differing centuries and cultures, will not inhere perfectly as a unified whole. Cultures often have differing opinions about prohibitions and standards, as well as what they find laudable and shameful. As George Steiner has written, “All serious art, music and literature is a *critical* act.”⁵³¹ As such, dramas are already interpretations of the world with their own sets of commitments, respective to their various creators, and thus will differ in their interpretations of the world. What seems truly sad to one person may leave another person unmoved. While the death of a king may affect some quite strongly, others may see here only the inevitable result of grasping for power, or even feel glad at the overthrow of authority. Teenage love likewise evokes mixed

⁵³⁰ John Kekes, *Facing Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 33-34.

⁵³¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, 11

feelings. While young people may feel pity for these ‘star cross’d lovers’, older heads may only shake at the improprieties of youth.

That tragic theory often ends in being either overly specific or overly catholic, and ultimately fails to distill the essence of the drama to a single definition, however, does not, to my mind, necessitate failure. Or, perhaps more poetically, we may recognize tragic nobility in the form of poetics itself. Murdoch writes of tragic poetry that the “statement must be impressive but not too complete”; we may well add that much the same goes for any definition of the dramatic form. Completeness can be a hindrance in discerning the power of tragedy to help us understand more of life. Thus, though one agrees with Terry Eagleton, who writes, “The truth is that no definition of tragedy more elaborate than ‘very sad’ has ever worked,” one must also keep in mind that even definitions which suffer from some crucial flaw (*hamartia*) still *work* in enabling recognition (*anagoresis*) of salient features of the tragic.⁵³² Hence, though I think that there is no ‘Holy Grail’ definition for tragedy, I believe that even incomplete definitions can be helpful in philosophizing about the world. In order for tragedy to be applied to life, as a tragic vision, even more disservice may be done to the form as a whole, as philosophers alight on one or two key aspects of the form and apply it to their notions of the world. These varying theories, though, may just as easily be seen as a compliment to the tragic form, as its complexity lends itself to a variety of interpretations, inspiring others differently.⁵³³

Because of the inherent imprecision of tragic poetics, it may be helpful, before turning to the work of Wendy Farley, to look at some of the ways that tragedy has been appropriated by philosophers and theologians who

⁵³² Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 3.

⁵³³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 551.

wish to look at the world, as Shakespeare says, as if “all the world’s a stage”.⁵³⁴ In the last chapter we saw that Augustine’s aesthetic theodicy was partially driven by an attempt to ‘make credible’ the Christian faith against the background of Pagan philosophy. Augustine sought to rescue Pythagorean, Platonic, and Neo-Platonic aesthetic insights for his cosmic theodicy, while avoiding the pitfalls of pagan theology. Tragedy likewise straddles pagan and Christian thought. Within Christian and secular thought, tragedy retains a fair amount of significance, but with differing import for either side. In a series of brief summaries, I hope to show a number of ways that tragedy has been utilized as an aesthetic theme, as a way of helpfully backgrounding our discussion of Wendy Farley’s aesthetic theodicy.

2.2. *Secular Tragic Vision*.⁵³⁵

In the recent, secular philosophical literature, there is great variety of reflection on tragedy as a category for thought about everyday life. Perhaps most notably, among the range of thinkers who reflect on tragedy, is a common thread, which looks to tragedy as a source of consolation in the midst of suffering.

⁵³⁴ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7.

⁵³⁵ As an important side note, it is worth mentioning the objection of Iris Murdoch in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* that

Real life is not tragic... When in real life unhappiness we ‘live in the tragic’ or ‘see something as a tragedy’ something false may be involved, possibly a forgivable reaching for consolation. Strictly speaking, tragedy belongs to literature. Tragedies are plays written by great poets. One might say of the *Iliad* that, in a supreme sense, it rises to a tragic level, which no prose work can reach. But it is too long and multiform to be a tragedy. There are no prose tragedies. Real life is not tragic. In saying this one means that the extreme horrors of real life cannot be expressed in art... Art offers some consolation, some sense, some form whereas the most dreadful ills of human life allow none. Auschwitz is not a tragedy.(93)

I’ll refer to this quote toward the end of the chapter, but for now it is worth questioning the validity of Murdoch’s life-art segregation. There seem to be two main problems with this denial. First, that it flies in the face of what we have seen from the way that people use the term tragedy across circumstances. Philosophers, poets and every people clearly can use the term meaningfully, and thus it is silly to deny content to its everyday usage. Second, we may add that the sauce for the goose is the sauce for the gander, and that a separation of tragedy from life may render art-tragedy itself nonsensical. If, contra Aristotle, we cannot identify human events as tragic how can we identify the human events of the play as tragic? If real-life cannot be tragic, can art?

2.2.1. *Nietzsche*. This tragic consolation is nowhere more apparent or explicit than in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. Though Nietzsche claimed to be the world's first tragic philosopher, this was certainly not the case; others such as Hegel and Schopenhauer had dwelt on tragedy, integrating it into their divergent philosophies.⁵³⁶ What Nietzsche saw in tragic drama was—despite the inherently destructive forces at work (the Dionysian prevailing over the Apollonian)—an irreducibly pleasurable experience at the core of life. What Nietzsche seeks to champion is tragedy at its worst and darkest, yet somehow also at its most glorious. He writes:

This is the most direct effect of Dionysian tragedy: generally, the state and society, the gap between man and man give way to an invincible feeling of unity which leads back to the heart of nature. The metaphysical consolation, which as I have already indicated, true tragedy leaves us, that at the bottom of everything, in spite of all the transformations in phenomena, life is indestructibly powerful and delightful...⁵³⁷

For Nietzsche, it is the experience of chaotic and destructive pleasure which provides the greatest benefit of tragedy, a metaphysical consolation which functions, in effect as a “theodicy”.⁵³⁸ If indeed, at base, life is indestructibly delightful, then even, as Nietzsche says, in the “worst world” we can find reason for existence.⁵³⁹ This central insight is prominent in Nietzsche's first work, yet remains present even as his thinking shifts. As Nietzsche moves the focus of his criticism to Christianity (beginning with *Daybreak* in 1881, and reaching its height with *The Genealogy of Morals* in 1887, where he fully denounces the slavish weakness of Christian morals),

⁵³⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 273.

⁵³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 45.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

he retains his emphasis on the significance of tragedy and Dionysian joy. In 1888, he writes,

Dionysus versus the “Crucified”: there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference regarding their martyrdom - it is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, created torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering - the “Crucified as the innocent one” - counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation. One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich, and capable of deifying to do so... The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.⁵⁴⁰

Here the “Crucified” replaces Apollo as a foil for Dionysus. Even more derided than the sun god, Christ is here a failed god, ugly in his defeat, yet unable to embrace and affirm his destruction. That Nietzsche would deny the resurrection is beyond question, but the far more damning failure of Christianity here is undoubtedly, for him, that the resurrection is even *necessary* to overcome evil. *Following* Nietzsche, the strong, rich, tragic man has no need of such deliverances—he has understood the power and truth of tragedy.

It is hard not to take a fair amount of pleasure in the vivacity of Nietzsche’s writing here. With Dionysian joy and energy, he aims to intoxicate with a vision of life so powerful that all despair may be overcome. But it is difficult, though, for anyone (except perhaps a male college sophomore) to take seriously Nietzsche’s overall suggestion here. That at the base of

⁵⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Vintage, 1968), 543.

experience there is an abiding creative pleasure in life which justifies the worst agonies imaginable is not, for most of us, remotely believable.

2.2.2. *Russell.* Bertrand Russell's most famous essay, "A Free Man's Worship" provides a more modest tragic vision, which seeks to address the world as he sees it, violent, destructive and ultimately doomed, but does not go so far as Nietzsche in affirming the joyfulness of life, even at its worst. In one of his most poetic and widely quoted passages, Russell describes the state of humanity, "Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving", he writes, "his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms".⁵⁴¹ Such is the origin of humanity, purposeless and accidental. Human destiny is equally dark, as Russell describes it. In the end,

no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave... all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.⁵⁴²

Phrased more simply Russell writes, "the world of fact, after all, is not good".⁵⁴³ Russell's bracing honesty here is refreshing, and Nietzsche would surely sign off on this picture of the universe. Yet Russell is keen to separate himself from the latter philosopher's response to this situation. As Russell sees it, Dionysian embrace of the forces of destruction is the wrong conclusion. "The worship of Force, to which Carlyle and Nietzsche and the creed of Militarism have accustomed us," he writes, "is the result of failure to maintain our own ideals against a hostile universe: it is itself a prostrate

⁵⁴¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 67.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 68.

submission to evil, a sacrifice of our best to Moloch.”⁵⁴⁴ In place of an affirmation of existence as fundamentally joyful, even at its worst, Russell urges that we retain our best ideals of the good, the beautiful, and a “vision of perfection” which recognizes that the universe as we see it is not what we should desire.

Later in the essay, Russell holds up tragedy as, of all the arts, “the proudest, most triumphant”, for, as he says, “it builds its shining citadel in the very centre of the enemy's country”.⁵⁴⁵ The most valuable element of this tragic citadel is the *view* which we receive from the ramparts. What the “beauty of tragedy... makes visible” to us, Russell writes, is

a quality which, in more or less obvious shapes, is present always and everywhere in life. In the spectacle of Death, in the endurance of intolerable pain, and in the irrevocableness of a vanished past, there is a sacredness, an overpowering awe, a feeling of the vastness, the depth, the inexhaustible mystery of existence, in which, as by some strange marriage of pain, the sufferer is bound to the world by bonds of sorrow.⁵⁴⁶

Perception of the universe, then, awakens a tragic awe at the cosmic vastness of life, which is both beautiful and destructive. Similarity to Nietzsche's vision cannot be denied, but Russell's vision is more fundamentally moral, in that the sorrow of the world awakens in us the best of virtues, to *resist* destruction and inhumanity. That the best of human existence can be destroyed, Russell is clear, and thus he attempts to find in tragedy a call to resistance. Ultimately Russell says little about the shape of this resistance to evil, and he concedes that few will be able to pursue the tragic vision through despair into tragic resistance to evil. But this does not really undermine what is most suggestive about his secular theodicy, which

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 71.

is that we can look honestly into the darkness of our own fate and yet still find meaning, and even beauty therein.

2.2.3. *Kekes*. The commonality between these thinkers is a use of tragedy to help awaken us to the destructiveness of evil, but to find within this awakening, a tragic nobility. John Kekes, in *Facing Evil*, lays out a somewhat Russellian-style argument for finding tragic meaning in a destructive universe; one which helpfully deepens Russell's essential argument by developing an account of ethics in a hostile universe. First, Kekes recognizes that the universe and our own motivations are often hostile to human flourishing. Citing King Lear as an archetype, Kekes notes that often our best intentions result in calamity, as Lear's desire for love and respect from his daughters leads to his, and their, downfall. Even the best-laid plans of human life can run afoul because of the indifference of nature and the tenuous and fragile makeup of our own psyches. If external nature is often unresponsive to our intentions, and human nature is all too susceptible to evil influences, then focusing on human decisions as the foundation for morality makes little sense.⁵⁴⁷ Given the contingency of life, we cannot know if our best intentions will result in the best results. Instead of a focus on beneficial results for our actions, Kekes pushes for a focus on character-morality, which aims for positive moral choices, but is able to make sense of moral decision making even when things go tragically wrong.⁵⁴⁸ Kekes intends to offer a more sober account of how we can live good lives in the face of evil, by urging us to be *certain kinds of people*, who recognize the fallibility of humans and the world, but still strive for the good. This second element, following on recognition of the state of the world, is a proper resistance to evil.

⁵⁴⁷ John Kekes, *Facing Evil*, 140-145.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 146-156, 161.

2.2.4. *Tragic Vision and Philosophical Reflection*

Central to Russell's and Kekes' account of tragic meaning, then, is a kind of Aristotelian *recognition* that things are fundamentally bad. For Nietzsche, Russell and Kekes, awakening to the dark realities of the world allows us to exercise a kind of tragic nobility. This form of the tragic vision seems to fit well with how I. A. Richards describes tragedy: as a vision (akin to Kant's sublime) which gives pleasure even in its unsettling vision of the world. Richards writes,

It is essential to recognize that in the full tragic experience there is no suppression. The mind does not shy away from anything, it does not protect itself with any illusion, it stands uncomfited, unintimidated, alone and self-reliant. Suppressions and sublimations alike are devices by which we endeavor to avoid issues which might bewilder us. The essence of Tragedy is that it forces us to live for a moment without them... The joy which is so strangely the heart of the experience is not an indication that 'all's right with the world' or that 'somewhere, somehow there is Justice'; it is an indication that all is right here and now in the nervous system.⁵⁴⁹

Reading Richards' appraisal of tragedy, then, we are reminded of Edgar's line in *King Lear*, where he says, "the worst is not, So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" ⁵⁵⁰ Though our vision may fall upon a dark and disturbed world, we may take comfort that it is seen through clear and insightful eyes. Paired together with this vision of destruction, the secular philosophers above point to an inherent nobility in tragedy which we can participate in. A. C. Bradley finds in Shakespearian tragedy a similar lesson:

The tragic hero with Shakespeare, then, need not be 'good,' though generally he is 'good' and therefore at once wins sympathy in his error. But it is necessary that he should have so much of greatness that in his error and fall we may be vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature. Hence, in the first place, a

⁵⁴⁹ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 230.

⁵⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.1.

Shakespearean tragedy is never, like some miscalled tragedies, depressing. No one ever closes the book with the feeling that man is a poor mean creature. He may be wretched and he may be awful, but he is not small.⁵⁵¹

If art helps to reorder our perception of the world, and enrich our sense of value, then this strain of secular tragic vision, running through Nietzsche, Russell and Kekes is primarily helpful as a way of recognizing the human position in a destructive universe, and providing a sense of defiant human value.

2.3. *Tragedy and Christian Belief*

Though we may raise questions about the sufficiency of the ‘tragic vision’ as we find it in a range of secular thinkers, it is at least easy to see that tragedy as a category for reflection fits quite naturally with their darker visions of the world. Turning now to theology, we begin to encounter more difficulty in incorporating a ‘tragic vision’ with the Christian worldview. This difficulty is to be expected. Tragic drama and the Christian good news exist in narrative tension (one arcing downward, the other upward).

Some, however, have proclaimed the two to be completely antithetical. I. A. Richards, for one, juxtaposes ‘Tragedy’ and Christian faith in the strongest terms possible. “Tragedy is only possible to the mind which is for the moment agnostic or Manichean”, he writes, “[t]he least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal.”⁵⁵² Complicating Richard’s analysis may be his lofty vision of tragedy (with a capital ‘T’) as “the rarest thing in literature”; therefore the most fragile art form, easy to taint though the addition of impure elements such as a possible afterlife. Following Richards, *Romeo and Juliet* is only pseudo-

⁵⁵¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1919), 22-3.

⁵⁵² I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 230-231.

tragedy (colored as it is by the rosy hue of Christian hope), while *King Lear* is the real thing—a howling hopeless drama. Such a rarified poetics of tragedy which excludes plays like *Romeo and Juliet* is, as Terry Eagleton has wittily argued, “like defining a vacuum cleaner in a way which unaccountably omits the Hoover.”⁵⁵³ Yet, despite what we may take to be a hubritical flaw (*hamartia*) in his literary criticism, Richards is not alone in drawing a line in the sand between this poetic genre and Christian theology. In his book *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner writes,

There has been no specifically Christian mode of tragic drama even in the noontime of the faith. Christianity is an anti-tragic vision of the world... Being a threshold to the eternal, the death of a Christian hero can be an occasion for sorrow but not for tragedy... The Christian view knows only partial or episodic tragedy...⁵⁵⁴

Tragedy is dead within the Christian era, Steiner believes, because hope is always present; specifically the continual hope of atonement with God. “Real tragedy,” he writes, “can occur only where the tormented soul believes there is no time left for God’s forgiveness”.⁵⁵⁵ Thus Steiner finds, from Dante’s *Divina Commedia* to the story of Goethe’s Faust, continual movement toward joy, especially in the case of Faust, whose final deliverance from the devil happens at a moment beyond apparent hope. In Goethe’s version, Faust has sold his soul to the devil, and finally dies, seeming to seal the deal. Yet here, as Steiner writes, “romantic melodrama is sound theology when it shows the soul being snatched back from the very verge of damnation.”⁵⁵⁶ The Christian story is itself melodramatic in this way, as Steiner describes it,

⁵⁵³ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 7.

⁵⁵⁴ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, 331-2.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 331.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 332.

The Passion of Christ is an event of unutterable grief, but it is also a cipher through which is revealed the love of God for man. In the dark light of Christ's suffering, original sin is shown to have been a joyous error (*felix culpa*). Through it humanity shall be restored to a condition far more exalted than Adam's innocence.⁵⁵⁷

Using this brief sketch, the Christian narrative can be cast as a riches, to rags, to even-greater riches story. If there is, as Northrup Frye suggests, a truly disinterested element in tragic drama, the Christian story as Steiner tells it is just the opposite, a Hollywood crowd-pleaser with a 'wow ending'. Therefore, it is difficult to disagree with the basic import of what Richards and Steiner say, when they contrast tragic drama and Christian truth. We find in the New Testament a deep and abiding call to faith, hope, and love which remain with us even through the worst of circumstances.⁵⁵⁸ But it is hard to agree with Steiner on a much deeper level than to affirm that *The Gospel of John* and *Oedipus Rex* tell very different stories. This *a priori* contrast is not so much incorrect as incomplete, and cuts off conversations between two 'dramas' which have much to say to one another. By far the most unhelpful aspect in Steiner's elucidation of the shape of the Christian drama is that it is so limited as to compress all suffering into a singular dip in the one-dimensional curve of redemption. This sketch of Christianity works in thumbnail size, but it excludes the reality that, seen in full, Christianity is *more* than a parable of redemption. It is an entire worldview that seeks to encompass all of life; to account, not only for the witness of scripture and its theological ramifications, but, on a soteriological level, for multifarious human experience, including our experience of suffering. Despite their rose-colored view of ultimate reality, Christians still suffer pain, doubt and death. That Steiner invokes the questionable notion of "Felix Culpa", though it is by no means dogmatically held in theodicy, is even more

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid..

⁵⁵⁸ Rom. 8:35-39.

suspicious in this context as it seems to equate all suffering with Adam's sin and therefore assume an equally splendid defeat of evil for any present suffering. To place partial or episodic tragedy outside the scope of 'real' tragedy, therefore, also suggests that tragedy has nothing to show us about living in the midst of evil; experiencing what may well be nothing more than 'temporary setbacks', but which nevertheless plague and pain us in the present. A number of Christian thinkers have tried to point out the presence of tragedy (if only partial and episodic) as nevertheless a 'real' experience.⁵⁵⁹

3. Wendy Farley's Aesthetic Theodicy: *Poetic Injustice and Christian Resistance*

3.1. *The Borderlands of Theodicy*

⁵⁵⁹ Miguel de Unamuno, notably, in *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 2006), finds in Christianity an existential hope for the immortality of all things which exists even in the face of dire contradiction. A description of Unamuno's driving desire might well be summed up by a line from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, where it is said of Marcius "He wants nothing of a god but eternity" (35). Unamuno approves wholeheartedly of this desire, as he desires, not only personal immortality, but the immortality of everything. For Unamuno, reason leads one to deny the possibility of consciousness after death - while one's deepest desires scream the opposite.

It is the Christian who, above all for Unamuno, can ride the razor's edge between this reason and the desire, on the "saving incertitude", which is, as he says, our "supreme consolation." (104) This contradiction, that one hopes for that which one cannot truly believe - as Unamuno phrases it, "The contradiction of my heart that says Yes and my head that says No!" - this is the tragic, perpetual struggle of human life (12). In keeping with this pattern, many of the exemplars of Christian thought, such as Athanasius, Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard, possess this same "audacity of faith" which refuses to abandon that which rationalism opposes (58). These "Men of flesh and bone" as Unamuno describes them, are burdened with wisdom rather than knowledge (16). Unamuno places more trust, then, in the work of "idiots", simple-minded, headstrong men of the church than in scholastics or philosophers such as Kant. Thus it may be apt to call Unamuno's vision 'Quixotic' as much as 'Tragic' in that it is described as a kind of "disease" of the mind, which refuses to settle for the merely rational (16). A Quixotic vision of reality is one that is constantly 'tilting at the windmills' of reality, in all its apparent hopelessness, out of a sort of grandiloquent defiance of these giants of rationality. Perhaps what makes Unamuno's sense of life tragic, then is his emphasis on the mutual dependence, and mutual enmity of faith and reason. "Reason and faith are two enemies," Unamuno writes, "neither of which can maintain itself without the other." (99). This mutual struggle is, in this way, Hegelian or Aeschylarian in shape, in that it arises from two good desires which must exist in conflict. The proper shape of philosophy is to heroically embrace this struggle, doomed though it may be. Thus, Unamuno's philosophy may well be summed up as follows: "My religion is to seek truth in life and life in truth, even though knowing full well that I shall never find them so long as I live" (99).

The work of Wendy Farley is worth discussion at length in this context, because the tragic vision, as she utilizes it, stands so clearly in line with the thinking of other tragic philosophers (it is representative, without being derivative), and yet her theodicy aims to contribute, not to a secular theodicy, but to Christian theodicy. Working within the context of Christian theodicy, Farley mounts a direct critique of the classical aesthetic theodicy of harmony which she finds unhelpful.⁵⁶⁰ As quoted in the first section, Farley rejects the medieval view of the harmonious universe as an unhelpful distraction: “[A]esthetic metaphysics turns our eyes to the beauty of the cosmos,” she writes, “by rendering particular sufferings invisible.”⁵⁶¹ Defining her critique, however, (in place of elaborate theological deviations), is not a direct repudiation of all things traditional, but a refocusing of the theodicy question on human life, as it is affected by God, creation, sin and especially suffering, while gathering together her insights under the rubric of tragedy.

Fitting with tragedy as an aesthetic motif, Farley refocuses the problem of evil, as she says it, by placing “suffering rather than sin at the center of the problem of evil”.⁵⁶² This shift is necessary to make room for tragedy within the theodicy conversation. This refocused theodicy is no longer ‘framed’ in the same way as traditional theodicy, by the ‘U-shaped’ story of sin summarized as *Paradise*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained*. Of this sort of narrative, Farley is suspicious. “The drama of salvation is firmly contained within a moral vision while anticipating a comic outcome”, she writes, “It is the neatness of this vision that disturbs me.”⁵⁶³ Here she shares much with theologians such as Paul Fiddes, who question the validity of this structure as a normative pattern. Fiddes, writing about the

⁵⁶⁰ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 12.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12.

traditional ‘U-shaped curve’ in *Freedom and Limit*, argues that scripture shows us a more nuanced “line of tension” between obedience and disobedience, freedom and limitation, which includes aspects of both comedy and tragedy, like a Shakespeare play.⁵⁶⁴ Farley likewise objects to the neatness of the U-shaped curve. But Farley shares even more in common with feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether, who eschew speculation on the afterlife (as more of a patriarchal concern), in favor of a focus on life in the here and now. “It is not our calling to be concerned about the eternal meaning of our lives,” Ruether writes of feminist theology, “Our responsibility is to create a just and good community for our generation and for our children.”⁵⁶⁵ Farley shares in this emphasis in as much as her theodicy is focused on the plot of human lives, and less on the grand plot of *humanity*. Whether or not we affirm ultimate harmony and perfect justice, the fact remains that here and now we experience great suffering and difficulty. Wendy Farley says it best when she writes:

Confidence in cosmic justice cannot completely obscure the rapacity of suffering as it devours the innocent and the helpless. Hopes in future vindication do not make hunger, racism, war and oppression theologically irrelevant.⁵⁶⁶

The proper starting place for a tragic vision, within Christian theology, then, is not at the level of the cosmic, but at the level of the particular. If nowhere else, there may be room for tragedy in the Christian worldview to do what Hamlet charges Horatio, to ‘absent’ ourselves from felicity a while and tell the story of suffering.

In bracketing out (though not rejecting) certain aspects of Christian theology, Farley’s theodicy moves into the borderlands of theodicy, wavering

⁵⁶⁴ Paul Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 52-3. See also, 65-82.

⁵⁶⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 257.

⁵⁶⁶ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 19.

between an argument against, and a modification of, a justification of God. Though Farley resists straying to the outer edges of Christian metaphysics, as Hegel and Whitehead are wont to do, she does get her ankles wet in this tradition, veering toward a process theology ‘outlook’, if not a fully blown process metaphysic. Most notably, Farley breaks with “the assumption that the power to dominate is the appropriate model for divine power”.⁵⁶⁷ Instead using “compassion, as a form of love, to symbolize the distinctiveness of redemptive power.”⁵⁶⁸ Yet, Farley’s suggestions are more in the form of a different emphasis, rather than a rejection of classical omnipotence. Perhaps this seems like a difference of semantics, but it is significant, on the whole, that what drives Farley is a difference of concerns – a desire to highlight the personal and immanent elements of theodicy, rather than the cosmic and transcendent elements. “Eschatology can console those who find no refuge in history”, Farley writes, “It can attest to a hope that evil is not the last word. But it is in history that we live, think, act, and suffer.”⁵⁶⁹ Thus it seems that, in seeking a historical response to suffering, the theodicy Farley seeks is one which is confined to the world-stage, and thus is defined, in essence, by Aristotle’s three ‘unities’ of place, time, and action. As a theodicy, Farley’s work is best construed as an attempt to find meaning in the midst of evil, by exploring the tragic structure of the creation we currently live in, and finding, within this tragic structure, encouragement for ethical decision making and the possibility of a positive relationship between God, humanity, and creation. Farley’s theodicy therefore does not *deny* traditional elements of Christian thinking such as omnipotence and eternal life, so much as she draws our eyes away from them in order to attempt to see tragedy more clearly and thence to see the possibilities of redemption therein.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 22.

3.2. *The Spectacle of Suffering: Tragedy's Relevant Response.*

Farley calls for theology to take tragedy seriously, then, because it offers a wider frame in which to view radical suffering. Tragedy, she argues, is more “inclusive” a category because it does not attempt to reduce all suffering to the effects of sin.⁵⁷⁰ Tragic drama, then, at the very outset, intends to *enrich* our perception of suffering by pushing it to the center of the stage. To be sure, all forms of drama about humanity touch on the subject of suffering, but neither epic prose, nor romance, nor comedy intend to treat suffering as the crux of the story, and the central spectacle. Farley praises tragedy for its ability to *foreground* suffering. She writes, “The tragic vision peers into the face of suffering and is forever marked by what it sees... A tragic vision is a way of preserving the undisguised horror of human suffering as an essential component of theological reflection.”⁵⁷¹ Or, as Hegel writes, tragedy means looking the negative in the face, and “tarrying” with it.⁵⁷²

Drawing on the work of W. Lee Humphreys, Farley offers a brief definition of tragedy which presents, in *précis*, her use of this distinct sense of life. “[A]t the heart of the tragic vision lies human suffering,” Humphreys writes, “suffering triggered in important ways by the action of the hero, yet suffering that is necessary at the very core of the human situation in the world. In the face of this necessary suffering the hero does not remain passive.”⁵⁷³ Whatever other strengths or weaknesses tragic theology may have, if one takes tragedy to be a crucial aesthetic theme, then, it will remain impossible to overlook suffering in the course of theodicy.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 19.

⁵⁷³ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 23.

The difference in emphasis which Farley's theodicy offers, however, is counterbalanced by a noticeable similarity to the Augustinian structure. Though Farley repudiates traditional theodicy's "cool justifications of evil", her work addresses essentially the same issues as Augustine's theodicy, as she lays out a careful account of evil, creation, and morality and filters it through the lens of aesthetics.⁵⁷⁴ For the rest of Section 3, I will discuss the various ways that Farley employs and elaborates on this basic definition, specifically looking at the relevance Farley finds in the tragic theme, the way that tragedy provides a framework for understanding creation, and finally what tragedy suggests about how we can respond to evil.

3.3. Creation's Tragic Structure

3.3.1. Beauty, Creation and Evil. In *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, Wendy Farley examines the way that tragedy provides insight into the structure of creation itself, in all its dangerous beauty, and with many attendant hazards. Like Augustine, Farley ruminates on the beauty of creation, insisting that a "[t]ragic vision is not gnostic, it shares with classical Christian theology a belief that creation is good." Citing Genesis 1, Farley takes time to note God's affirmation of "good" creation; citing Psalm 104, Farley notes the way in which God seems to delight actively in springs, trees, goats, and lions, "rejoicing" in his "works."⁵⁷⁵ God's goodness is manifest in creation, Farley argues as the "characteristic movement of the divine is ecstatic, self-transcending love that bestows beauty and therefore existence on a beloved cosmos."⁵⁷⁶

The plenitude of creation is fundamental to Farley's sense of creation's beauty. "Multiplicity and variety enrich and perfect creation", she writes, in

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 103.

words that could just as easily have come from the pages of Augustine.⁵⁷⁷

Farley further stresses that each level of creation, from the individual natures of creatures, to their diverse variety, to the mutual relationships, all possess inherent goodness: “Because individual creatures exist in social and ecological relationships with each other, creation is better than it would be if each entity were an isolated monad.”⁵⁷⁸ Yet, as Farley is quick to note, the nature of creation is such that its beauty and goodness are not without inherent difficulties. Developing her tragic vision in three parts, Farley descends from a vision of creation’s goodness, into an elucidation of its tragic structure, and finally into the rupture of creation through sin and suffering. Eschewing speculation about the fall of humanity and creation, Farley argues that finitude, conflict, and fragility follow from the creation of that which is other than God and therefore lie at the root of human suffering.⁵⁷⁹

3.3.2. Finitude, Conflict and Fragility. Farley is keen to stress that her tragic vision is never a denial of the goodness of material creation, and thus begins her three part discussion with an apologetic for God’s structuring of the world as necessitated by the nature of beauty. God brings about ephemeral beauty which, by definition, does not last.⁵⁸⁰ The beauty of a flower, or a sunset is at least partly derived from its coming to being, and passing away again.⁵⁸¹ Likewise, in creating a world with great diversity, with lions and lambs, mountains and valleys, summers and winters, there is always the possibility of natural conflict: as Austin Farrer calls it, the “mutual

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁹ As Kristine Raanka notes of Farley’s work in *Women and the Value of Suffering* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), “Farley identifies the following key elements as contributing to the tragic structure of reality: finitude, conflict, and fragility” (175).

⁵⁸⁰ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 41.

⁵⁸¹ Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 103; also *Tragic Vision*: “Creation is ephemeral and its beauty arises in conjunction with the poignancy of its constant perishing” (41).

interference of systems”. It is crucial to keep in mind how strongly Farley praises creation’s beauty:

The good of creation comes from the fact that something other than God is granted the gift of existence. But what is other than God cannot share the unchanging serenity of love or the endless youth of eternity or the harmonious unity of the divine life. The beauty of the world lies in its variety and diversity. Yet conflict will inevitably arise as the multitude of creatures pursue opposing ends. Tigers will prey on young gazelles. Ice ages will waste entire populations and ecosystems. Agriculture will beat back the jungle. From these conflicts, sorrows, and losses emerge the fierce beauty of creation. Sorrow must accompany beauty, but it need not overthrow the poignant loveliness of nature. Creation is tragically structured, but tragedy is neither the barrenness of nothingness nor the wickedness of evil. Tragedy is the price paid for existence – but the fecund grace of nature makes it appear that the price is not too high.⁵⁸²

This defense of metaphysical evil, or the “Shadowside” of creation, seems fully traditional in its acceptance of the necessary limitations of creating diversity. Here Farley comes closest to offering a traditional aesthetic theodicy in that she holds up a good (creation’s variety), which shows itself to be desirably beautiful, yet carries with it a price tag of suffering. Yet the above quotation is potentially misleading. Tyron Inbody quotes this passage approvingly in his book, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, but seems to assume that Farley somehow accepts the price paid for creation without further reservation.⁵⁸³ The finitude, conflict and fragility of creation which Farley describes have far more dire consequences for the realms of human life.

Conflicting values are a perennial theme in tragedy. As Hegel has observed, as well as more recent critics such as Helen Gardner, tragedy often arises

⁵⁸² Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 60-1.

⁵⁸³ Tyron Inbody, *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 156.

because of a conflict of “opposite but equally justified ethical power[s]”.⁵⁸⁴ As in the case of Orestes who, in *The Libation Bearers*, wavers between avenging his father’s murder and letting the murderess (his own mother) go, our ethical decisions are often caught between two unattractive options. Thus, even the diversity of human life, as Farley argues, with its multiplicity of values, cultures and nations generates an environment which is susceptible to conflict. Farley writes:

Tragedy describes suffering that is caused, at least in part, by some aspect of reality over which the hero has no control. The environment of tragedy is usually either an external, non-human power (such as the Fates or Zeus) or a set of intrinsically conflicting values. In the first case, tragic suffering comes about because the hero’s moral passion is in conflict with ultimate powers of the cosmos... In the second kind of tragedy, the conflict among values is presented as an element of the world order. Tragedy is not traced to a malevolent cosmic force but rather to the essential irreconcilability of equally important obligations.⁵⁸⁵

The work of Nicholas Berdyaev stands behind much of Farley’s thinking, as Berdyaev argues, rather darkly, that “man is bound to be cruel because he is confronted with the necessity of sacrificing one value for the sake of another... of sacrificing his country or of the struggle for social justice.”⁵⁸⁶ Farley’s thought also recalls the work of Donald MacKinnon, who repeatedly focused on the “intractable” conflicts in human life which inevitably arise.

The world of Racine is very different from that of Shakespeare, and both alike from the worlds explored by the ancient Greek tragedians. Yet if one bears in mind Plato’s searching criticism of tragic drama as a suitable form for the presentation and exploration of ultimate issues, one finds that the most important aspect of what he

⁵⁸⁴ Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13-49; G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1212-20.

⁵⁸⁵ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 26.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

repudiated was the sense that from tragedy we continually renew our sense of the sheerly intractable in human life.⁵⁸⁷

Hemmed between these two poles, the predicament of the tragic hero echoes and clarifies, as Max Scheler would say, “a feature of the world’s makeup”.⁵⁸⁸

Even living without such dire choices, it is obvious that simple values are often in conflict. As Farley notes, “the pursuit of scientific or artistic excellence may leave little time to react to social and political problems.”⁵⁸⁹ For Farley, then human embodiment in a world of diversity is of value, but is also a source of danger, as it exposes us to the inevitability of pain, fear, grief, disease, and untimely death. “[T]ragic suffering” Farley writes, “[is] meant to exemplify a world order in which intolerable and unjustifiable suffering is inevitable.”⁵⁹⁰ Like tinder laid underneath a fire, the goods which God brings about can also easily lead to destruction if they are misused or misunderstood.

Yet Farley does desire to avoid any sense of determinism derived from the apparent “inevitability” of suffering:

Tragedy recognizes something in the world order recalcitrant to human freedom and well-being, which qualifies and even corrupts obligation. But tragedy resists the temptation to elevate this enigmatic necessity to a strict determinism or predestination that would erode responsibility.⁵⁹¹

Placing repeated emphasis on freedom, Farley lays out a vague but workable account of freedom as that in humans which cannot be “reduced to

⁵⁸⁷ Donald MacKinnon, “Ethics and Tragedy” in *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM, 1979), 186-7.

⁵⁸⁸ Max Scheler, “On the Tragic” in *The Questions of Tragedy: A Selection of Essays on Tragedy and the Tragic*, ed. Arthur B. Coffin (San Francisco: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 106.

⁵⁸⁹ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 32.

⁵⁹⁰ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 26.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

biological drives or sociological forces.”⁵⁹² Freedom for Farley is the inner, distinctive force which navigates human life and ensures continuity and responsibility. Yet even here, Farley notes, the finitude and conflict inherent in creation affect freedom and restrict its steadiness. Because of the tragic structure of creation, conflict and finitude, freedom is *fragile*. Anxiety and desire, flip sides of the effect of creation’s multiplicity on the human psyche, hinder the capacity for the right expression of human freedom, and, *a la* Farley, condemn freedom to betrayal and defeat. Very often, because of real or perceived scarcity, humans must compete in zero-sum games, whether competing for basic resources, jobs, or romantic partners. Further, because of the infinite variety of alluring options, we are given to restlessness and dissatisfaction with our choices. Pulled and pushed by our inner fears and desires in this way, Farley sees freedom as a “stamp of greatness”, though at the same time a “tragic flaw of human existence”.⁵⁹³ Thus Farley seems to locate much of the worst of human behavior in the structure of creation, despite the fact that she affirms freedom as an essential component of human existence.

Already we can see that Farley locates the roots of suffering in the structure of the world. Unlike Augustine, who draws a clear line between unfallen and fallen creation, the former possessing no taint of deformity or destruction, and, even after the fall, remaining well-ordered, Farley finds no such clear division between the creation and the fall, seeing instead an initial value in creation which warrants beautiful creation, but which because of the inherent structure of creation, soon engenders discord and suffering. Pausing here, one might well imagine Farley to have offered a theodicy notably different from, but not entirely alien to, contemporary justifications

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 37.

of God. Farley situates much of human suffering in the necessities of creation, which is beautiful, but dangerous; which, because of its finitude (again, an Augustinian theme) allows for human frailty and harmful contingency, and thus can be more clearly understood as the work of a loving creator. Yet, from here, Farley instead presses on, pushing away from her initial justification of creation's finite and fragile beauty, and exploring a much darker side of creation.

3.4. The Rupture of Creation.

Having developed an account of creation's tragic, but beautiful, structure, Farley argues, "[s]uffering and sorrow are present to all human life without obscuring the goodness of creation."⁵⁹⁴ She notes that various kinds of evils can be incorporated into traditional conceptions, by being accounted for "as punishment for sin, as elements of a larger aesthetic harmony, as purgation or pedagogy, or as presaging eschatological correction".⁵⁹⁵ But central to Farley's work is a focus on the sorts of evils which cannot fit into the conceptual schemes of traditional theodicy. None of these accounts, on Farley's reckoning, can make sense of "radical suffering", which in her words, "rips the mask of beauty and wonder off the face of creation."⁵⁹⁶

Radical suffering is not garden-variety death and disease, but agonized experiences which are deeply destructive to human life and are irreducible to human guilt. Here she lists the genocide in Cambodia and Germany, the abuse of women and children, or torture such as took place under the Pinochet regime in Chile.⁵⁹⁷ The testimony of a Chilean mother provides an especially powerful example of radical suffering:

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

At one point, I realized that my daughter was in front of me. I even managed to touch her: I felt her hands. “Mummy, say something, anything to make this stop,” she was saying... They took her to an adjacent room and there, there I listened in horror as they began to torture her with electricity! When I heard her moans, her terrible screams, I couldn’t take it any more. I thought I would go mad, that my head and my entire body were going to explode.⁵⁹⁸

To be tortured in such a way, or even to be unable to stop one’s daughter from being tortured, can be incredibly destructive to *anyone’s* spirit. That our best laid plans for life, health and love can be so thoroughly undermined may cause us to ‘give up’ on the pursuit of the best human life has to offer. John Hick advocates “soul-making” as a powerful explainer for why God would allow suffering, but severe suffering of this kind withers character-development and undermines our most basic trust in others. It is hard to imagine recovering from such an atrocity.⁵⁹⁹

The story further engages our emotions in such a way that we cannot imagine anyone with the power to stop it allowing it to continue. Hearing of such torture, the reader wishes that he or she could somehow reach *into* the story and stop this torture (like the man in the Old West who, upon watching a production of *Othello*, reportedly shot the actor playing Iago because he was so malevolent).⁶⁰⁰ Reading the story, especially as parents, our guts churn with outrage at the torture of a young child. Why would God not have stopped such an atrocity? What could the poor girl have done to deserve being tortured by electricity? Such suffering, she is keen to

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹⁹ Farley cites Frodo’s misery in *Lord of the Rings* as an example of radical suffering, specifically when Frodo confesses that all good things, food, water, grass and flower, have faded and he is “naked in the dark.” But perhaps the more poignant scene is in the last chapter, when Frodo announces that he will go away to the Grey Havens, “I have tried to save the Shire,” he says, “and it has been saved, but not for me.” Because of Tolkien’s skill in evoking the goodness and particularity of the Shire, the reader strongly senses, even within victory, what has been lost for Frodo.

⁶⁰⁰ Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 379.

stress, cannot be explained. Thus radical suffering is simply ‘surd’ or irreducible.

Farley finds consonance between this radical suffering and the attentiveness to suffering we find in the genre of tragedy. She writes, “Tragedy explores evil by focusing on the kind of suffering that dehumanizes the sufferer and cannot be understood as deserved.”⁶⁰¹ The archetypal tragic hero, Oedipus, exemplifies radical suffering as his utter ruin. The downfall of Oedipus, as Farley writes, “cannot be traced to any wickedness or selfishness on his part.”⁶⁰² The opposite is true: it is Oedipus’s *moral zeal* to investigate the cause of the plague upon Thebes which leads to the unveiling of the destructive truth about his patricide and incest. Elsewhere in Greek tragedy, Farley points to Prometheus, whose morality is the cause of his suffering, as it clashes with the controlling powers of the universe. In *Prometheus Bound*, the god for whom the play is named is bound to a rock, for defying Zeus and bringing fire to humanity. As a human spectator, the reader naturally sympathizes with the hero, finding the decree of Zeus unjust, and agreeing with Hephaestus, the blacksmith god who must secure Prometheus to the rock: “Woe’s me, Prometheus, for thy weight of woe!” The purpose of the play is primarily to drive home this point, as we *see* Prometheus’s sufferings, and we pity him for them. Both plays center around the awful perception of suffering, in related ways. When we hear Prometheus say, “See, see, / Earth, awful Mother! Air, That shedd’st from the revolving sky / On all the light they see thee by, / What bitter wrongs I bear!”, the play folds in upon itself and the spectator fulfills the command.⁶⁰³ In *Oedipus Rex*, the heroic king blinds himself after seeing his mother-wife’s suicide by hanging. “Never have my own eyes / Looked on a sight so full of fear”, Oedipus

⁶⁰¹ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 40.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* in *The Dramas of Aeschylus*, trans. A. Swanwick (Forgotten Books, 1881), 184.

declares, and the chorus agrees, “Too terrible to think of, or to see.”⁶⁰⁴ Oedipus cannot undo, however, the fact that he has seen horrors, nor “The flooding pain / of memory, never to be gouged out.”⁶⁰⁵ Tragedy not only helps us see suffering, but shows us suffering which is too terrible to see. The vision of radical suffering, which cannot be “gouged out”, together with its irreducibility to fault, suggests, to Farley, that evil is “surd”, indicating the *irrationality* of evil, and irreducibility of evil to any moral calculus.⁶⁰⁶

Farley’s discussion of evil’s surdity recalls again Donald MacKinnon whose work most closely parallels Farley’s here as both find in certain evil events a complete inexplicability which defies explanation. In an important essay discussing tragedy, MacKinnon focuses on the “riddle of Iscariot” as a paradigm case of one who suffers greatly, but whose suffering was seemingly necessitated by the destiny of Christ’s passion.⁶⁰⁷ That there are such people as Judas, for whom it would have been better to “have not been born”, suggests that “[i]t is sheer nonsense to speak of the Christian religion as offering a solution to the problem of evil.”⁶⁰⁸ This nonsensical quality to certain evils likewise leads MacKinnon to point to a “surd” quality within creation, which we see in the Christian gospels and in tragic drama.⁶⁰⁹ Yet, for Farley (and MacKinnon), the surdity of suffering does not suggest a *sheerly* irrational element, as if suffering was a mere ‘Jabberwock’ incomprehensible and ultimately nonsensical. Its ‘surdity’ lies in its unassimilable qualities, in the way that it mis-fits with the rest of what we

⁶⁰⁴ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 69.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 22, 64, 97, 125.

⁶⁰⁷ Donald MacKinnon, “Order and Evil in the Gospel” in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (London: Lutterworth, 1968), 92.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁰⁹ Donald MacKinnon, “Atonement and Tragedy” in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (London: Lutterworth, 1968), 100.

believe about God's providence. In discussing tragedy as Christian theologians, both thinkers are correct to focus, not on all forms of evil, but on those evils which resist being seen as morally intelligible, because, as we have seen above, the warp and woof of the Christian cosmic drama does not easily allow for a tragic view of the world. But as MacKinnon and Farley see rightly, a Christian theology of providence does not make *all* evils suddenly morally intelligible, but, in fact, makes many evils completely incomprehensible. If our world is dominated by capricious and competing Olympian deities, then the destruction of 'great men' is sad but conceivable. But if it is overseen by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God, then the terrible suffering of those who did nothing to deserve it is even *more* abhorrent.⁶¹⁰

Because of the destructive nature of the worst kinds of suffering, and the inability of human guilt to explain why these experiences befall us, Farley takes this kind of evil to be unexplainable and unjustifiable. In perhaps her most distinctive break with the Christian tradition, Farley rejects any possible explanation for radical suffering (yet we will see that she is not alone here). No theodicy, she believes, can make a dent in the formidable

⁶¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, in *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1976) in dealing with the death of his wife, struggled with precisely this problem. Unable to reconcile what he believed about God's goodness with the pain and abandonment he was feeling, Lewis struggled to maintain his faith in a good God. The pain Lewis felt in these days is vividly recorded in his diaries as he rages against the God who he once thought he could trust, who now seems to be a cosmic sadist. A firm believer in miracles, Lewis thought for a time that his wife's bone cancer had been healed. Their hopes were encouraged by "false diagnoses, by X-ray photographs, by strange remissions, by one temporary recovery that might have ranked as a miracle." (34). But none of these hopeful moments added up to a healing, but instead were the prelude only to more painful sickness and finally death. The pain the famous apologist is feeling is apparent in his words, as he 'yells' at God for not doing what was plainly within His power: "Step by step we were 'led up the garden path'," Lewis writes, "Time after time, when He seemed most gracious He was really preparing the next torture." (35) Though his faith does not founder on the shoals of suffering, Lewis arrives at the keen and lasting observation that belief in the Christian God does not make suffering easier to stomach, it often makes it unbearably difficult. In one of his best passages, he writes:

Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand. (28)

In the face of suffering, as Farley writes, "[c]onfidence in cosmic justice cannot completely obscure the rapacity of suffering as it devours the innocent and the helpless" (19). She is right, and, as I take Lewis to suggest, belief in God often makes such suffering *worse*, by rendering it less intelligible under a Christian worldview.

edifice of terrible evils. “I find myself in the company of Ivan Karamazov,” she writes,

who refuses to be comforted by any theodicy – purgation, punishment, vindication, harmony, retribution. None of these can make it all right that children are tortured by their parents or their governments. At best these explanations make it easier not to mind other people’s suffering so much. Moralism moves too quickly to palliatives that obscure the cruelty of evil.⁶¹¹

That the moralism of Augustine is rejected by Farley is beyond doubt. For Farley, that Augustine would even speculate on the suffering of innocents as possible punishment for sinful parents (as he does in *De libero arbitrio*), places his theodicy outside the pale of respectability. Farley is firm that there cannot be a justifying reason for radical suffering. In language which is consonant with Ivan Karamazov’s fervent protest, Farley writes, “The screams of children and the silence of despair cannot be drowned out by theodicies or justified by the cosmic wonder of nature.”⁶¹² Since, as Farley believes, humans tragically suffer far greater agonies than their sinfulness warrants, she finds no consolation in the forgiveness which comes from God in the atonement. “*Even the death of a Messiah*” she writes, “*cannot atone for the anguish of the world.*”⁶¹³

There are clearly issues with the acceptability of Farley’s conclusion here. First, Farley assumes, much too hastily, that the atonement is located exclusively in the passion and death of Christ, and not also in the wider story of his incarnation, resurrection and ascension: his resurrection, especially, being the first fruits of our eventual redemption. This is not to say that Farley has no place for Christ in Christian theodicy. In numerous places, Farley points to the crucifixion as an example *par excellence* of God’s

⁶¹¹ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 12-3.

⁶¹² Ibid., 63.

⁶¹³ Ibid.

redeeming power seen through the suffering of the Son. She writes, “[t]he utter desolation and helplessness of crucifixion is, for Christians, the ultimate revelation of God’s power to redeem human beings.”⁶¹⁴ The “incarnation... is a breathtaking and radical element of the “good news”, Farley argues, and “[h]istory itself—mundane, boring, ambiguous, exciting, and evil history—is the place where God is present with redemptive power.”⁶¹⁵ She further sees the church’s work in the world, in history, as the proper continuation of the incarnation, working as it does to resist evil and love compassionately in the midst of evil. However, her limited reflection on the atonement leaves us with little notion of how the death of Christ informs and transforms our concept of tragedy.⁶¹⁶

Furthermore, having bracketed out the afterlife as ‘beyond history’ and therefore beyond the scope of her theodicy, Farley is left only with this-worldly resources for resolving the problem of suffering. The appeal to the greater glories of heaven as a compensation for this-worldly suffering is a perennial theme in theodicy, and without it, theodicy is greatly impoverished (Rom. 8:18-21). Farley’s rejection of eschatology as solution to the problem of tragic suffering cuts off her theodicy from a necessary, and fully Christian, resource.

In her second break with tradition, the absolute rejection of a morally-sufficient reason for God’s allowance of evil sets Farley more firmly against traditional theodicy. The plain unacceptability of this position for traditional Christian orthodoxy goes without saying, and it opens a rather

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁶¹⁶ In the recent literature, one prominent example of this kind of reflection is the work of Alan E. Lewis, whose book, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: MI, 2001) offers a substantial reflection on the way that the cross and resurrection inform one another in the narrative of salvation, inviting complex ambiguities as the two days are heard, in Lewis’s words in “stereophonic unity” (33).

serious rift in theological discourse. If certain kinds of suffering are beyond justification in any sense, we must ask, why would God allow it? And if God could not stop such suffering (either by some limitation of power or divine respect to human autonomy), we must wonder why God chose to create in the first place? The result of admitting such conflict into theology must be either a cruel God, a weak God, no God, or a severely weakened theodicy.⁶¹⁷

3.5. A Theodicy of Tragic Resistance and Redemption.

As a theodicy, Farley's work here would seem to have foundered on the shoals of tragic suffering, but she finds within tragedy further resources for hope and a renewed trust in God. Perceiving that the tragic vision does not resolve the problem of evil, but rather intensifies it, because there is no justification for radical evil, Farley attempts to avoid the worst consequences of this position, and seeks to do so by appeal to central elements of tragic perception. Through the tragic vision, Farley writes, these twins "tragedy and resistance to tragedy, are born together."⁶¹⁸ As such, Farley sides with the way Ricoeur describes Aeschylean tragedy as "both a representation of the tragic and an impulse toward the end of the tragic."⁶¹⁹ Two key features of Farley's tragic vision, compassion and resistance, which correspond roughly to the affective elements of tragedy, pity and fear, enable her to offer a hope which can transcend tragedy:

⁶¹⁷ Hebblethwaite, in his essay "MacKinnon and the Problem of Evil" (in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, ed. Kenneth Surin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989]) wisely observes that when the irreducibility of suffering is assumed, that something else in our theology must give. Thus, Hebblethwaite has critiqued MacKinnon's theodicy on his statement that it is "sheer nonsense to speak of the Christian religion as offering a solution to the problem of evil." ("Order and Evil in the Gospel", 92). Without some solution (or at least a possible/tentative solution), the affirmation of God's goodness in the face of evil loses its content.

⁶¹⁸ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 99.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

A tragic vision is branded by suffering, but the mark of tragedy is defiance rather than despair. The beginning of a tragic vision is anger and sorrow in the face of suffering. The horror of suffering provokes resistance. As such, it is an ethical (and ultimately theological) response to suffering: it begins and ends as compassion.⁶²⁰

Integrating her account of divine love, Farley sees the tragic vision as a part of God's gentle, non-oppressive, persuasion to enable us to overcome suffering.

3.5.1. Compassion. Beginning with an account of beauty, Farley lays the groundwork for her tragic response to radical suffering. Through impassioned appeal to the beauty of creation, Farley displays an awareness of the 'call' which aesthetic excellence places on our person. Suffering operates in a similar way, Farley notes, as "the beauty and suffering of one's environment constantly impinge upon consciousness and dispose one toward the world in a compassionate way."⁶²¹ Though the goodness of creation is ruptured, this attentiveness and sensitivity to creation remain intact, and we respond to suffering with compassion.

This compassionate element of the tragic vision, is, of course, central in all tragic art. Martha Nussbaum rightly identifies compassion as the basic social emotion, a necessary response for any functioning human and also an essential element in tragic art.⁶²² Farley makes this connection as well, seeking to nuance the traditional Aristotelian language of "pity" with the more fulsome "compassion", which she sees as "a form of love [which] includes a recognition of the value and beauty of others."⁶²³ In Greek

⁶²⁰ Ibid. 37.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 75.

⁶²² Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion", *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 13:1 (1996): 27-58

⁶²³ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 79.

drama, the suffering of Prometheus is seen to be unjust, with an attendant response of compassion for one who suffers because of his good actions. Thus, radical suffering cannot defeat compassion, because compassion is elicited in others by the vision of suffering. Thus Farley describes compassion as a certain way of *seeing*, a “way of organizing and interpreting the world”.⁶²⁴

Compassion’s vision, however, can become blocked by callousness to human suffering. When we focus on the short-fallings of a people-group through casual racism, we can lose sight of the individual beauties and difficulties of each and every person. One particularly pernicious barrier to recognizing another person’s suffering with compassion, is the notion that God visits misery in return for wickedness. Acknowledging that the Hebrew prophets often saw punishment in the light of divine retribution, Farley also takes time to cite other passages in scripture which do not see all misery as the expression of divine wrath (Ps. 44:17-19). Most troubling, for Farley, is that a further sense of God’s love for us may be eradicated, if all suffering is divine punishment. An Augustinian theodicy, in this way, can conceal from us God’s tender love when we might need it most. If suffering is the result of personal sin, Farley argues, then compassion is transformed into “cruelty, callousness and legalism” and “the tools which we are given to taste the beauty of the divine—scripture, the church, religion, theology, even the Messiah—cease to be windows to God and become mirrors that reflect back our own stupidity and cruelty.”⁶²⁵ Thus the ‘tragic vision’ opens up new windows for compassion because it sees much suffering as irreducible to fault and therefore undeserved.⁶²⁶ To further

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 73

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 126.

⁶²⁶ Of course, it must be again noted that Farley does not deny that humans also do have moral agency and thus can bring deserved misery on themselves.

suggest that God's goodness is expressed in terms of compassion, rather than in terms of condemnation, makes clear that our suffering is not the result of divine judgment. John Munday describing Farley's view, says it well when he writes, "Radical suffering becomes more understandable and even more bearable if it is framed in relation to divine love rather than sovereignty."⁶²⁷

3.5.2. *Resistance.* Together with compassion, resistance to evil is born out of the tragic vision, as we recognize suffering as unjust. The tragic hero, for whom we have compassion, provides a model for us in his dealings with evil:

Even in defeat, a vision of justice remains to vindicate the tragic hero. The defiance of the hero enacts and recovers human dignity even in the teeth of destruction. If suffering and destruction cannot be overcome, they can be resisted. It is in the resistance itself, in this refusal to give up the passion for justice, that tragedy is transcended.⁶²⁸

Prometheus is again held up by Farley as a model of defiant virtue, who, in the midst of his suffering, refuses to forswear his virtue.

Resistance, however, is not a matter of revolutionary might but of redemptive love. Since Farley insists that radical suffering "cannot be atoned for", compassionate resistance seeks to alleviate suffering rather than to avenge it.⁶²⁹ This is a key point to keep in mind, that compassion cannot be *defeated* by tragedy because it does not look for success in traditional terms. We are reminded here of the writings of John Kekes and Bertrand Russell, who point to tragedy as a category for ethics and meaning which is

⁶²⁷ John S. Munday, "Review: Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy" *Theology Today* 47: 4 (1991): 478-480.

⁶²⁸ Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 27.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

planted firmly in the knowledge of the harshness of reality. Kekes' tragic model for morality is focused on the character of the agent, not the likelihood of success or reward. Farley's vision for resistance to tragedy likewise sees our call to moral action as one which holds on to a vision of goodness and justice even in the face of evil and destruction.

Yet, this is not a godless vision of tragic meaning. "Divine love as the source of tragic world order is also the source of the vision of justice, vindication, and compassion that transcends tragedy," Farley writes, indicating the source of human meaning, in resistance to the tragic structure of things through compassion.⁶³⁰ Compassion is also a necessary component of this resistance, as it sees the frailty of those who enact evil as well. Thus, resistance is tempered by an understanding of the fragility of the oppressor as well, and a refusal to demonize those who inflict suffering. John Munday describes Farley's theology of resistance like this: "She seeks the clue to finding the actual presence of God in history in resistance to evil. Resistance in the face of overwhelming evil and suffering comes from compassion. Divine compassion becomes incarnate in that resistance. This is where hope arises."⁶³¹ For Farley, Christ provides a model for resistance to evil and healing of evil, as he refuses to participate in an ongoing cycle of violence even as his mission and message are undone by violent oppressors – even forgiving those who crucify him.⁶³² The tragic vision, as is established by Aristotle, is marked by pity. To see tragically, for Farley, enables us to see how all humanity has fallen into sinfulness (at least partially) because of the contingencies and conflicts of life, and because of our own frailty. Just as

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁶³¹ John S. Munday, "Review: Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy", 479.

⁶³² Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 100.

we recognize the tragic hero's nobility and faults, we can see this same phenomenon in the tragic world around us.

3.6. Reflection and Critique.

Though there are many points of Farley's theodicy which deserve further discussion and critique, the overall shape of her theodicy should be apparent. Farley's tragic vision fits with the way that tragedy has been used philosophically, in that she too, looks to suffering and finds hope, not from without, but from within the experience of tragedy. Tragedy, as Farley argues, draws our eyes to undeserved suffering. As in the theater, we see the wrongness of what has happened. Yet we also see the possibilities of nobility and redemption within the spectacle of suffering. For Farley and other tragic thinkers, to see tragically is to transcend tragedy.

Yet, it is difficult to see how Farley's theodicy, taken as a whole, is compatible with traditional Christian theodicy. In denying that radical suffering can be atoned for, or justified in any sense of the word, Farley cuts the feet out from any robust Christian theology. To deny to God perfect goodness, even in a vague way, will ultimately destroy any fundamental hope we can have for trusting God or desiring relationship with Him. A theodicy must strive, or at least hope, for a satisfying *reason why*. Perhaps this vision is not granted in this life, but to deny the possibility of such a reason makes nonsense of any language which affirms the goodness of God.

Further, to occlude from sight the hope of the afterlife consigns to utter hopelessness those who have suffered and died. In his sharp critique of tragic theology (see Appendix B for a fuller description) David Bentley Hart accurately describes the tragic vision as an attempt at "avoiding banality,

bland optimism and idiot complacency in the face of evil.”⁶³³ Yet, it is here, Hart finds, that tragic theology fails so spectacularly, as it sees evil in a light which Hart finds, “far too comforting”.⁶³⁴ Hart points especially to the elitism of the tragic vision as only available to those who have not been utterly eradicated by radical evil. Only the self-aware can find this kind of tragic meaning, and their compassion and resistance to evil does no good to the dead of Auschwitz or the innocent victims like them. Thus, to find any deep comfort in the tragic vision is, perhaps, as Augustine warned of tragedy, to find consolation in a spectacle which should only upset us. Iris Murdoch also picks up on this idea, when she writes that,

When in real life unhappiness we ‘live in the tragic’ or ‘see something as a tragedy’ something false may be involved, possibly a forgivable reaching for consolation... Real life is not tragic. In saying this one means that the extreme horrors of real life cannot be expressed in art... Art offers some consolation, some sense, some form whereas the most dreadful ills of human life allow none. Auschwitz is not a tragedy.⁶³⁵

Thus, we cannot accept Farley’s theodicy as complete *qua* theodicy, but we can still reflect on the tragic vision she elucidates and see how it may complement or critique our understanding of the aesthetic theme in theodicy.

3.7. Conclusion.

There remains a need to stand back from some of the large themes of Farley’s work and assess, as much as possible, the validity of the tragic aesthetic theme for our study. In the first part of this thesis, I argued that theological aesthetics could deepen the theodicy discourse by increasing our ability to perceive the workings of providence in the midst of evil. In the

⁶³³ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 373.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 374.

⁶³⁵ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 93.

second part, I have looked at the aesthetic theodicy of Augustine as a foundational model for seeing through the lens of aesthetics as offering insight into God's providential ordering of the world. Noting, however, the shortcomings of Augustine's aesthetic theodicy, we have turned to the tragic vision as a critique of Augustine which assumes the validity of aesthetics as a theological resource, yet takes issue with the cleanliness of the Augustinian vision.

In place of a cosmically-scaled aesthetic, the tragic vision, as Farley presents it, focuses on the experience of suffering, which is something that Augustine's theodicy has very little interest in, except as the concomitant punishment for sin. Yet, as Balthasar notes, in appreciating the big picture Augustine paints we do not need to take all the unfortunate missteps in his thinking. As Balthasar writes, "It is possible to be true to [Augustine] without accepting the tragic consequences of his static model of the world."⁶³⁶ Breaking free from Augustine's moment-to-moment vision of harmony, and his perfect symmetry between sin and misery, we can make room for the reality of human tragedy.

Farley offers a beautiful vision of creation, which like Augustine's vision, is not gnostic, but affirms the goodness and beauty of this varied, finite, and fragile world. Yet Farley also offers a human-scaled picture of suffering which is undeserved, and, in her mind, inexcusable even for God to allow. Farley here seems to swing to the other end of the pendulum, away from the clean theodicy of Augustine, into a murky blackness that would seem to suggest atheism. Yet, from this outer edge of theodicy, Farley seeks to find light in the midst of darkness and to wrest hope and meaning from the worst of situations. Finding God in the midst of radical suffering, Farley

⁶³⁶ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 2: 129.

holds up compassion and resistance as hallmarks of the tragic vision. Fitting with the nobility of the tragic hero who, in the teeth of destruction, holds firm to his vision of the good, the tragic vision is not dissuaded by the apparent futility of moral action because it does not look for success in traditional terms. The tragic vision is also informed by the knowledge of injustice, and finds therein compassion in the midst of suffering, akin to the pity which we feel for the tragic hero. This contemporary theodicy, then, is intended as a way of stopping radical suffering from descending into utter meaninglessness and nihilism.

The value of Farley's tragic vision rests on her attempt to offer a vision of divine compassion present in humanity which cannot be defeated by injustice and suffering. She writes,

Divine compassion is the power of redemption, realized in history within its tragic structures and in the midst of rupture. Redemption, therefore, cannot mean that radical suffering and sin are not destructive, or that their destructions are irrelevant or unreal, let alone deserved. But precisely in the depth of this destruction a power remains to resist it, to thwart it, to preserve the possibility of healing.⁶³⁷

Further, this hope within defeat is intended by Farley to be a theological reflection of the crucifixion and resurrection. Though she seems to ignore the eschatological defeat of evil as a valuable consideration, Farley affirms the resurrection as a sign of hope for this-worldly triumph over evil. However, it is difficult to see exactly how the resurrection offers deep and lasting comfort if we exclude eschatology from consideration in theodicy. More than the resurrection, the crucifixion for Farley (and other tragic theologians) must remain central. It is Christ's model of compassion and resistance in the face of great suffering to which we turn as a model of

⁶³⁷ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 132.

tragic meaning. In holding up the compassion and resistance that can accompany a tragic vision, Farley therefore offers us signs of how this vision can enable hope in the midst of suffering.

Yet, we must wonder if there can be any reconciliation between the tragic vision and a broadly Augustinian picture of cosmic justice and beauty? Having broken free from Augustine's picture of moment-to-moment harmony and perfectly symmetrical balancing of sin and misery, it is possible to grant that there can be a genuine experience of injustice and unwarranted misery which is, at least in the here and now, tragic. Affirming even that the Christian story is, in the big picture, a U-shaped curve, we can still grant that Christians experience genuine, undeserved, tragic suffering in the here and now. Tragedy has been woven into the fabric of the Christian worldview, even though that worldview is (in the largest, universal sense) a divine comedy.

Paul Fiddes, in discussing the complexities of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies, which mix together light and dark elements in differing proportion, argues that this reflects the realities of human life:

The Christian story is basically a 'divine comedy', as Dante entitled it; it ends well with a new creation. But there are also tragic elements within it; there is cross as well as resurrection, and in the vision of the Seer of Patmos the lamb in the midst of the throne still has the marks of slaughter upon him (Rev 5:6). It seems that resurrection does not wipe out death, but absorbs it into life. The question then is which alternative pattern of the Christian story best illuminates the kind of blend of tragedy and comedy, laughter and tears, with which Shakespeare confronts us.⁶³⁸

This mixture of comedy and tragedy, which is itself a part of a larger "Divine Comedy", seems to offer itself as a potential model for aesthetic

⁶³⁸ Fiddes *Freedom and Limit*, 66.

theodicy to utilize. When looking at the big picture, it seems that Augustine's vision can be an illuminating one. But looking more closely at the world, we find an unexplained remainder of suffering which does not fit, at least in the short run, into the harmonious whole. Tragedy, therefore, seems to offer a way of seeing suffering which in itself is ennobling and engenders resources for compassion and resistance which might otherwise be missed if we stayed only at the level of the cosmic. Yet, the tragic vision itself can be seen to be incomplete. It does not offer nobility, and the possibility of redemption to *all who suffer*. And so it is necessary to continue to look at other aesthetic themes which may complement, or critique, the tragic aesthetic theme.

APPENDIX B. *David Bentley Hart on the Tragic Vision*

The most direct critique of the tragic aesthetic theme comes from David Bentley Hart, who, in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, attacks the tragic vision in theology as a shallow attempt to reconcile our existence with the reality of suffering. Against thinkers such as Donald MacKinnon (discussed, briefly above) and Nicholas Lash, who do not intend to offer a theodicy, but who do comment on the nature of evil, Hart finds an essential contradiction in their embrace of the tragic vision. Tragic thinkers (such as Farley), Hart argues, embrace tragedy as a way of “avoiding banality, bland optimism and

idiot complacency in the face of evil.”⁶³⁹ Yet it is here, Hart finds, that tragic theology fails so spectacularly, as it sees evil in a light which Hart finds, “far too comforting”.⁶⁴⁰

Tragedy, as Hart argues, seeks comfort in the suffering itself, and thus, finding meaning therein, tacitly approves it. “[F]rom the holocaust of the particular,” Hart writes of tragic theology, “one can always pluck an ember of meaningfulness, a stabilizing ‘message’ that makes of the sacrifice itself a good (or necessary) thing; an interior and golden light can always be rescued from the ashes of the other in the interests of *my* hope.”⁶⁴¹

Such an attempt, he finds, must tacitly ratify such violence as well. Hart concludes:

And for Christian faith the only tragic wisdom is that there is no final wisdom in the tragic; Christianity was set against tragic wisdom from the first; far from failing to glimpse behind evil a transcendent horizon, a chthonian depth. (387)

Hart’s critique of tragic theology, focused as it is on MacKinnon and Lash, nevertheless holds much weight for Farley as well. Hart here points to the inherent elitism of the tragic vision, in that tragedy provides a helpful way to view suffering, but it is a vantage which is not available to those destroyed by evil. But more poignantly, Hart gets to the heart of tragic theology’s deeper attempt to rescue meaning from the midst of suffering, and therefore to transcend suffering.

That tragic theology is too willing to make peace with the totality of violence in creation is not disputed. Farley’s theodicy so long as it remains “tragic” cannot provide the justice which we desire from God. That

⁶³⁹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 373.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 374.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 388.

creation is both beautiful and dangerous we affirm, alongside Farley, but cannot rest content to see the resurrection as a *symbol* of perennial hope in the midst of suffering. By taking the resurrection seriously Hart argues, this "requires of faith something even more terrible than submission before the violence of being and acceptance of fate, and forbids faith in the consolations 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 basis of Hart's critique rests on any system of theology which would look to tragedy as an ultimate comfort. The story of the cross and the resurrection, however, for Hart, contradicts any final meaning suffering can provide. Returning to the pronouncement of George Steiner that Christianity is "anti-tragic", we above agreed that the Christian narrative and the tragic plot-line have two divergent arcs. If Christ is the ultimate symbol of redemption, and the "first fruits" of a new creation, in whose death and resurrection, we find not only meaning but a concrete hope for the future, then we cannot embrace tragedy as the dominant motif for theodicy. Thus we side with Hart when he writes, "for Christian faith the only true, tragic wisdom is that there is no final wisdom in the tragic".⁶⁴²

But we cannot go so far as to agree that "[in] the light of Easter, the singularity of suffering is no longer tragic (which is to say, ennobling), but merely horrible, mad, everlastingly unjust".⁶⁴³ To hold that suffering is ultimately *insignificant* is as troubling as affirming that suffering is ultimately *significant*. To deny to evil any greater depth than its ugly, painful surface is to deny the power of God to bring about positive meaning in the midst of

⁶⁴² Ibid., 387.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 393.

evil. Christian theodicy does not aim to account, in totality, for all evil—but it does affirm that evil itself is not without positive meaning. To choose evil is degrading: perverting God’s good gifts and ultimately enslaving to the sinner. None of this is ‘ennobling’. But to choose evil ‘freely’ rests on a deeper truth which *is* ennobling, and which does give to sin, suffering, and even death some partial sense of justice.

The Christian stands in opposition to any Attic affirmation of cosmic violence, but not to every form of tragedy. Hart holds up Shakespeare’s *King Lear* as more representative of a properly Christian tragedy, where the death of Cordelia is shown to be “absolutely without meaning, without beauty, imparting no wisdom, resistant to all assimilation into any metaphysical scheme of intelligibility or solace”.⁶⁴⁴ That Lear dies, believing his daughter to live by some imperceptible movement of her lips (“Do you see this?” Lear utters, “Look on her, look, her lips, Look there, look there!”) prevents the play from any grand closure. The genius of Shakespeare’s *Lear* should not be denied, nor the astoundingly bleak, howling climax, which like *Ecclesiastes* or *Beowulf*, is more (not less) perceptive of the darkness because of its vision of the light. True, Lear dies deluded. But to deny to Lear, dying on the heath, any measure of tragic significance is simply false. That the King dies, wishing to hear Cordelia speak again but thinking her voice too soft for hearing (“Her voice was ever soft, Gentle, and low—an excellent thing in woman”), is a perfect echo of the first scene in the play, where Cordelia’s refusal to avow in false words her love for her father (“What shall Cordelia do? Love, and be silent”) is a catalyst in their corporate ruin. That Lear dies wishing to hear the voice of one whom he once chided, “Cordelia! mend your speech a little”, gives (partial) solace and (partial) intelligibility to Lear’s plight. This, if anything, must be tragic meaning.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

That this sort of solace is not ultimate cannot be denied: the theology of *King Lear* cannot stand on its own as a testament to divine justice. The theodicy which best explains *Lear* is not Edgar's ("The God's are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to scourge us"), but Gloucester's ("As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport"). But neither the tragedies of *Lear*, nor the tragedies of Shakespeare on the whole, necessitate a theology of cosmic violence in order to possess intelligibility and meaning. The over-reaching revenge of Hamlet, the over-reaching ambition of Macbeth, the over-reaching love of Romeo and Juliet all possess tragic significance which is assimilable into Christian theology. That there is, within Shakespeare, a continual turn toward reconciliation (as in *Romeo and Juliet*), recognition (as in *Macbeth*), or a dark and partial redemption (as in *Hamlet*), suggests that there is room for partial or episodic tragedy therein.

Further, if Hart, in denying tragedy as a theological category, intends to deny any positive significance to suffering, we must plainly disagree. To posit that suffering in the form of death and destruction are always without meaning—that suffering is in need, not of beautiful re-presentation on the stage in order to become meaningful, but only of the defeat of its meaninglessness in the eschaton—presents an opposing challenge to Christian theodicy, in that it renders the dark side of the human story insignificant, and the story as a whole a chaotic admixture of the beautiful and the horrendous, with no meaningful principle standing in between the two. A denial of the logic of tragedy may also, ironically, lead to a denial of comedy as well, which further complicates any "anti-tragic" Christian aesthetics. That the structure of comedy depends on disruption of proper order cannot be denied. Though it rarely involves death, the comedies of

Shakespeare are not without knowledge of suffering, pain, hatred, deception, lust and other forms of evil, yet the transformation of these evils into a harmonic whole (at least for most of the players), supposes that evils can be comprehended and meaningfully overturned even within the realm of the immanent. To overturn the “meaning” of suffering strips our own stories of meaning, by turning all of our experiences of evil into moments that are, following Hart, in the light of Easter “merely horrible, mad, everlastingly unjust”.⁶⁴⁵

A more sensible solution, not throwing the tragic baby out with the tragic bathwater, is to dethrone tragedy from ruling over all of theology or theodicy (as Farley seemingly does), and instead allowing tragedy to possess a tentative meaning within (or alongside) our vision of ultimate harmony.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 393.

CHAPTER 5

THE MONSTERS AND THE CRITICS: THEODICY AND MARILYN ADAMS' VISION OF HORRENDOUS EVILS

There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made.

EDGAR ALLEN POE, *The Masque of the Red Death*

A couple of years before, under the guidance of an intelligent French-speaking confessor, to whom, in a moment of metaphysical curiosity, I had turned over a Protestant's drab atheism for an old-fashioned popish cure, I had hoped to deduce from my sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being. On those frosty mornings in rime-laced Quebec, the good priest worked on me with the finest tenderness and understanding. I am infinitely obliged to him and the great Institution he represented. Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. Unless it can be proven to me – to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction – that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze [Lolita] had been deprived of her childhood by[me,] a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *Lolita*

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

MATTHEW 27: 45-54

1. Introduction

1.1. *Tragedy and Horror*

Exploring the tragic vision in conversation with Wendy Farley, we sought to defend the value of the vision which tragedy offers us of undeserved suffering, which is met with compassion and resistance. The category of the tragic gives us a “sense of life” in which there is injustice, and yet also resources for meaning and morality in the wake of injustice. The tragic vision intends to offer us both a perception of suffering and a response to suffering which is generated, or at least facilitated, by this vision. The presence of this vision is a helpful corrective to an Augustinian picture of cosmic harmony, which interprets the reality of misery through the exclusive lens of sin, and therefore cannot clearly *see* suffering as anything but willful rebellion. It is also helpfully critiques the Augustinian tendency to constantly turn to the beauty of the cosmos as the only vision of value.

The danger of the tragic vision is, like the Augustinian picture of harmony, when it becomes totalizing. Farley’s theodicy, though positive about the role of humans as agents of compassion and resistance, is nevertheless limited to benefitting those who possess the tragic vision or experience compassion from those who do. The tragic vision does not benefit the dead, or those whose psyches are so shattered by evil that they can no longer function. Here, the value of the tragic vision applies only to the spectator, not the human spectacle. As David Bentley Hart has pointed out, tragic theodicy, ironically, suffers from the defect of remaining overly optimistic about the possibility of positive meaning in the world, while untold millions suffer hideously, without a cogent explanation of how untold millions of victims can find meaning for themselves. The *purely* (or even predominantly) tragic

vision cannot therefore be compatible with a Christian theodicy which aims to offer ultimate hope. In seeking a more Christian picture of providence, then, it is necessary to look elsewhere for a more accurate depiction of evil. One of the most recent developments in the problem of evil literature offers a compelling alternate vision of evil, an aesthetic theme which would critique the tragic vision along these lines: horror.

Horror may prove a valuable conversation partner here, because as a general theme, it reorders our perception of evil by pointing to what is incomprehensible, inane and pointless. Unlike a tragic vision, which at some level, ennobles the sufferer through positive comparison, horror is a dark and nihilistic way of understanding evil. As an artistic category, horror trades in the random and meaningless: hence, this description of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, a movie whose story of innocent tourists caught in a house of horror clearly portrays cruelty and violence as meaningless, and thus defies positive description:

The film's archetypal structure is borrowed from fairy tales: this isn't far from Hansel and Gretel, with its children lost in the woods who find an attractive house inhabited by a fiend who kidnaps and wants to eat them. But while fairy tales tend to serve the function of preparing children for the rigors of adult life, and thus present a positive face for all their often considerable violence, *Texas* inverts their traditional values and presents an apocalyptic vision of unrelenting negativity.⁶⁴⁶

This unrelenting negativity, described above, further calls into question even the value of horror as an art-form for consumption. What value lies in watching or reading about horrible acts? If Augustine despised tragic drama for its immoral pleasure-taking in the spectacle of pain, he surely would object to art-horror as well, as it revels in the dark and disgusting all the

⁶⁴⁶ James Marriott, *Horror Films* (London: Virgin, 2007), 183.

more. So what, then, is horror, and what value may it have for understanding theodicy in light of aesthetic themes?

1.2. *The Poetics and Power of Horror*

1.2.1. *Art-Horror as a Genre.* Horror is a relative late-comer to the field of genre study. Among the traditional genres there are the happy ones: Comedy and Romance (or adventure); and there are the dark ones: Tragedy and Satire. Northrop Frye assigns seasons to these *mythoi*: Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter (respectively).⁶⁴⁷ If comedy is the budding of life and love, then it is fitting that tragedy is the withering of these things. Romance takes place in idyllic high summer, a series of escapades full of vitality, and satire takes place in its dark mirror-world, where black is white and compassion is buried under a foot of icy humor.

Looking for a place to locate horror, a genre not discussed by Frye, but one which enjoys its own section at the video store or library, one wonders where to put it. Horror exists at the outer edges of tragedy, and easily descends into absurdity. The most popular medium for horror, the horror film, often plays upon a mixture of fright and humor. The closeness of tragedy and dark humor is understandable. One of the often defining features of horror is the presence of the grotesque, whether in the form of a monster or an alarming turn of events. The grotesque can terrify, but also as, Philip Thompson notes in his book on the subject, its “unresolved clash of incompatibles”⁶⁴⁸ results in a mixture of “*both* the comic and the terrifying”.⁶⁴⁹ It is notable that popular horror movies walk a fine line between black comedy and terror, mixing both together, as in the *Halloween* or *Scream* movies, or descending from terror to comedic satire, as George

⁶⁴⁷ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (NY: Atheneum, 1967).

⁶⁴⁸ Philip Thompson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), 27.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

Romero's zombie movies have successively done. Both humor and horror depend upon the jarring and incongruous.

Thus, horror is easily distinguishable from tragedy in its phenomenological effect. Though real-life atrocities are often referred to as tragic, the experience of horror in art does not engender "fear and pity" (using Aristotle as a guide) but rather "fear and revulsion." Philosopher of art, Noël Carroll writes, "Art-horror requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust."⁶⁵⁰ Stephen King, no philosopher but an expert in his own way, defines three characteristics of the genre, terror, horror, and revulsion.⁶⁵¹ If tragedy retains an element of beauty, despite its portrayal of injustice and suffering, horror must be said to wallow in ugliness. Horror does not aim to elevate the view, but to engage the viewer – even if that requires frightening the viewer very badly.⁶⁵²

In viewing a tragedy, we grow to identify with the hero, especially with his inherent virtue, which is ultimately undone. In horror, however, what sympathy there exists between the viewer and the victim will likely be *visceral* more than *emotional*. Seeing a woman hung on a meat hook, as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* invites us to do, isn't "very sad" it is terrifying and nauseating. Rather than experience a cathartic purge of the emotions, we are more likely to want to purge the contents of our stomachs. The connection between spectator and spectacle is further seen in the way that

⁶⁵⁰ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (NY: Routledge, 1990), 28.

⁶⁵¹ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (NY: Time Warner, 2002), 36-40.

⁶⁵² In Edgar Allen Poe's story *The Masque of the Red Death*, the jaded partygoers are inured to all forms of compassion and sensitivity, and mockingly retreat to an isolated mansion to frolic while the rest of the country suffers from the plague. For them, nothing is taken seriously. Yet the frightening appearance of a partygoer dressed as a plague victim is a matter about which even they cannot laugh. Like the partygoers in Poe's story, horror cuts through our defenses and hits us right in the gut.

characters within horror fictions mirror those of our own.⁶⁵³ As Carroll points out, this is not the case with every genre of fiction. He writes,

Aristotle is right about catharsis, for example, the emotional state of the audience does not double that of King Oedipus at the end of the play of the same name. Nor are we jealous, when Othello is. Also, when a comic character takes a pratfall, he hardly feels joyous, though we do. And though we feel suspense when the hero rushes to save the heroine tied to the railroad tracks he cannot afford to indulge such an emotion. Nevertheless, with horror, the situation is different. For in horror the emotions of the characters and those of the audience are synchronized in certain pertinent respects, as one can easily observe at a Saturday matinee in one's local cinema.⁶⁵⁴

This mirroring effect is found frequently in horror fiction, as described by Jack Finney in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In the book, the hero, Miles Bennell, encounters two of the alien pods that eventually take the form of humans. Finney describes Bennell's reaction as he seeks to destroy them:

They were weightless as children's balloons, harsh and dry on my palms and fingers. At the feel of them on my skin, I lost my mind completely, and then I was trampling them, smashing and crushing them under my plunging feet and legs, not even knowing that I was uttering a sort of hoarse, meaningless cry – “Unhh! Unhh! Unhh! – of fright and animal disgust.”⁶⁵⁵

Bennell's horror at the trampling of the soon-to-be-human pods is easy to identify with. Other similar examples can be seen in nearly any horror story where the protagonist or secondary character must enter a forbidding basement, venture out into the dark, or confront the monster. Like the character in the story, we are intended to feel fright and revulsion.

⁶⁵³ As Noël Carroll writes in *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (NY: Routledge, 1990): “In horror fictions, the emotions of the audience are supposed to mirror those of the positive, human characters in certain, but not all respects. Our responses are supposed to converge (but not exactly duplicate) those of the characters; like the characters we assess the monster as a horrifying sort of being” (28).

⁶⁵⁴ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (NY: Routledge, 1990), 18.

⁶⁵⁵ Jack Finney, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1998), 114.

The close pairing of the reaction of characters within horror fictions, and our own reactions, suggests that some very specific aspect of horror fiction generates this phenomenological response. Cognitivist studies of horror have tried to elucidate what it is about horror that elicits fear and revulsion.⁶⁵⁶ Noël Carroll associates the experience of art-horror with monsters, which he defines as “any being not believed to exist now according to contemporary science.” Monsters, being impossible, therefore will not fit our categories (like the killer doll ‘Chucky’ from *Child’s Play*, who crosses the boundary between living and inanimate things) and so will likely be seen as both “threatening and impure.”⁶⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud offers an early analysis of the uncanny which bears much resemblance to Carroll’s definition of horror. In *The Uncanny*, Freud proposes to describe the effect of fright where the familiar becomes “unheimlich” (uncanny, eerie, or, more accurately, unhomely).⁶⁵⁸ He references Ernst Jentsch’s study “Über die Psychologie des Unheimlichen” which places special emphasis on ambiguity about whether a thing is living or dead:

When we proceed to review the things, persons, impressions, events and situations which are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny in a particularly forcible and definite form, the first requirement is obviously to select a suitable example to start. Jentsch has taken as a very good instance ‘doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata...⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁶ Cynthia Freeland defines cognitivist as a general attempt to treat “emotions as part of our cognitive outlook on the world; emotional arousal accompanies audience members’ active interpretation and thinking about a film.” Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 9.

⁶⁵⁷ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 28. While I agree that monsters are a major source for the experience of horror, Carroll’s definition of them as “impossible beings” seems painfully limited. Examples of non-horrifying impossible beings are easy to provide (e.g. Superman). Does the fact that Superman gets his powers from earth’s yellow sun, when the rest of us just get skin cancer, make him a monster? Of course not. Carroll anticipates this and notes that not all monsters are horrifying monsters (28). Still, to call Superman a monster seems inaccurate, or at least uncharitable.

⁶⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953), pp. 219-252.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

Freud especially invokes the example of the living doll from the story by E. T. A. Hoffman as a premier example of the uncanny.⁶⁶⁰ The example of a living/dead doll offers a perfect example of a seemingly impossible being, as it defies our experience of the reality, to be a doll entails being inanimate and unfeeling, but at the same time it tugs at our simultaneous perception of the doll as life-like and nearly-human. Other monsters likewise possess characteristics that are frightening at least partly because they are impossible. Dracula's immortality and the Wolf-Man's shape-shifting, for instance, defy our categories of what is real.

Carroll's definition of monster as "impossible being" seriously suffers, however, against examples like *Psycho*'s Norman Bates, or the shark from *Jaws*, or the examples given by Ivan Karamazov. Here are horrors, to be sure, that terrify and disgust; yet they are immanently *possible*. Impossibility, without modification, does not provide an adequate definition for art-horror, if this were the case, then the sheerly nonsensical verse of Lewis Carroll should, in some way, disgust and terrify. The poem, "The Walrus and the Carpenter", for instance, contains the lines "The sun was shining on the sea, / Shining with all his might: / He did his very best to make / The billows smooth and bright – / And this was odd, because it was / The middle of the night." That the sun could be shining, and yet the hour be "the middle of the night" is, of course, logically contradictory. Yet the effect is hardly terrifying. Monsters do not terrify because of their impossibility. Indeed, if this were so, then fictional characters such as Superman should terrify as well, but they do not. Cynthia Freeland, author of *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*, critiques Carroll on this same point, citing *Psycho* and other movies as examples of horror despite the absence of supernatural elements. Regardless of the fact that

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

killers like Hannibal Lecter and Norman Bates are “real-to-life rather than supernatural beings,” Freeland writes, “they *are* monsters.”⁶⁶¹

Carroll seems to be driven to such a limited definition by his interest in the roots of Gothic horror, which sprang up as the “underside of the Enlightenment.”⁶⁶² Carroll charts four disjunctures between Enlightenment characteristics and horror. They are Rational vs. Emotive; Objective vs. Subjective; Natural vs. Supernatural; and Progressive vs. Regressive.⁶⁶³ Horror involves disruption, and the Enlightenment provides a lofty yet fragile ideal, begging to be smashed.⁶⁶⁴ Perhaps nowhere is this seen more clearly than in *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, a Gothic which combines horror elements with elements of Romanticism, which in itself is a reaction to the Enlightenment; its subtitle subtly warning against the “over-reaching” of modern man. Yet, Carroll somehow seems trapped by Enlightenment dichotomies as he continues to think in scientific categories when defining what is, or is not, horrifying. The roots of horror may well be partially grounded in the Enlightenment emphasis on science and objectivity, but the way that horror affects us goes well beyond its historical roots.

Cynthia Freeland’s account of art-horror is the wider and better than Carroll’s, as she focuses on “monsters as beings that raise the specter of evil by overturning the natural order, whether it be an order concerning death,

⁶⁶¹ Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 182.

⁶⁶² Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 55.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁶⁴ *Frankenstein* is a good example of embodying this underside, as we see the horror that lashes back at the hubris and emotional shallowness of Victor Frankenstein, as the book’s subtitle calls him a “modern Prometheus.” The monster violates Frankenstein’s safety, killing his young brother; entering the honeymoon chamber and killing Frankenstein’s new bride; and, perhaps worst of all, Frankenstein’s faith in progress and his own lofty ideals.

the body, God's laws, natural laws, or ordinary human values."⁶⁶⁵ The key element is a sense of *violation*. Where notions of order are less strongly held, interruption will be less disturbing. Thus, horror is often rooted in what feels most safe and secure - the home (*The Haunting* or *The Sixth Sense*), the family (*The Exorcist* or *The Shining*), innocent or mundane activities such as checking into a motel or baby-sitting (*Psycho* or *Halloween*). For both Carroll and Freeland the effect of art-horror is generated by the violation of our sense of rightness. Carroll's definition, however, is so limited as to apply only to art-horror favorites such as Dracula, the Wolfman, or Freddy Krueger. Freeland's wider construal of horror not only matches up better to art-horror but real-life horror as well. The violation of order can apply to a wide range of horrific experiences in a wide range of arenas, whether moral, social, spiritual or existential, as we shall see in the next section.

1.2.2. Horror in Human Context. Horror involves the violation of order (real or perceived), and when we use the term horror, in art or in life, we usually invoke an extreme level of disproportion, disorder or incongruity of states of affairs. Martin Amis, writing on the rise of terrorist violence, feels the need to invoke this moral/aesthetic category:

Suicide-mass murder is more than terrorism: it is horrorism. It is a maximum malevolence. The suicide-mass murderer asks his prospective victims to contemplate their fellow human being with a completely new order of execration.⁶⁶⁶

Amis is clearly correct in identifying the mass-murder of thousands of innocent victims as "horror", for clearly we have in such acts an incongruous and disturbing disregard for human value. Terrorist attacks violate our sense of safety because they undermine the most basic levels of respect between human beings. These acts are truly horrible because it is so

⁶⁶⁵ Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead*, 8.

⁶⁶⁶ Martin Amis, "The Age of Horrorism (Part Two)" *The Observer*, 10 September, 2006.

difficult to even imagine a state of affairs that would ever warrant them, which undermines any moral grievance the perpetrators may cite as an inciting reason. Rather than uphold the moral order, an act of horror (even if motivated by a sense of injustice), obliterates the moral order.

1.2.3. Horror and Privation. Freeland's understanding of horror as a violation of proper order, then, ironically, fits well with an Augustinian framework for creation, and the vision of monstrosity which Augustine elucidates. In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine reflects on whether Adam's or Noah's sons begat any monstrous races reported in "profane histories." Augustine describes men with one eye, or backwards feet, or hermaphrodites "both begetting and bearing children in one body", as well as mouthless men "living only by air and smelling", as well as pygmies, and one-legged men who are wonderfully swift and sleep under the shade of one large foot, as well as the Cynocephali, "that had dogs' heads, and barked like dogs".⁶⁶⁷ These pictures of monstrosity Augustine describes all feature distortion, disorder, or an incongruous mixture of attributes, in essence, all lack the *form* which is proper to a human. Thus, for Freeland and Augustine, the essence of horror, a sense of the violation of order, depends on a sense of proper order, and its palpable *privation*.⁶⁶⁸

The notion of *evil as privation* has, at times, been deemed too flimsy to deal with horror as a category. For instance, Susan Neiman, in her book, *Evil in Modern Thought*, critiques Augustine's famous metaphysical formulation of the *privatio boni*:

⁶⁶⁷ CD 16.8.

⁶⁶⁸ Christopher Mathewes' recent book, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, examines Augustine's still-relevant legacy as it appears in thought of Reinhold Niebuhr and Hannah Arendt. Mathewes notes how Niebuhr uses Augustine's notion of perversion as central in his concept of sin, while Arendt's famous report on the "banality of evil" is informed by Augustine's notion of evil as privation. His book is just one sign of interest in the relevant legacy of Augustine.

“Evil” carries theological resonance even when explicit theological foundations are rejected. And if the definition of evil as absence, which the Middle Ages inherited from Augustine, seems inadequate to express anything about contemporary horror, no other metaphysical foundations have been – perhaps mercifully – proposed.⁶⁶⁹

It is true that ‘privation’ alone offers nothing to help us understand or express horror, but only in the same way that the word ‘not’ offers little understanding without other words to negate. Hence, Augustine’s use of *privatio* is *not* helpful without Augustine’s *boni*. The Augustinian “grammar of evil”, as Rowan Williams calls it, is actually very helpful, given the Augustinian vision of a world ordered in such a way that each thing is good in itself and in relation to every other thing. Virtue is a right ordering of the loves – an “ordo amoris”.⁶⁷⁰ Beauty is proportionate – “a good congruence of the members”.⁶⁷¹ Nature is well-ordered – “everything from earth to heaven ascending in a scale of goodness”.⁶⁷² Given this line of thinking: the evil-willing person has become dis-ordered, monstrous inside, a jumble

⁶⁶⁹ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 68.

⁶⁷⁰ CD 15.22.

⁶⁷¹ CD 22.19.

⁶⁷² CD 11.22.

of desires.⁶⁷³ (*Psycho*'s Norman Bates is a good example: one moment wishing that he could flee "mother" then alternately calling her his "best friend".) Evil's aesthetic will always move toward the grotesque and incongruous. (Pennywise the shape-shifting clown from *IT* is an example of this revolting incongruity as *it* refuses to take stable form, and thus cannot be described except as 'It'). Further, because, following Augustine, everything has its place in the scale of goodness, and therefore something is evil/frightening when it does not fall within its 'place'. (Seth Brundle from *The Fly* exemplifies the disgust we feel when something is not what it should be – neither man nor fly).

Augustinian aesthetics and metaphysics provides a background against which the "sensible illogic" of horror - disproportion and incongruity - can be felt. Thus, Neiman's critique of privation seems unfounded. Horror and privation fit well together, so to speak. Brian Horne writes,

Order is characteristic of the work and love of God... Disorder is the sign of sin: evil is the privation, the absence, of order... The absence of order – the attempted perversion of what *is* – can be felt

⁶⁷³ Though the Augustinian framework further shows us how perpetrated horrors, while evil actions, need not necessarily be *willfully* evil. The example of poor Norman Bates, both pitiable and terrifying, both victim and perpetrator, is certainly a monster. Yet, though he is the locus of evil, his fractured psyche, more than his will, is the root of his problems. Hannah Arendt famously reported on the "banality" of evil in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The problem for the prosecution in the Eichmann trial, she indicates, was that "the prosecution wasted much time in an unsuccessful effort to prove that Eichmann had once, at least, killed with his own hands." "[T]he indictment for murder was wrong," Arendt writes, but the prosecution pursued this charge because, Arendt goes on, "[when] intent is absent... we feel no crime has been committed" (22). Eichmann, like Norman, is certainly a monster. That the vacuum-oil-salesman-turned-Nazi had no desire to kill Jews is irrelevant. What is relevant is that he valued bureaucratic toadying over the lives of 5.8 million. Eichmann's banal loves cost countless lives. But this is not to say that Eichmann was not culpable, rather, as Susan Neiman notes, Arendt "insisted on the need for moral theory which locates guilt and responsibility in something besides intention" (Neiman "What's the Problem of Evil?", 43).

Arendt is willing to grant to Eichmann that he may well have not desired the killing of Jews, but this does not prevent his monstrosity. Even if, as in Sodom and Gomorrah, the moral tenor has become so out of tune that all are implicated in the evil, this does not excuse the moral hideousness. However, Eichmann's case does not imply, contra Neiman, that "the lack of bad intentions does not even mitigate" culpability (Neiman, "What's the Problem of Evil", 44). Eichmann had bad intentions, for which he was extremely culpable, they were simply not quite as obviously correlated to the evil they brought about as with other Nazis (cf. philosophical discussions of "moral luck").

and depicted even while, paradoxically, we can say that it is an absence.⁶⁷⁴

What horror does overturn, if not the notion of evil as privation, is any *easy* trust in the ultimate order of creation.⁶⁷⁵ Horror, in art or in life, violates our sense of proper order, and thus undermines our ability to trust the order of the world, or to positively relate ourselves to the world around us.

1.2.4. *Horror and Human Meaning.* “A meaningful life” writes Robert Emmons in his book, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns*, “is one that is characterized by a deep sense of purpose, a sense of inner conviction, and assurance that in spite of one’s current plight, life has significance.”⁶⁷⁶ As we would expect, Emmons finds that “indicators of meaningfulness predict psychological well-being, while indicators of meaninglessness are regularly associated with psychological distress and pathology.”⁶⁷⁷ Ranging over a wide selection of psychological research, Emmons finds that post-suffering, “Growth is possible to the degree to which a person creates or finds meaning in suffering, pain, and adversity.”⁶⁷⁸ Citing various psychological studies, Emmons finds that sufferers such as HIV-infected men were often able to find “high meaning” that helped integrate the illness or loss into a framework. HIV could be seen as a “catalyst for personal growth”, “spiritual growth”, or as enabling a sense of “belonging” among co-sufferers.⁶⁷⁹ Religious meaning is especially helpful. Emmons references a

⁶⁷⁴ Brian Horne, *Imagining Evil*, 28.

⁶⁷⁵ Augustine displays a rather calm composure in the face of monstrosity when he writes, [T]he same reasons we can give for this or that extraordinary birth amongst us, the same may be given for those monstrous nations; for God made all, and when or how he would form this or that, He knows best having the perfect skill to beautify this universe by opposition and diversity of parts. But he that cannot contemplate the beauty of the whole stumbles at the deformity of the part, not knowing the harmony that it has with the whole. (CD 16.8)

⁶⁷⁶ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns* (NY: The Guilford Press, 1999), 138

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 144.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 146.

study about coping with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), “Those parents who had found meaning within a religious framework had significantly less distress 18 months postloss as well as greater positive well-being.”⁶⁸⁰ Emmons observes however, that for religious believers well-being (happiness) was often accompanied by high levels of emotional distress. The suggestion being that the *manageability* of suffering which religion provides did not reduce the *tangibility* of suffering.⁶⁸¹ This looks quite positive for religious belief, including Christian belief, to offer both honesty in the face of suffering *and* hope.

What does one do, however, when evils defy not only human meaning but religious meaning as well? HIV and SIDS ‘spell’ fear for large groups of people, yet seem to lie closer within the range of what *might* be integrated into a meaningful whole. But horrendous evils even more obviously defy attempts at personal or religious integration. While it is true, as Emmons writes, that a “religious or spiritual world-view provides an overall orientation to life that lends a framework for interpreting life’s challenges,” horrors are not easily understood within a religious framework, they are, seemingly, more difficult to make sense of.⁶⁸² The violating power of horror can jar our confidence in there being a stable system of value within which we can positively relate ourselves to the wider world. Terri Jentz’s autobiographical account of being randomly attacked by an axe-wielding maniac illustrates this. Jentz tells of her initial sense of confidence – feeling “bullet-proof” after surviving with only semi-serious axe wounds – but then also tells of her subsequent struggle to rebuild her picture of the world:

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

Some part of me at the edges of consciousness had lost trust in the order of things. I no longer believed that life was following a script in which certain things would never happen. Evidence of this truth turned up in the newspaper one day. The story of a boy on vacation in Yellowstone Park who walked onto a dock to view the geyser pools. When a vapor kicked up obscuring his vision, he stumbled into the water. By the time they fished him out, a matter of minutes, his bones were boiled clean. This last detail really made an impression on me. That something so out-of-the-world horrific could happen on vacation in one of America's glorious national treasures like Yellowstone. By the end of my twenties I was mysteriously debilitated... It seemed to me a great risk to inhabit a body.⁶⁸³

Jentz's traumatic incident, which violated her natural sense of the social and moral sense of the world, gave her (at first) a sense of extreme good luck. But this sense of extreme fortune soon turned into a sense of extreme foreboding that something just as random and meaningless could happen in the future. Other examples of freakish accidents likewise reenforced the idea that life no longer had a 'script', and thus was completely unpredictable.

Horror cuts against all our expectations (and in doing so, frightens us). It thrives on the incongruity, incoherence, and deformity of the monster/act of violence in order to frighten us. It works on us because it works against our expectations. Thus, despite Robert Emmons' suggestions about the positive effects of finding meaning in misfortune, horror, by its very nature, cuts against this effort by presenting itself as random and meaningless. The experience of artists and other thoughtful writers shows that there is a widespread sense of certain kinds of evils as fundamentally clashing with our sense of the way the world *ought* to be. As we shall see, it has a similarly disruptive effect upon theodicy.

In human life, then, horror is understood against a background of world order, which it disrupts by seemingly cutting against it. Yet it is much easier

⁶⁸³ Terri Jentz, *A Strange Piece of Paradise* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 12.

to make sense of why horrors occur without the idea of a good and powerful God also looming in the background. The Christian has an even more extreme “unresolved clash of incompatibles”, moreover, as the notion of an all-powerful, all-loving, all-wonderful God is juxtaposed against an event for which there seems to be no good reason. It is easy to sense the disjuncture between the Christian God and the Holocaust. God’s love affirms human purpose; horrendous evils seem to deny it. What, then, can theodicy ‘do’ with horrors?

2. Horror in Philosophy: *Horror and the Rejection of Theodicy*

Unlike tragedy, horror is rarely used as a category for Christian theology. There is no long standing, respected “horrific theme” to accompany the “tragic theme” of theodicy. The category of horror is used, almost exclusively, by those arguing against the goodness of God.

The most famous example of horror as an aesthetic theme in theodicy is surely the dialogue between Ivan Karamazov and his brother, Alyosha, in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. There is hardly a more vivid rejection of Augustine’s aesthetic theme of harmony to be found anywhere. Ivan Karamazov begins his renunciation of the idea of “higher harmonies” by going through a long list of tales of cruelty, where children are harmed in novel ways: babies ripped from wombs by bayonets, children torn apart by dogs, and an infant smiling sucking on a gun held by a soldier, who then pulls the trigger. These stories are intended to shock and disgust, and are lacking any qualifying historical context or motivation. They are simply horrible. It is these stories that Ivan uses as a basis for his moral rejection of God.

If God created this world and oversees it, Ivan senses, then everything must be permitted for a purpose. Thus, Ivan assumes that in the end, all of God's reasons for allowing these outrages will be revealed and there will be reconciliation and healing. This state of affairs Ivan then associates with the notion of ultimate harmony (an eschatological state where all is explained and justified). Yet, Ivan argues,

If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me please? It's beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony. Why should they, too, furnish material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future?⁶⁸⁴

Ivan can find no sensible reason why innocent children should be allowed to suffer like this and refuses to accept any solution to the problem and thus he hands 'back the ticket' to God."⁶⁸⁵

I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse with an unexpiated tear to 'dear, kind God!' It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how?⁶⁸⁶

Even Alyosha, at Ivan's prodding, admits that, if he were God, he would not consent to creating a world which contained such horrors.⁶⁸⁷

Contemporary philosopher Peter Fosl likewise pursues a Ivan-sounding argument in his essay "The Moral Imperative to Rebel Against God". Fosl begins his essay by describing the murder of two young boys by their mother, Susan Smith, who pushed a car in which the two were seatbelted into a lake.⁶⁸⁸ Fosl invites the reader to place themselves imaginatively in the

⁶⁸⁴ Nelson Pike ed. *God and Evil*, 16.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁶ Nelson Pike ed. *God and Evil*, 15.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁸ Peter S. Fosl, "The Moral Imperative to Rebel Against God" *Cogito* 11: 3 (1997):159-160.

minds of those two boys for two minutes, thinking about what it must have felt like to cough and choke and sputter as their car sank into the water. Fosl then asks the reader, “What was the experience like?” and shares his own reaction:

As the father of two sons, one about the age of Smith’s oldest, I found the experience particularly difficult. Among the feelings I confront are the horror of suffering and death as well as the terrible, terrible sadness that gripped the people of the United States in the face of this event, the sensation that brought many to open sobbing as they considered what had happened.⁶⁸⁹

It is likely that any other thoughtful, sensitive person likewise felt nausea and disgust, and perhaps a much deeper sense of outrage, at the example given by Fosl, he argues that this emotional response is “philosophically significant” and should be examined in light of what we believe about God. More than simple sadness and revulsion, Fosl argues that at the “core of this sensation... is also an emotion whose object is nothing less than the universe and existence as a whole.”⁶⁹⁰

This outrage at the universe Fosl also finds expressed in the famous dialogue between the Karamazov brothers quoted above. Fosl charts Ivan’s argument and outlines what he takes to be its core premises and conclusion:

1. If any being is aware of some evil, is able to stop or prevent that evil, and does not stop or prevent that evil, then that being is morally reprobate [Moral Principle].
2. The suffering and death of children is evil [Moral Fact].
3. God is aware of the suffering and death of children [Theological Fact].

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.,160.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.,159.

4. God is able to stop and/or prevent the suffering and death of children [Theological fact].
5. God does not stop and/or prevent the suffering and death of children [Empirical Fact].

Conclusion: God is morally reprobate. ⁶⁹¹

Here Fosl helpfully unpacks Ivan's implicit argument, and shows where its real strength lies. The lynchpin of Ivan Karamazov's and his own argument, Fosl argues, is Premise 1. The weakness of Premise 1 however, is that it is not self-evident that a good being should stop every kind of evil. There seem to be lots of smaller evils that might well be justified by some greater purpose, either allowing for some greater good (as the pains of long-distance exercise teach us endurance amidst hardship), or smaller evils might prevent some greater evil (just as the pains of dentistry prevent the greater pain of rotting teeth). Fosl's argument here parallels William Rowe's argument from gratuitous evils (see note), as he nuances his first premise to include the assumption that the evil in question does not allow for some

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.,160.

greater good or prevent a worse evil.⁶⁹² Thus, Fosl's argument hinges upon the blunt description of evils "of the magnitude manifest in the suffering and death of children" and subsequently asking whether any moral being could justifiably allow them. Fosl's conclusion, like Ivan's, is that there is no justifying reason for the kinds of evils perpetrated on innocent children (such as in the Susan Smith case). Also like Ivan, Fosl keeps the logical apparatus of his argument to a relative minimum. What he relies on instead, like Ivan Karamazov, is the repeated invocation of examples of innocent suffering. By comparing God to Susan Smith, watching while two small children suffer, or by comparing God to a negligent lifeguard who lets children drown in water which he is paid to oversee, Fosl intends to awaken

⁶⁹² Gratuitous evils are, according to William Rowe, "instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse." (William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil & Some Varieties of Atheism", in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, [Bloomington, IN: Indianapolis UP, 1996], 2.) Some gratuitous evils Rowe describes are not horrendous, per se, merely unnecessary, others are truly terrible. Rowe's examples of gratuitous evils are of a fawn burnt and dying alone in the woods, and a five-year-old girl, raped, beaten, and murdered by her mother's drunken boyfriend. Rowe argues in his evidential argument against theism that there *appears not* to be any reason that justifies the occurrence of *either* of these evils. In the case of the former – a lightning strike in a distant wood that leaves Bambi burnt and dying alone – there are simply not any directly correlating goods (like the exercise of free will by a budding pyromaniac, or some exercise of compassion by a poacher who sees the fawn, tries to save it and fails, then therefore decides to give up his illegal hunting of animals). But if there were such correlating goods, Bambi's death *might* be justified. In the case of the latter, however, the problem is not so much that there are no directly correlating reasons that justify the girl's terrible death, but that, as Rowe says (roughly) "no good state of affairs...would justify [God] in allowing [it]" (William Rowe, "Evil and Theodicy" *Philosophical Topics* 16 [1988]: 119-132).

Though both the evils described are, according to Rowe, gratuitous, the latter is gratuitous for a different reason. Where the former is pointless, the latter is such a horrendous moral evil that we cannot imagine God having any justifying reason for allowing it. So the evidential argument goes, even acceding the value of free will and soul making, these goods are insufficient to explain why, practically speaking, a perfect being would have to allow *this* evil in order to maintain free will or bring about character development. Would the drunken boyfriend's free will be so undermined by God removing this option? He could have a thousand other opportunities to make free choices, so surely this specific choice isn't his only chance to choose well or poorly. Mightn't he have simply passed out on the floor instead of committing this hideous action? And regarding soul making, the five-year old had no opportunity for such, and the boyfriend? Maybe so, but surely an omnipotent God could have brought it about that the boyfriend had a jailbird's change of heart in some other way.

Yet, even if it could be shown that there was no other way for God, in His infinite resourcefulness, to bring about a certain good without allowing the specific evil in question, this may not do the trick. The evil might still be gratuitous. Even if the drunken boyfriend could experience repentance in no other way we might still be led to conclude that the value of the good did not outweigh the disvalue of the attendant evil.

in us a sense of the *monstrosity* of God.⁶⁹³ Fosl further imagines a situation where we may be asked to turn over our young child to a powerful magician-king, who would torture, molest and kill the child but then “produce eternal world peace and prosperity” in return.⁶⁹⁴ There is no necessary connection between the child’s suffering and the world peace, these are simply the magician-king’s conditions. The answer to this hypothetical seems obviously to be no, this magician-king is truly a monster. But, as Fosl writes, “Don’t Christians believe that God, in fact, did such a thing with his only son?... I would observe how strange it is that people don’t find the JCI God monstrous.”⁶⁹⁵

The significance of Fosl’s method is, again, not the detail of his argument (which is simple) but the way that he utilizes vividly horrible examples and details in order to evoke in the reader a *sense* that there can be no sufficient reason for God to allow the evils he does. The use of horror in philosophical discourse seems, in these two cases, to be primarily about giving us a sense of the incredible disvalue of a state of affairs, and expecting that sense to outweigh all possible responses that we can offer to it. Horror, in these cases, works to stump theodicy into silence.

Reflecting on the extreme examples of cruelty and torture invoked by Ivan Karamazov, Christian theologian David Bentley Hart praises the genius of Ivan’s argument from horror as “the only challenge to a confidence in divine goodness that should give Christians serious cause for deep and difficult reflection.”⁶⁹⁶ The reason for the effectiveness, Hart argues, is how, in Ivan’s

⁶⁹³ Peter Fosl, “The Moral Imperative to Rebel Against God”, 161.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid. Fosl’s example isn’t perfect. A young child could not make a mature decision to take on this sacrifice. Christ could. What is striking about this example is that by removing the conditions of the cross from their larger context it makes them seem monstrous and unjustifiable.

⁶⁹⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 42.

argument, “there are already foreshadowings of a deeper Christian riposte to the argument.”⁶⁹⁷ Neither Ivan Karamazov, nor Peter Fosl, deny Christianity the full scope of theological resources which it can bring to bear (such as appeal to the afterlife), but rather rest their objections on a deep and seemingly inviolate sense of revulsion at the occurrence of horrors. Further, this sense of revulsion is not dispelled by the presence of a Christian view of the world. “Those Christian readers who have found it easy to ignore or dispense with the case Dostoyevsky constructs for Ivan have not,” Hart argues, “fully comprehended that case (or... adhere to so degenerate a version of Christian doctrine that they can no longer be said to understand the God revealed in Christ).”⁶⁹⁸

Likewise, I must agree that horror functions, in its expression of revolting disvalue, as the sharpest critique of divine providence which any aesthetic theme could offer. Horrors focus our attention on the darkest and most horrible details of human suffering and therefore give us a powerful sense of evil. In the next section, we will look at how Marilyn McCord Adams develops on this aesthetic theme, utilizing these insights in developing her aesthetic theme of horrendous evils. Yet, we will also see how Adams tailors her theodicy to respond to horrors in a fundamentally Christian way.

3. Marilyn Adams’ Aesthetic Theodicy: *Horrendous Evils and Divine Victory*

What makes Marilyn McCord Adams significant for this study is her clear-sighted sense of the destructiveness of the worst evils (horrors), as well as how she incorporates many of the insights gained from them into a Christian theodicy. Like Wendy Farley, Marilyn Adams breaks with certain

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 42.

elements of traditional Christian theology, but, her insights are still (I believe) readily assimilable by a more traditional approach to theodicy. By focusing on horror, an aesthetic theme which Christian theodicians have often avoided, Adams aims to see something about what must be ‘done’ with, not just any evils, but the worst evils, in order for God to be good to us.

3.1. What are Horrendous Evils?

In her book, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Marilyn Adams defines horrendous evils as “evils the participation in which constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether a participant’s life could be a great good to him/her on the whole”.⁶⁹⁹ Adams cites “the rape of a woman and the axing off of her arms... betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties... child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas” and other life-destroying events.⁷⁰⁰ As such, the kinds of evils Adams is talking about fit with the kinds of arguments put forward by Peter Fosl and Ivan Karamazov. These are hideous actions which do not carry with them any obvious positive meaning. Further, these are horrifying events which challenge our trust in God and our sense of divine providence. Yet, more than Peter Fosl or Ivan Karamazov, Adams devotes a great deal of time to analyzing what makes horrors so particularly challenging, and thus digs deeper into why exactly they are so difficult for Christian theology to deal with.

First, as Adams describes them, horrors stretch beyond normal categories (such as moral trespass) we use to evaluate evils. The sinfulness of an

⁶⁹⁹ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999), 26. Hereafter cited as *HEGG*.

⁷⁰⁰ *HEGG*, 26.

action has no standard correlation to whether it is horrendous. Likewise, culpability is no guarantee that horrors will or will not affect a person, as they degrade both the victim and the perpetrator. Some horrendous evils may involve no immoral action at all: as in the case of accidentally running over one's child with the car. Nor is the category reducible to harm incurred, as Adams notes the example of "a mother's eating the corpse of her already dead son".⁷⁰¹ In the former case the death was accidental, but the collusion of coincidence makes the death far more painful than if the son had died, say, in an unrelated bicycling accident. In the latter case no additional harm is incurred, the son is already dead, but the mother's *eating* of her son is still destructive. These evils take on deeply negative significance in the life of a person, gnawing away at other positive structures in a person's life. "[A]rguably," Adams writes, "the worst evils and the best goods are symbolic. What makes evils horrendous is their power to *degrade* by being *prima facie* ruinous of personal meaning".⁷⁰² What makes these evils so bad is not that they spring from a truly depraved mind, or are a symbol of extreme malice, but how they affect the individual who experienced them. In the case of the two most recently mentioned evils, the terrible occurrence strikes at the heart of one of the most treasured roles in life: that of parent. To accidentally kill or be forced to cannibalize one's child gnaws at the very core of one's identity.

Horrors strike humans at the point of their greatest strength, as thinking, conscious beings with a great capacity for interpretation of events. They are unlikely to affect other species (so far as we know), because, as Adams writes,

On my conception, horrors afflict persons insofar as they are actual or potential meaning-makers. With this focus, I leave to one side the

⁷⁰¹ HEGG, 27.

⁷⁰² HEGG, 27.

question of whether God is *good to* individual inanimate objects or plants. Likewise, my analysis of both problem and solutions will pertain to animals only to the extent that their cognitive and affective capacities constitute something like meaning-making powers.⁷⁰³

Horrors erode meaning as they cut at the core of our identification with sources of great value. Using the examples given by Adams, we can see how incest would cut away at our identification with family; how rape and mutilation would cut away at a woman's sense of femininity; how deep betrayal would cut away at our connection to all human relationships; and how the explosion of nuclear devices would cut away at our connection to the entire human race.

Being able to positively relate oneself to the world in which one lives, is, of course, an important part of the human experience. This brings in the aesthetic dimension to Adams' discussion of horrors, as she argues that our sense of meaningfulness is partially constituted by our ability to understand the world as exhibiting orderliness, and being able to manage variety with simplicity (which Adams believes to have positive aesthetic value). It is important, Adams argues, for us to be able to organize reality in a comprehensible fashion:

Experiencing the world as ordered in a way that is congruent enough with reality is *constitutive* of human sanity. Experiencing the world as chaotic, or losing one's taste for the orderings that match up with the 'objective' world, is part of what it is to be insane.⁷⁰⁴

Thus, a part of our ability to see our lives as meaningful is being able to comprehend and positively interact with reality. As Adams sees it, our lives are like works of art, which we attempt to organize by such principles as

⁷⁰³ HEGG, 28.

⁷⁰⁴ HEGG, 143.

“unity, integrity, harmony and relevance”.⁷⁰⁵ Just as with a particularly effective horror movie, the outbreak of horrendous evils shatters what previous understanding we had for the “plot” of the story. As in the classic film *Psycho*, where the murder in the shower comes as a total surprise, horrors jump out of nowhere and suddenly interrupt our expectations. The story of Terri Jentz’s surprising axe-attack comes to mind as an example of a horrendous event which left her feeling that life was no longer following a “script”, and thus unravelling her sense of trust in the world. Thus Adams finds common ground between art-horror and real-life atrocities when she utilizes the aesthetic categories of “disproportion and incongruity” to identify why they “overwhelm meaning-making capacities...furnishing strong reason to believe that lives marred by horrors can never again be unified and integrated into wholes with positive meaning”.⁷⁰⁶

The occurrence of horrors, whether perpetrated by us or done to us, can eradicate a sense of meaningfulness in our lives even if they entail very little physical harm to us. Regardless of our physical well-being, as Robert Emmons stated, “indicators of meaningfulness predict psychological well-being, while indicators of meaninglessness are regularly associated with psychological distress and pathology.”⁷⁰⁷ Thus, because of their close connection to self-understanding, horrors are (so far as we can tell) confined to the neighborhood of humanity. Appropriately, then, it is exclusively with individual persons that Adams is concerned.

Adams’ person-centered approach marks out her work as notably different from Augustine’s. Where the Bishop of Hippo is concerned to fit together all the various parts of creation into a cohesive and beautiful whole, Adams

⁷⁰⁵ HEGG, 146.

⁷⁰⁶ HEGG, 148.

⁷⁰⁷ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns*, 138.

is more narrowly concerned with the welfare of each individual. Her definition of horrendous evils, then, as “evils the participation in which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether a participant’s life could be a great good to him/her on the whole”, is intended to be weighed directly against the the theological affirmation of the goodness of God.⁷⁰⁸ For Adams, the primary challenge in the problem of evil discussion is the apparently logical incongruity between the goodness of God and horrendous evils. In her own way, then, Adams also pushes back against the Augustinian focus on cosmic harmony because she believes that in order for God to be good, God must be good to each and every human person God created. A free will theodicy which does not have an account for how a victim who suffers horribly at the hands of free agents can have a life which is a great good to him/her on the whole is incomplete. Thus, for Adams, any discussion of the goodness of God which does not take into account how God is good to those who experience horrendous evils is impotent to resolve the problem of evil.

3.2. Horrors and Morally Sufficient Reasons

The second key area Adams investigates with reference to horrendous evils is her break, like Ivan Karamazov and Peter Fosl, with traditional theodicy’s attempt to compile a list of morally sufficient reasons that might excuse God. Adams rejects such an attempt, and believes that “horrors are so bad that to treat any of the reasons we can think of as reasons *God* found (or would have found) *sufficient* turns God into a monster, an evil genius of worse than Cartesian proportions.”⁷⁰⁹ If for Adams, there can be no

⁷⁰⁸ HEGG, 26.

⁷⁰⁹ Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrors in Theological Context”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55:4 (2002): 472. (See also “God and Evil: Polarities of a Problem” *Philosophical Studies* 69: 2-3 (1993): 180-1.)

morally sufficient reasons that would explain why God might allow evils, is she not in the same boat as Ivan Karamazov, floating down the stream toward atheism?

The answer is no, as Adams makes two parallel moves to avoid giving up on the goodness of God. She begins by conceding that it is not as if “God had any obligation to do otherwise or to be good to us; the ‘size-gap’ means that God has no obligations to creatures,” she says.⁷¹⁰ This might seem to be sufficient for the job. If this claim is accepted, it resolves the problem of gratuitous evil by challenging the idea that a good God would always stop horrendous evils from occurring. Yet it raises a deeper and more troubling question about how we can meaningfully speak about God’s goodness if we cannot include God (in some sense) in our moral community (for a more detailed critique of this position see Appendix C). In this way Adams’ work is similar to Wendy Farley’s, in that both see certain kinds of evil as completely unjustifiable and inexcusable in any normal sense. Also akin to Farley, Adams does not rest with the doubts that evils raise, but seeks to press on and find a greater opportunity for hope. Adams’ approach, however, differs from Farley’s in that her chosen theme of horror seemingly contains no inherent value or significance. Thus Adams’ response to evil is focused on showing, not how these evils can be put to use, but how these evils can be ultimately defeated.

3.3. Horrors and Divine Goodness

3.3.1. The Defeat of Evils. In her work, Adams draws on the essay, “The Defeat of Good and Evil,” by Roderick Chisholm, which details what is necessary for the defeat of evils. In contrast with evils that are balanced off

⁷¹⁰ Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrors in Theological Context”, 472-3.

by other goods, evils that are defeated must be so incorporated into the positive whole that we do not regret their presence. Chisholm writes that “when evil is *balanced off* in a larger whole, we may, when considering the whole, regret or resent the presence of evil there.” But in the case of a positive whole, one should say of constituent evils that “the badness of the part that is bad makes the whole better than what we would have had had the bad part been replaced by a neutral negation.”⁷¹¹ Therefore, evils that have been defeated have become so identified with a larger, positive state of affairs that their existence is no longer regrettable (though it still stands to reason that *badness* itself must always be viewed negatively).⁷¹²

Chisholm also details the difference between defeasible and indefeasible states of affairs. Indefeasible evils pose a problem because they will always detract from the value of any larger state of affairs in which they are present, and also raise questions as to why God might have created a world containing indefeasible evils. Chisholm does not have a problem with the existence of intrinsically evil states of affairs. But, he writes, “[I]t would seem that a world that is at least as good as any other possible world would contain states of affairs that are intrinsically bad – provided that the badness of each of these states of affairs is defeated.”⁷¹³ There therefore ought to be no indefeasible evils in a world created by God. Chisholm writes: “It is clear, I think, that the theodocist *must* appeal to the concept of defeat – that he can deal with the problem of evil *only* by saying that the evils in the world are defeated in the sense that I have tried to describe.”⁷¹⁴

⁷¹¹ Roderick M. Chisholm, “The Defeat of Good and Evil,” in *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991), 61.

⁷¹² I suppose the clearest example is the one that many Christians are quite familiar with; namely, the half-proud, half-apologetic tone of Christian testimony, where the Christian acknowledges past evils, but does not fiercely despise (or feel ashamed of) them anymore.

⁷¹³ Chisholm, “The Defeat of Good and Evil”, 66.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

On the subject of whether indefeasible evils exist, however, Chisholm is agnostic. He seems fully comfortable with the idea that there may exist indefeasible evils when he writes,

It may be, for all we know, that the evil in the world is defeated by some state of affairs that is absolutely good. And it may also be, for all we know, that the goodness in the world is defeated by some state of affairs that is absolutely evil.

This sort of agnosticism, apparently, does not sit well with Marilyn Adams, as her book aims to bring to light those evils that seem the most indefeasible, *prima facie*, and show that they can be defeated after all. By doing this, it seems that Adams can go a long way in proving Chisholm's agnosticism to be unnecessary. Showing how God's goodness overcomes horrendous evils seems to make both cases by highlighting God's absolute goodness as well as the defeasibility of what would seem to be the worst (and therefore most threatening) evils. Defeasible evils are those that have been defeated or are logically possible to defeat, and Adams sets out to show how it is logically possible to defeat horrendous evils. She writes:

My suggestion is that we can explain the compossibility of God and evil (even the evils of entrenched horrors) if we can offer a (logically possible) scenario in which God is *good to* each created person, by ensuring each a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole, and by defeating his/her participation in horrors within the context, not merely of the world as a whole, but of that individual's life.⁷¹⁵

Adams' book goes through a wide variety of ways God can be good to us and thus defeat horrendous evils. I want to focus on three related areas, the aesthetic imagination, Christology and the afterlife:

⁷¹⁵ HEGG, 55.

3.3.2. *Evil and the Aesthetic Imagination.* Utilizing Chisholmian language of defeat, Adams highlights the role of the imagination as a part of the defeat of evil:

The ability to contribute to the positive meaning of a person's life by overcoming evil with good is in part a function of the aesthetic imagination, of the capacity to weave evils into complex goods through subtle irony and reversal.⁷¹⁶

Emphasis here on the “aesthetic imagination” is notable, as Adams is pointing to a key way that the negative meaning of evils can be reversed. Meanings of events change as their context changes. David Mamet's book, *The Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, derives its title from this characteristic in stories. He quotes an old blues song that says “I used my knife to cut my bread, so I could have strength to work. I used my knife to shave my face so I could look good for her. I used my knife to cut out her lying heart.”⁷¹⁷ In the song, the knife's meaning is fluid and goes *good, better, worse* as the context changes. In a similar way, Adams notes that the “meaning of participation in evil varies with the contexts in which it is embedded – from a literary point of view, with the plots into which it is woven.”⁷¹⁸

Adams discusses the ways that the whole aesthetic value of a person's life can be such that it outweighs and even defeats evils. According to Adams, God, the great artist, is reworking our lives into works of art. Yet, Adams stresses that God is not like the classical artist, interested primarily in poise and perfection. Rather,

God must be a modern artist, ready, willing, and able to turn horror-torn individual careers into Guernica's, to house distortion to

⁷¹⁶ HEGG, 147.

⁷¹⁷ David Mamet, *The Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (NY: Vintage, 1998), 66.

⁷¹⁸ HEGG, 137.

produce wholes of outstanding merit, at least some of which can eventually be appreciated by the individual him/herself...⁷¹⁹

Under this model, the evils in our lives can be integrated much like the ugly, green bilious patches are worked into Monet's beautiful painting of the Rouen cathedral.⁷²⁰ By recognition of the pattern of God's work humans come to realize the beauty of their life, a beauty whose uniqueness is somewhat derived from the way that God has overcome their own personal horrors. Thus, Adams is insistent that horrors must be defeated in the life of a person by their own story being made into something bigger, larger and more beautiful. The key to defeating the evils, though, still rests upon human recognition of the divine "craftsmanship." Once a person recognizes God's work that person may feel that his life is a great good after all. A key question which arises, however, is how this can be accomplished?

One of the key points of insistence for Marilyn Adams is the impotence of generic approaches to the problem of evil. For Christians, Adams argues, it is necessary to marshal the widest range of resources for answering the problem of evil. While some theodacists have attempted to employ more religion-neutral responses to the problem of evil, Adams sees the necessity for invoking Christian resources in order to respond to horrors. Among the range of areas of Christian thought that are sometimes neglected, Adams discusses Christology and Eschatology as especially relevant.

3.3.3. Evil and Christology. In *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* as well as a more recent book, *Christ and Horrors*, Adams uses horrors as a lens through which to view the story of Jesus. For those who suffer horrors, Adams further holds up the benefit which Christ offers them as a fellow

⁷¹⁹ HEGG, 149.

⁷²⁰ HEGG, 29.

horror-participant. As one who suffered like them, they can experience honoring identification even in the midst of horror.⁷²¹ Following Adams, God may overcome evils in the lives of those who suffer, by providing them with “symbolic honor.” She writes,

*Honor is the currency of the powerless; it is what clients short on material goods can offer to patrons... Myopic focus on concrete values tempts both victim and onlooker to believe that there is no way for God to be good to a person while pain, suffering, and material deprivation remain. But honor is a good that can be conferred on people even while concrete benefits are still lacking.*⁷²²

The incarnation is, for Adams, the prime example of God’s honoring identification with humanity, and is therefore a source of comfort for anyone, including those who suffer greatly.

Yet, there is an even closer and more specific correlation of the incarnation with the theme of horrendous evils. One of the effects of suffering greatly, of breaking free of the “script” of life, can be a sense of alienation from others and from the universe. As Adams notes, “we human beings commonly exhibit a drive to self-transcendence, to relate to something beyond ourselves”.⁷²³ Yet horrors shatter our confidence in being able to relate positively to the world, and instill in us a sense of revulsion at our own person. Alienation is one natural result of suffering from horrendous evils. However, as Adams points out, alienation may be replaced with a sense of comfort, by finding another who has been through a similar circumstance.⁷²⁴ The fact that Christ has suffered on the cross, not merely death, but a truly degrading and dishonoring crucifixion means that Christ is

⁷²¹ HEGG, 106-128, *passim*.

⁷²² HEGG, 126.

⁷²³ HEGG, 145.

⁷²⁴ HEGG, 167.

a horror-sufferer as well. Within this context, the famous images within Christian art of the scourged and suffering Son of God can be understood as art-horror: the deliberate presentation of events which are grotesque, frightful and revolting. Horror victims may thus see, all around them in classical Christian imagery, a sign of God's identification with them. Adams says it well, when she writes,

God in Christ crucified cancels the curse of human vulnerability to horrors. For the very horrors, participation in which threatened to undo the positive value of created personality, now become secure points of identification... Retrospectively, I believe, from the vantage point of heavenly beatitude, human victims of horrors will recognize those experiences as points of identification with the crucified God, and not wish them away from their life histories.⁷²⁵

The incarnation in general, and specifically Christ's co-suffering with us, provides a clear, accessible source of honor and identification. Even in the midst of horrors, Christ is "the One in Whom all things hold together" (Col. 1:17):

In the realm of God, the worst that we can suffer, be, or do, is not only ruinous because God invents a new organizational grid that endows us with amazing meaning (for example, gruesome degrading caricatures of human beings become instances of identification with God in Christ crucified).⁷²⁶

However, Christ's passion and death are not merely a source of identification (in that God comes down and suffers with us) but are also a source of inspiration (in that we are granted a vision of how horrendous evils can be defeated in the resurrection). The image of the cross points beyond itself to the image of the resurrection, as even in the darkest moments of Christ's sense of God-forsakenness, there is still an affirmation of his divinity (Matt. 27: 45-54). Thus, Adams writes, "the symbol of Christ

⁷²⁵ HEGG, 167.

⁷²⁶ HEGG, 102.

crucified is bivalent, integrating negative into positive aesthetic values in the redemption and consummation.”⁷²⁷ Thus it is that many Christians who have suffered greatly have found comfort in the bloody and brutal spectacle of the cross. Not because they delight in the suffering of the son of God, but because the Son of God’s story, even its darkest moments of desolation, has been taken up into the story of God’s ultimate redemption. Christ’s story is the pre-eminent example of God’s ability to expand the scope of the story to overcome the text’s apparently dark meaning.

In *Christ and Horrors*, Adams describes this as Stage I defeat of horrors, the this-worldly making available of resources which can allow horrors to be defeated. As Adams describes it, this is “establishing a relation of organic unity between the person’s horror-participation and his/her intimate, personal, and overall beatific relationship with God”.⁷²⁸ However, Adams points to two other stages of horror-defeat which require a further work of God for the persons who experience them. This leads Adams to talk about the afterlife as a crucial resource for combatting horrors.

3.3.4. Evil and Eschatology. Unlike Wendy Farley, Adams does not bracket out eschatological considerations as peripheral to the problem of evil discussion. Stages II and III defeat of evil, as discussed in *Christ and Horrors*, may well take place after death, as God’s ministering power to us enables our ability to see those points of connection and identification which God has made actual through Christ, as well as those events within our own lives which would help us to see the more subtle and complex plot which God has crafted.⁷²⁹ Stages II and III, as Adams describes them, are stages which

⁷²⁷ HEGG, 141.

⁷²⁸ HEGG, 66

⁷²⁹ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 66.

Christ points to himself, in that his post-mortem state is now more circumspect and seemingly aware of the bigger picture of what God is doing (he has maintained, seemingly a total understanding of his mission and attained peace about it), but also that Christ is now beyond vulnerability to horrors.⁷³⁰ His body is corporeal but also seemingly beyond harm.

Adams sees these stages as necessary to help us to attain the proper perspective on our lives and the world around us, but also to ensure that we can no longer fall under the sway of horrors again. Eschatology offers us a sturdy hope that God's attempts to establish solidarity with us, and God's work in weaving horrors into a larger and more lovely whole, can truly be accomplished for each individual.

However, Adams also points to a final resource for theodicy: the beatific vision, which is the unsurpassable contemplation of the divine which will be a part of heavenly life. This enjoyment of the divine is, for Adams, a deeply aesthetic experience. She writes, "I join Christian Platonists in taking Divine perfection, the Good that God is, to include beauty".⁷³¹ The good that God's beauty provides is, according to Adams, "immeasurable and incommensurate with any and all created goods or ills."⁷³² Its effect is to provide a good so immense that it counterbalances all the evils in a person's life. She writes,

Further, I assume that aesthetic contemplation that appreciates the object for its own sake, can itself be intrinsically valuable; in particular, that contemplation of unsurpassable beauty is itself immeasurably good for the beholder. It would follow that any such

⁷³⁰ Ibid.

⁷³¹ Ibid., 147.

⁷³² Ibid.

contemplation of Divine Beauty not only balances off but engulfs participation in horrendous evils.⁷³³

Here Adams echoes Romans 8, where Paul notes that these present evils will not be “worth comparing” to the glory which shall be revealed. Thus, Adams essentially concludes her reflections on evils which are ‘off the charts’ in terms of disvalue, with a call for a final resource with infinite value. The aesthetic disvalue of grotesque and incongruent horrors, then is matched and overcome by the immense value of the beatific vision. By showing how humans can have access to such an immense source of value, then, Adams points to divine resources for benefiting each and every created person.

3.3.5. Aesthetic Benefits as Fifth Framework?

Referring back to Chapter 1 (where I laid out four possible philosophical frameworks for theodicy) Adams’ work here almost suggests a fifth framework for theodicy, where morally-sufficient reasons are eschewed in favor of an exclusive account of how God can be *good to* even those who suffer the worst evils. By drawing out the aesthetic dimension of the beatific vision, as well as the aesthetic dimension of seeing how evils can be positively integrated into our lives, Adams suggests how aesthetics can inform theodicy which is focused on the well-being of each created person. I reserved mention of Adams’ framework for theodicy because I wanted to wait until this chapter to discuss it, but also because I do not think that, in and of itself, Adams’ focus on defeating (instead of explaining) evils is a sufficiently developed paradigm for theodicy for inclusion in that context. (For a more detailed discussion of why this is, see Appendix C.) However, the aesthetic

⁷³³ Ibid.

dimension of the eschatological goods which Adams proposes (seeing one's life as an integrated whole, and the beatific vision) cannot be overlooked. Here we find, however, that the aesthetic dimension of Adams' suggested benefits fits very well into the framework derived from Stump that aesthetics may serve theodicy in aiding our perception of God's goodness. Both the beatific vision and the integration of evils into a larger, positive whole, can be thought of in moral or relational terms which are not predominantly aesthetic. In highlighting the aesthetic dimensions of these benefits, Adams is enabling a clearer *perception* of their value (very much in the way that Stump suggests). What is most significant, for this study, is not the aesthetic nature of the goods which Adams holds up, so much as the fact that horror, as an aesthetic theme, so clearly calls for them. The theodacists cannot merely *explain why* horrors occur, the theodacist must also *explain how* God can defeat horrors.

3.4. Conclusion.

Horror concludes our examinations of three related, but differing, aesthetic themes. Horror, I suggest, is a valuable aesthetic conversation partner for harmony and tragedy for a number of reasons. First, though its view of sin is essentially Augustinian in that it is aesthetically the opposite of the good: disproportionate and disordered, its view of the world is more akin to tragedy, where unjust, and seemingly inexcusable, suffering occurs. Unlike the tragic vision, however, horror finds no reason for hope or meaning in the evils it examines, except for hope in the defeat of evil. Horror forces us to look outside of the totality of creation for deliverance, and to look to God's paradigm defeat of evil as defined in the cross. As David Bentley Hart has pointed out, tragedy may, ironically, suffer from the defect of being too optimistic about evil because it retains (and even magnifies) the dignity of humanity in the face of evil. In opposition to this, the aesthetic theme of

horror may push us closer to a fully Christian vision of evil, because it is more nihilistic and brutal. Horrors destroy lives, and seem to contradict the goodness of God to each and every person. Thus, I am inclined to agree with Marilyn Adams insofar as she sees that theodicy is bankrupt without an account of the possible defeat of evil for each person. Horror helps us see that the story on evil cannot be complete given what we see in the world. Horrors, as Adams writes, “like the blood of Abel, they cry out from the ground”.⁷³⁴ Thus horror demands from theodicy more than mere explanations, the hideous distortion we see in horrendous evils demand an eschatological response. If horror does not cancel out the Augustinian *notion* of cosmic harmony, it must, at the very least, cancel out the Augustinian *affirmation* that we experience this harmony in the here and now. Adams sees rightly that more must be done for participants in horrendous evils.

⁷³⁴ HEGG, 151.

APPENDIX C: *A Critique of Adams*

While theodicians such as Plantinga, Swinburne, and Hick all approach the issue by exploring reasons why a moral person might allow evil, and thus defend God *qua* moral person, Adams seeks to show that her client is above the jurisdiction of the court, yet at the same time convince the jury that He is the good person, wanting the best for each and every one of us. Both parts of Adams “defense” strike me as problematic.

First, her desire to strongly affirm the radical disjuncture between God and humanity. “God and creatures are metaphysically incommensurate” she writes, “as St. Anselm goes so far as to say, in relation to God, creatures are ‘almost nothing.’”⁷³⁵ Morally, however, Adams implies that we are not ‘almost’ but *actually* nothing:

because of the size gap, nothing we could be or do could count - simply by virtue of what it is - as an appropriate move in relation to God, any more than a worm’s wiggling to the right could be intrinsically more respectful of humans than wiggling to the left.⁷³⁶

To some degree, God can overcome this gap. “Just as human civil law confers value, turns paper worth a few cents into \$100 bills,” Adams writes, “so Divine legislation establishes statutory definitions of what will count as fitting or appropriate response by finite creatures to God.”⁷³⁷ Some of this seems clear, as in the case of Sabbath observances. “Why Saturday instead of Tuesday?” we ask. God replies, “Because I say so.” The action of resting on Saturday is not good “simply by virtue of what it is”, but is this

⁷³⁵ Marilyn McCord Adams, “God and Evil: Polarities of a Problem”, 168-9.

⁷³⁶ HEGG, 95. Adams is emphatic that horrors are the rock upon which traditional theodicies “founder”, and that moral categories are “bankrupt, because they fail to grasp what is so bad about horrors, what it might mean for God to permit them, or what their remedy might be.”(59)

⁷³⁷ HEGG, 96.

true of *forming the intention* to obey God and thus rest on Saturday? Based on my reading of Adams, she isn't clear on this point. What is clear is that she does not locate human sin in the will.

Famously, Adams ontologizes sin, defining it as uncleanness and locates it in the "twin metaphysical necessities" of human existence.⁷³⁸ Humans are defiled not because of what we *do*, but because of what we *are*.⁷³⁹ Because "God and creatures are metaphysically incommensurate" we cannot relate properly to God.⁷⁴⁰ And because of our "metaphysical straddling" (neither merely spirit nor merely animal) we are unclean in a way similar to Levitical pigs - neither clearly one thing nor another.⁷⁴¹

Thus Adams aims to construct a "theodicy without blame", but raises perplexing issues about God's purposes.⁷⁴² Katherin Rogers presses the question, "Are the metaphysical size gap and the "uncleanness" necessary?"⁷⁴³ "Adams never questions the assumption that the free agents posited by the Augustinian tradition are metaphysically closer to the image of God than are her unclean infant humans," Rogers writes, "Her argument is just that we *are* the latter and not the former." One wonders, given Adams' confidence about a post-resurrection state where we are "no longer vulnerable to horrors", why God did not create that state first?⁷⁴⁴ If sin is a function of what we are, rather than what we do, why could God not have made us better?

⁷³⁸ HEGG, 95.

⁷³⁹ See HEGG, 86-7.

⁷⁴⁰ Marilyn McCord Adams, "God and Evil: Polarities of a Problem", 168-9.

⁷⁴¹ HEGG, 92-95.

⁷⁴² Marilyn McCord Adams, "Theodicy Without Blame" *Philosophical Topics* 16: 2 (1988): 215-245.

⁷⁴³ Katherin A. Rogers, "The Abolition of Sin: A Response to Adams" *Faith and Philosophy* 19:1 (2002), 77.

⁷⁴⁴ Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrors in Theological Context", 478.

Further, one may wonder, alongside C. S. Lewis, if being an ontologically unclean being is not *worse* than being a voluntarily unclean one?⁷⁴⁵ Lewis writes, in *The Problem of Pain*, “the fact that we are vermin, so far from being felt as an excuse, is a greater shame to and grief to us than any of the particular acts which it leads us to commit.”⁷⁴⁶ Perhaps there is something to do with universalism in Adams’ push for lowering human dignity. If humans are given freedom of self-determination they may head themselves straight for hell. But there are ways around this dilemma. Perhaps, as Rogers suggests, voluntary heaven and forced heaven.⁷⁴⁷

The culmination of Rogers’ critique attempts to press Adams’ line of thought to its conclusions, arguing that if “We are all the same, vast, distance from God” and “our uncleanness is metaphysically necessary” then “Hitler and Mother Teresa are both the same metaphysical distance from God and equally unclean” thus “there is no value difference between them viewed objectively and in relation to God.”⁷⁴⁸ Rogers:

If this is the case, then our human understanding of the term “good” cannot be carried over to God. But if God is not “good” in some way which human beings can grasp, then discussion predicated on His possession of that attribute is vain.⁷⁴⁹

Lewis makes this point more strongly in *The Problem of Pain*, “If He is not (in our sense) good, we shall obey, if at all, only through fear - and should be equally ready to obey an omnipotent Fiend.”⁷⁵⁰ Further, the gap between God and humans seems so broad that the incarnation will not serve to

⁷⁴⁵ Also standing with us is St Augustine, who holds that “a weeping man is better than a happy worm” (VR 77).

⁷⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), 73.

⁷⁴⁷ Katherin A. Rogers, “The Abolition of Sin: A Response to Adams”, 77-8.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 82-3.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷⁵⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 37.

bridge it, because, “Even should He reach across the gap and assume our nature, *His* nature, *modus operandi*, and goals must remain opaque to us”: thus Rogers concludes that Adams’ “abolition of sin means denying meaningful goodness to God.”⁷⁵¹

I’m not interested in rendering verdict on the Adams v. Rogers match. But some of the critiques at least raise doubts about Adams’ attempt to widen the traditional size-gap – pushing God up and humans down. If, at times, theodacists have collapsed the distance, it is at least noteworthy there may be problems with the opposite attempt as well.

Second, I wish to examine Adams’ attempt to show that God is “*good to each created person*, by ensuring each a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole.”⁷⁵² Besides an inherent tension, it seems, between God “honoring us”, as Adams emphasizes, and our lowly estate as “maggots,”⁷⁵³ there may remain questions about how good God can be to us without providing morally sufficient reasons for His actions.

Patrick Sherry, in his essay, “Redeeming the Past” points to two conditions that “would have to be fulfilled for us to regard a new pattern of events as redemptive.”⁷⁵⁴ The first is that reconciliation would have to be made between victims and wrongdoers. The second is that sufferers would have to “see the meaning... of our sufferings, both those brought about by other

⁷⁵¹ Katherin A. Rogers, “The Abolition of Sin: A Response to Adams”, 82-3.

⁷⁵² *HEGG*, 55.

⁷⁵³ Adams writes, “[W]e have no more rightful place in God’s household than worms and maggots do in ours (Job 24:4-6); nothing we could naturally be or do would make us suitable for Divine company.” (*HEGG*, 94) Without sounding defensive, one wishes to object, not just on behalf of us as humans, but on behalf of the maggot. Following Augustine, it’s good to be a maggot! And maggots have their place in relation to God. Moving up the scale of being, humans have a place as well. Good as God made us, bad when we stray from our nature.

⁷⁵⁴ Patrick Sherry, “Redeeming the Past” *Religious Studies* 34 (1998), 171.

people and those occasioned by natural causes”.⁷⁵⁵ Sherry imagines an eschatological opportunity for people to “see such connections in the case of all their sufferings, realize that the goods brought out of them by God could not have been brought about in any less painful way without violating our freedom,” and thus feel “the whole process worthwhile”.⁷⁵⁶

Julian of Norwich sets precedent for Sherry’s case, since she believes that “part of the bliss and fulfillment of those who are saved will be that... they will see the true reason why God has done all the things he has.”⁷⁵⁷ While Sherry’s insistence seems a bit strong—maybe all of us do not need to see all the connections—his point is suggestive. Even if God did not give us reasons why bad things had to happen to us specifically (e.g. for the purposes of soul-making), but instead provided large scale, generic reasons (e.g. free will, or the orderly operation of the natural world), it seems that having some sense of why God allowed bad things to happen to humans would provide a necessary part of God being good to us, and helping us understand and love Him. Part of redemption and healing may involve coming to understand reasons why a certain event happened. Certainly, in common life, reasons often play a key role in reconciliation and redemption.

A quick thought experiment: Imagine you are a plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit against an industrial tycoon who dumped toxic materials in your town’s water table. The defense refuses to discuss what reasons the tycoon had for his actions but promises that the tycoon is so wealthy and clever that he can make it up to each and every cancer-ridden plaintiff and their deformed children. In fact, is so resourceful that he can make it so that your lives are better than before you ingested toxic waste! Thus, even

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., 171.

though he will not apologize for or attempt to explain why he dumped the waste, he asks for you to drop your charges against him. The typical response, I would think would be to continue to press the charges no matter how nice the fellow seemed. If he were really so concerned about us, why did he dump the toxic waste in the first place? While this example is a bit unfair to Adams (the tycoon and God are still far too dissimilar), it at least suggests that we might feel residual outrage at God if we never were privy to any of his reasons for allowing evil. Giving a reason, like an apology, can be a powerful way of atoning oneself to others.

Thus Adams' defense cuts out two elements I think important for meaning-making: God's including us in His moral community (though, of course, not as equals) and God's paying us the divine respect of ultimately answering our why questions. While neither of these are fatal flaws, they may disconcert us enough to give traditional theodicy a second look.

The problem which horrors present to theodacists, because of the insufficiency of morally sufficient reasons to fully justify God's allowance of them, forces us to take seriously an "agnostic thesis" (such as the one that William Alston advances) that allows for us to deflect potentially destructive attacks of theism, without needing to offer a total theodicy (or without defaulting into skepticism). Taking on the question of why God allows very serious evils, Alston writes,

I will not be proceeding on the basis of any general skepticism about our cognitive powers either across the board or generally with respect to God. I will, rather, be focusing on the peculiar difficulties we encounter in attempting to provide adequate support for a certain very ambitious negative existential claim, viz., that there is (can be) no sufficient divine reason for permitting a certain case of suffering...⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵⁸ William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition", 102.

Alston aims to take down the idea that there is no good reason for God to allow certain evils, without attempting a total theodicy. Alston combats the idea that our cognitive powers are incapable of understanding evil at all by assembling a list of partial reasons why God might allow evils: including punishment for sin, free will, soul making, and the redemptive power of suffering.⁷⁵⁹ Despite the fact that none of these reasons seem to strongly outweigh the gratuitous evils Adams brings up does not mean that Alston's attempt fails. True, no single reason or set of reasons we can think of acts as the trump card to horrendous evil, but the fact that we can think of a wide range of reasons for serious, but not horrendous evils, leads us to believe that it is likely that there are such reasons, we just can't quite grasp them.⁷⁶⁰

Our inability to summon perfect reasons Alston chocks up to six factors:

1. "Lack of data," including full knowledge of the past and future, the workings of the human psyche, and so on.
2. "Complexity greater than we can handle."
3. "Difficulty determining what is metaphysically possible or necessary."
4. "Ignorance of the full range of possibilities," our imaginations are often limited in what they can conceive.
5. "Ignorance of the full range of values."
6. "Limits to our capacity to make well-considered value judgments."⁷⁶¹

These points are compelling. That we cannot readily conceive of morally sufficient reasons why God allows horrendous evils does not mean that *any*

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., 103-116.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 120.

such reasons God might have are monstrous; nor does it imply that God is not morally good. The problem more obviously lies with our ability to make large-scale, complex moral judgments.

Returning to aesthetic analogies again, it seems very likely that God's epic story is too large and dense for us to easily grasp. "[W]hy can a child clearly discern the literary merits of a comic book but not *Henry V*?" Daniel Howard-Snyder asks, the answer is obvious, because *Henry V* involves "much more than he is able to comprehend... Value is often veiled in complexity."⁷⁶² Balthasar takes us a similar line in *Love Alone is Credible*, where he offers the analogy of a Mozart symphony as an example of complexity which dwarfs our imaginative capacities:

In the experiences of extraordinary beauty—whether in nature or in art—we are able to grasp a phenomenon in its distinctiveness that otherwise remains veiled. What we encounter in such an experience is as overwhelming as a miracle, something we will never get over. And yet it possesses its intelligibility precisely *as* a miracle; it is something that binds and frees at the same time, since it gives itself unambiguously as the "self-manifesting freedom" (Schiller) of inner, undemonstrable necessity. If Mozart's *Jupiter* symphony has a finale—which is something that I cannot anticipate, derive, or explain on the basis of anything within myself—then it can be only the finale that it has; the symphony possesses its own necessity in this particular form, in which no note could be changed, unless it be by Mozart himself. Such a convergence of what I have invented and yet at the same time possesses compelling plausibility for me is something we find only in the realm of disinterested beauty.⁷⁶³

Drawing on Alston, my answer, then, to why God allows horrendous evils is, "I don't know." Or, more accurately, "God knows" (Job 42). This hopeful agnosticism prevents horrendous evils from signifying that God is impotent, or evil, or hates us, or that we are irrelevant to Him. It attempts

⁷⁶² Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil" in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 302-3.

⁷⁶³ Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 53.

to affirm the plausibility of God's love for us and our worth in His eyes by defending God's moral goodness and placing humans in an important role as moral agents (à la Augustine or Plantinga), despite the fact of horrors.

But a hopefully agnostic theodicy does nothing to *reverse* the meaning of specific horrendous events. Horrors remain so far as we can see disproportionate and incongruous. Contra Augustine, horrors are not yet fully integrated into the harmonious whole. Thus, the aesthetic dimension of horrors, besides challenging overly-simple answers in theodicy, also challenges the notion that all is well. The unresolved remainder left at the end of the theodicy solution, the aesthetic dimension of horror cries out for resolution. Fortunately, Christian theodicy, as opposed to generic theism, has a crucial resource for meaning-making in the midst of evil. Horrors point us to the cross, which offers us the one, true story of God's defeat of horrendous evils.

CONCLUSION

In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else has been directed. Thus each is equally at the centre and none are there by being equals, but some by giving place and some by receiving it, the small things by their smallness and the great things by their greatness, and all the patterns linked and looped together by the unions of a kneeling with a sceptred love. Blessed be He!

C. S. LEWIS, *Perelandra*

At the conclusion of *The Last Battle*, the final book in C. S. Lewis's popular Narnia series, the magical land of Narnia comes to an end. Following the titular 'last battle', the heroes of Narnia, Eustace, Jill, King Tirian and Jewel the Unicorn are all thrust into a stable, which they assume to be simply filled with hay, troughs, and riding tackle, but is actually a *gateway* to a heavenly country: a brighter, cleaner, better version of Narnia. What they took to be an ignominious end, defeat in battle, being shoved into a stable, likely to be killed, has actually turned out as well as could be imagined. However, along with the heroes of the book, a group of dwarfs are also thrust through into the stable, but instead of enjoying the beauty around them, they perceive themselves to still be in the dark, dirty animal stable. Even though the dwarfs are clearly visible to the book's protagonists, the dwarfs themselves still perceive the world around them as the world of the stable.

In the chapter titled, "How the Dwarfs Refused to Be Taken In", Lewis describes the somewhat amusing contrast between the pleasure of the heroes of the book and the misery of the dwarfs. In an attempt to get the dwarfs to understand where they truly are, one of the heroes takes a bouquet of freshly-picked wild violets and holds them to the dwarf's nose,

saying, “Can you smell *that?*”⁷⁶⁴ In reply, the dwarf strikes out at the well-meaning hero and says, “How dare you! What do you mean by shoving a lot of filthy stable-litter in my face? There was a thistle in it too.”⁷⁶⁵ Eventually Aslan (the Christ-figure of Narnia) comes into the scene and explains that the dwarfs are trapped in this mental prison by their strong desire (as the title of the chapter suggests) not to be “taken in”. “[T]hey are” Aslan explains, “so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out [of the stable].”⁷⁶⁶ The dwarf’s cautiousness about being “taken in” prevents their perception of the wider, more wonderful, world.

This thesis explored the relationship which contemporary theodicy has with theological aesthetics. It would be the height of arrogance to suggest that all contemporary theodacists exhibit dwarfish churlishness with relation to theological aesthetics, but there is a similarity between the trends within the theodicy literature and the dwarfish rejection of the new and the strange. Specifically, the prevalent suspicion of aesthetic values, categories and metaphors in the theodicy literature (not to mention its widespread neglect) suggests that this is an area where theodicy has opted for safety, to the detriment of its ability to see (as well as taste, touch and smell) the range of values which are waiting to be used.

In an attempt to correct what I took to be a philosophical bad habit within theodicy, I first looked at the ‘economic models’ within which theodicy carried out the ‘business’ of defending God from the problem of evil. Here I found, by examination of the most influential theodacists in recent years, a trend to look at the problem in largely moral terms, specifically in seeking out morally-sufficient reasons why God allows evils. The problem with this approach for aesthetics, I suggested, was that categories and values

⁷⁶⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1994), 181.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

associated with the aesthetics tend to function rather poorly as morally-sufficient reasons. Furthermore, I suggested, to avoid guilt-by-association, many theodacists have avoided aesthetic values such as beauty because of the ineffective way that beauty has been used by process theodacists in their attempts to explain the divine allowance of evil. This “thistle” in the aesthetic bouquet, has no doubt further warranted suspicion of the usefulness of aesthetics. In order to “make room” for values such as beauty, I suggested, we need to re-frame the question so as to allow more space for alternate ways of seeing. Through conversation with Eleonore Stump, I suggested that a valuable part of the theodicy discourse involves an account of perception: of *seeing* God’s work and God’s world in the proper way. A perennial problem in human life is the way that familiarity can dull our perception of the world, and desensitize us to palpable value, or the way that focus on little details can occlude the bigger picture of the world.

Thus, I argued for theological aesthetics as a field which can help to enrich theodicy by offering it new vistas from which to view the problem of evil. Relying on Hans Urs von Balthasar and Dorothy Sayers as guides, I explored what it means to take seriously the Christian *logos* as a starting point for theological aesthetics, and how, bringing with us our Christian convictions to the field of theodicy, we should not go about thinking about aesthetics, as Dorothy Sayers phrases it, “as if the incarnation had never happened.” Rather, following Sayers, I argued that the theology of incarnation suggests that creative, poetic expression can enable new understanding. Specifically, I argued that we can focus on two features of poetics to illuminate our understanding: in that the arts can re-order *and* enrich our perception of the world. Using this as a guide, I set out to look at three large scale ‘aesthetic themes’ within theodicy.

The first, the Augustinian theme of cosmic harmony, was naturally suggested in two ways. First, because Augustine is himself the fountainhead for much of the aesthetic tradition within Christian theodicy, and second, because Augustine's aesthetic theme has been the focus of the most prolonged and eloquent attacks on aesthetics in theodicy (as displayed *ne plus ultra* by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love*). Defending Augustine's intentions and effectiveness against these attacks, I argued that the theme of cosmic harmony is not *prima facie* morally pernicious, but accords with and supports the Christian proclamation of ultimate justice. Further, I argued that an avoidance of themes such as beauty in theodicy can lead to an equal and opposite problem, which is a theodicy which is sternly moral, excluding those features of life which make life worth living. However, taking issue with some of the details of Augustine's aesthetic theme, I argued that it suffered from a certain tone-deafness to the discordant notes within the universe at any given moment. Contrary to what Augustine argues, it does not seem defensible to argue for perfect moment-to-moment justice in the world. Thus, while some would say that Augustine's picture of the world is too far reaching, I argue that Augustine's picture is not, ironically, big enough to encompass the reality of tragedy in this world.

Following then, from Augustine, I leapt forward many centuries to look at two more recent attempts to interweave aesthetic themes with theodicy. First, looking at the tragic theme in theodicy, I spent time in dialogue with the work of Wendy Farley, who stands in the tradition of other philosophers who have utilized tragedy as a conceptual resource for their thinking. A tragic theodicy, as Farley phrases it, "enters into the hiatus between the longing for justice and the reality of suffering," and thus, she argues, resists the short-fallings of traditional theodicy's "cool justifications

of evil”.⁷⁶⁷ Tragedy opens up a space for us to see and feel suffering which is recognized and felt as unjust, yet at the same time finds some value and meaning in the moment of suffering. As Farley argues, tragedy helps us see suffering, but also to see beyond suffering to the resistance and compassion which are born from it. Tragedy, therefore, carries with it some of the antidote to evil, valuable resources which Christians can integrate into their theodicies, and which may well be overlooked without this aesthetic theme. The danger of theodicy, as David Bentley Hart eloquently points out, is that tragedy can succumb to a kind of ‘ratification’ of suffering, and thus ‘make peace’ with an enemy, when we should instead be plotting the enemy’s defeat. I agree here, and suggest that the trend within tragic theodicy can too easily lead us to overlook the need for an even further defeat of evil, and can also lead us to find too much meaning in innocent suffering.

The final aesthetic theme under examination is horror, a relative newcomer to the theodicy literature. Seeking to offer a critique of tragedy, I dialogued with the work of Marilyn McCord Adams, whose theodicy takes horrendous evils as a starting point and fundamental touchstone for any justification of God. Through appeal to the category of horror, we can see more clearly that not all evils are possessed of a kind of tragic grandeur, which naturally engenders resistance and compassion, but can degrade and crush the moral agent like an ant under the heel of a work boot. Horror also offers a critique to the Augustinian aesthetic theme, in that it offers for reflection states of affairs which are not only intellectually repellent but emotionally disturbing, and therefore should upset the calm, collected demeanor of any theodicy who claims to have a final answer to the problem of evil. One key advantage of horrors, however, is that their unrelentingly negative vision drives us to look beyond them for some larger framework wherein they can

⁷⁶⁷ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 22-3.

find resolution. Whereas tragedy aims to offer some solution to the problem of evil within the realm of the immanent, horror demands eschatological resolution. This pressing demand therefore calls us to make explicit appeal to the full range of Christian resources, as well as to look to our exemplar in all things, Jesus Christ, to offer us a vision for the ultimate defeat of evil.

Horror does not, however, overturn either the value of tragedy or the ultimate vision of cosmic harmony, but rather, forces us to take account of the darkest details of the “great dance” (as C. S. Lewis describes the providential ordering of the universe), in order to see (or to attempt to see) how these dark details can be incorporated into some larger and more lovely work of art. In a twist of genres, then, it is horror which forces us to look to those most beautiful and hopeful of details in the Christian story.

Returning, then, to the initial metaphor with which I began this section, it has been the attempt of this thesis to drag the theodicy conversation a bit more out of the stable to which it has become accustomed, in order to enrich theodicy’s vision with some additional vistas from which to view God’s providence. Through some conceptual reframing and additional conversation partners, theodicy, as a discourse practice, can learn to see, smell, taste, touch and hear some new features of God’s providence, which extends not just to the favored dimensions of truth and goodness, but also to beauty, which, as Hans Urs von Balthasar describes it, “dances as an uncontained splendor around the double constellation of the true and the good”.⁷⁶⁸ ‘Dancing’ with beauty (and the imagination) may be difficult, at first, for theodicy to begin to do. But as I have argued, the benefits for theodicy which theological aesthetics has to offer are sufficient to force theodacists out onto the dance floor.

⁷⁶⁸ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1: 18.

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