

Aesthetic Arguments for the Existence of God

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Introduction

Philosophers rarely advocate arguments from beauty for the existence of God, and those who do advocate them rarely spend more than a few paragraphs in their cause. [1] This is so much the case that major critiques of theistic arguments, such as J.L.Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism*, feel no need to respond to aesthetic arguments. However, the range, subtlety and power of aesthetic arguments is greater than commonly realized, and they have been defended by such luminaries as Richard Swinburne, F.R.Tennant and Keith Ward. [2]

I will define four general categories of aesthetic arguments for God: two epistemological and two ontological. I then develop two avenues of argument, one epistemological and one ontological, paying particular attention as I do so to the thought of two secular philosophers who have considered the relationship between aesthetics and religion: Anthony O'Hear and Roger Scruton. I will also draw upon the work of Christian thinkers Francis Schaeffer, C.S.Lewis and Peter Kreeft.

Four Categories of Aesthetic Argument

Aesthetic arguments for God are traditionally subsumed under the category of design arguments. They generally take the form of argument by analogy or to the best explanation, although several deductive arguments exist.

Aesthetic reality can be divided between our subjective awareness of beauty and the objective beauty (intrinsic aesthetic admirability) of which we are aware. Aesthetic arguments may therefore focus either upon our ability to know beauty, or upon the existence of beauty itself. Aesthetic arguments that focus upon our knowledge of beauty are 'epistemological' arguments; those that focus upon the existence of beauty *per se* are 'ontological' arguments.

Some of the epistemological arguments (aesthetic argument type *a*) work from the nature of our subjective aesthetic experience, seeking to interpret this experience as revelatory of divinity. Other epistemological arguments (aesthetic argument type *b*) begin with the mere fact that we have aesthetic awareness, seeking to show that theism gains credibility in providing the best understanding of this capacity. As William C. Davis writes:

Humans have numerous features that are more easily explained by theism than by metaphysical naturalism, if only because metaphysical naturalism currently explains all human capacities in terms of their ability to enhance survival. Among these features are the possession of reliable faculties aimed at truth, the *appreciation of beauty*, and a sense of humor. [3]

Some ontological aesthetic arguments (aesthetic argument type *c*) ask how likely it is that non-purposeful natural laws should produce the objective beauty that we find all around us. For example, J.P.Moreland affirms that features of the world such as 'a sun-set, fall in Vermont, the human body, the Rocky Mountains [and] the singing of birds. . . all exhibit real, objective beauty' [4] and suggests that: 'the beauty in the examples cannot be accounted for in terms of survival value, natural selection, and the like.' [5] For this conclusion he gives the following reasons:

Some of the examples (the Rocky Mountains) are not biological organisms. Further, even when one considers biological organisms (the human body) it is not clear that the beauty of those organisms is related to their survival. Since science does not deal with value qualities (aesthetic or moral) in its descriptions of the world, then beauty as an aesthetic property is not a part of evolutionary theory. [6]

The thought is that, since naturalistic explanations of the world give no *a priori* reason to expect beauty to arise in either the biological or non-biological realm, a theistic explanation, which can invoke teleology to explain this fact, gains a measure of credibility.

Other ontological aesthetic arguments (aesthetic argument type *d*) propose the existence of God as the source and standard of objective aesthetic value. Augustine, in his *City of God*, provided the following typical example of a deductive type *d* aesthetic argument:

Beauty. . . can be appreciated only by the mind. This would be impossible, if this 'idea' of beauty were not found in the mind in a more perfect form. . . But even here, if this 'idea' of beauty were not subject to change, one person would not be a better judge of sensible beauty than another. . . nor the experienced and skilled than the novice and the untrained; and the same person could not make progress towards better judgement than before. And it is obvious that anything which admits of increase or decrease is changeable.

This consideration has readily persuaded men of ability and learning. . . that the original 'idea' is not to be found in this sphere, where it is shown to be subject to change. . . And so they saw that there must be some being in which the original form resides, unchangeable, and therefore incomparable. And they rightly believed that it is there that the origin of things is to be found, in the uncreated, which is the source of all creation.

The following apologetic concentrates on aesthetic argument types *a* and *d*.

Beyond O'Hear on Aesthetics and the 'religious resolution'

In *Beyond Evolution* (Oxford, 1997) Anthony O'Hear writes that: 'in experiencing beauty we feel ourselves to be in contact with a deeper reality than the everyday.' [7] He passes the following observations upon this experience:

Art can seem revelatory, just as it does seem to answer to objective standards. It can seem to take us to the essence of reality, as if certain sensitivities in us. . . beat in tune with reality. It is as if our. . . appreciation of things external to us. . . are reflecting a deep and pre-conscious harmony between us and the world from which we spring. If this feeling is not simply an illusion. . . it may say something about the nature of reality itself, as responsive to human desires. . .

But how could we think of an aesthetic justification of experience. . . unless our aesthetic experience was sustained by a divine will revealed in the universe, and particularly in our experience of it as beautiful? It is precisely at this point that many or even most will draw back. Aesthetic experience *seems* to produce the harmony between us and the world that would have to point to a religious resolution were it not to be an illusion. [8]

So far so good, but O'Hear himself draws back: 'But such a resolution is intellectually unsustainable, so aesthetic experience, however powerful, remains subjective and, in its full articulation, illusory. This is a dilemma I cannot solve or tackle head on.' [9] To summarily dismiss the 'religious resolution' as 'intellectually unsustainable' seems like an uncharitably off-handed failure to follow the evidence where it leads, a failure that also forces O'Hear to deny his first impression of beauty as being objective. What a strange, even absurd universe, in which the aesthetic experiences that seem to give life so much of its

meaning are in fact meaningless illusions! Perhaps the universe is sane after all, in which case O'Hear's dismissive attitude towards the divine is (literally speaking) not.

O'Hear's chapter on beauty in *Beyond Evolution* ends with the thought that, 'despite the problems of alienation thrown up by science and morality' [10] we nevertheless have a sense that we are (to some extent) at home in the world, and that nowhere do we meet this intuition quite so strongly as in aesthetic experience: 'From my point of view it is above all in aesthetic experience that we gain the fullest and most vividly lived sense that though we are creatures of Darwinian origin, our nature transcends our origin in tantalizing ways.' [11] This is to say that naturalistic evolution is incapable of adequately accounting for our aesthetic faculties; but O'Hear offers no hypothesis to plug this inherent gap in his explanation of things. Might this be because the obvious explanation lies with God? Aesthetic experience, says O'Hear, promises to reconcile our particular aesthetic experiences 'to what might be thought of as our striving for some transcendent guarantee and consolation.' [12] For O'Hear, the tantalization is literal. The aesthetic experience that calls us home is an illusion, a 'whistling in the dark' [13] as he puts it (unless God is accepted after all), and this realization must leave us alone with our alienation.

O'Hear therefore finds himself in exactly the same position as the author of *Ecclesiastes* who saw that everything was 'meaningless . . . under the sun [i.e. without reference to a transcendent God].' (*Ecclesiastes* 1:2-3.) It seems to me that embracing the existence of God is the only way for O'Hear to escape from the pit of nihilistic despair. Here then is an experiential, *existential* aesthetic argument that works by proposing an adequate, integrated, intellectually and aesthetically satisfying world-view.

More recently, in *After Progress* (Bloomsbury, 1999), O'Hear seems to have drawn closer to the acknowledgement of "what the religions have referred to variously as God or Brahman or the One" [14], concluding that:

Through art, particularly the great masterpieces of the past, we do have intimations of beauty, of order, of divinity, even, way beyond the biological. . . in appreciating the beauty of the world. . . we are seeing the world as endowed with value and meaning. . . In responding to our experience of the world in moral and aesthetic ways, we are implying that there is something to be responded to. . . We are seeing the world and our own existence as created. . . seeing the world as animated by some higher quasi-personal purpose, operating through and behind the material process revealed and studied by natural science." [15]

As F.R. Tennant wrote: 'God reveals Himself. . . in many ways; and some men enter His Temple by Gate Beautiful.' [16]

Aesthetic Experience and Longing for God

If God exists and has designed us for relationship with Himself, as Christianity claims, one would expect people to find contentment only within such a relationship and to show signs of deprivation if such a relationship is lacking. That there is a deep need for God within the human heart was recognised by the biblical songwriter who wrote that 'As a deer longs for streams of cool water, so I long for you, O God.' (Psalm 42:1, G.N.B.) Christian writers through the ages have echoed this theme of longing. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions* that: 'You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.' Pascal wrote of how 'There is a god-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man, and only God can fill it.' [17]

Many atheists also recognize the existence of a restless, unfulfilled desire for something more. Katharine Tait said this about her father, the famous atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell: 'Somewhere at the back of my father's mind, at the bottom of his heart, in the depth of his soul, there was an empty space that had once been filled by God and he never found anything else to put in it.' [18] Russell himself acknowledged that: 'The centre of me is always and eternally a terrible pain - a curious wild pain - a searching for something beyond what the world contains.' [19]

That this restless desire apart from God predicted by the theistic hypothesis exists, and that people who believe they have discovered relationship with God seem to have discovered the object that satiates this desire, is evidence in favor of the theistic hypothesis; empirical confirmation of Jesus' claim that: 'this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.' (John 17:3.) As Pascal argued:

Man tries unsuccessfully to fill this void with everything that surrounds him, seeking in absent things the help he cannot find in those that are present, but all are incapable of it. This infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite. . . object. . . God himself. [20]

Pascal here perfectly describes secular culture in its futile search for fulfillment apart from God. As Roger Scruton observes: 'The desolation of the god-forsaken city is proof of that higher world from which the soul descends.' [21]

This desire for God (which pulls against our sinful desire to be our own god) was discussed by Thomas Aquinas and (though unpublished) by Pascal; but it was left to C.S.Lewis to present it as an argument for the Heaven of 'eternal life' with God:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. . . If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. [22]

What has all this to do with aesthetic experience? Augustine provides our first clue: 'my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, *beauty*, and truth not in him but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error.' Augustine's search eventually led to the discovery that God was the true object of his need, the true fountain of beauty (of all that is good, including truth and knowledge), and to the exclamation: 'Oh Beauty so old and so new! Too late have I loved thee!' [23]

This same search for that transcendent something sensed within or through aesthetic experience was a golden-thread running through the life of C.S.Lewis:

If a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come at last to the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given. . . in our present mode of. . . experience. This desire was. . . as the seige Perilous in Arthur's castle - the chair in which only one could sit. And if nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist. [24]

As a literary scholar, Lewis picked up on the Romantic term *Sehnsucht* to describe a family of emotional responses to the world (melancholy, wonder, yearning, etc.) which are linked by a sense of displacement or alienation from the object of desire. '*Sehnsucht*', writes Corbin Scott Carnell, 'may be said to represent just as much a basic theme in literature as love.' [25] The closest English translation for *Sehnsucht* is probably 'nostalgic longing', and it arises when experience of something within the world awakens a desire for something beyond what the natural world can offer as a corresponding object of desire. *Sehnsucht* therefore directs our attention towards the transcendent, that which 'goes beyond' our present experience. The power of fairy-tales lie in their ability to transport us into a world transparently imbued with *Sehnsucht*. [26] Peter Kreeft considers music, noting how the ancients attributed it to gods, as perhaps the most powerful producer of *Sehnsucht*. However, Lewis suggests that:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. . . Do what we will, then, we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy. [27]

The rhetoric is a little overplayed here: there is objective beauty *in* books and music, but these things also stir within us a desire for a beauty greater than themselves which we seem to apprehend *through* their beauty. It is as if their finite beauty is a derived quality that draws our aesthetic attention into the heaven of underived and absolute beauty. On the theistic view of things, this 'as if' finds its fulfillment.

This *Sehnucht* points, then, towards the existence of a supernatural happiness. Is there truly any reason to suppose that reality offers satisfaction to this desire? Being hungry doesn't prove that we will get fed. True; but such a criticism misses the point. A man's hunger does not prove that he will get any food; he might die of starvation. But surely hunger proves that a man comes from a race which needs to eat and inhabits a world where edible substances exist: 'In the same way,' says Lewis, 'though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will.' [28]

Lewis was impressed by Rudolph Otto's book *The Idea of the Holy*, in which 'the Numinous' is described as that which causes in those who perceive it a sense of awe. This sense of awe is not the fear that would be caused by believing a fierce animal was in the room with you, nor the supernatural dread of believing a ghost to be near-by, but the feeling of awe one might have if one simply believed that 'a great spirit' were present. [29] The Numinous is not the subjective experience, but the transcendent object about which one feels this sense of awe. The principle of credulity (that we should trust first impressions until given reason for doubt) encourages us to take the straightforward interpretation of such experience that the Numinous is an objective reality truly perceived.

The point of discussing the Numinous in the present context is that awe of the Numinous is one of that family of emotional states grouped together under the category of *Sehnucht*. Moreover, a sense of the Numinous often accompanies aesthetic experiences of the 'sublime' variety (i.e. the beauty of the great and majestic), such as a mountain or thunderstorm. This explains why mountains and climatic events feature so widely in the religious experience of the Jewish nation. Neither the aesthetic experience nor the immediate objects of that experience can be termed 'the Numinous'. The mind of a university educated prince turned shepherd is quite capable, for example, of distinguishing between a burning bush and the numinous presence of God mediated through that burning bush. To argue that the burning bush was 'nothing but' a natural conflagration is to fall into the pit of reductionism. Perception of the Numinous constitutes a whole new 'level' or 'depth' of experience, and it is recognizable as such. As Evelyn Underhill wrote:

When we are awed by the intolerable majesty of the Himalaya, when we look . . . at the lonely hostile beauty of the Eismeer - only water at a low temperature after all - . . . we are merely receiving through symbols adapted to our size, intimations of the Absolute Beauty. . . . Looking at an object which is 'beautiful' or 'sacred'. . . we are - if we receive a genuine aesthetic or religious impression - passing through and beyond this object, to the experience of an Absolute revealed in things. [30]

Peter Kreeft writes of the human face as 'the most numinous, most magical matter in the world.' [31] Why? Because 'the surface of the face, like the appearance of the world, points. . . beyond the surface to. . . depths not of matter but of meaning.' [32] Kreeft explains that, like a poem, the face must both be and *mean*:

A smile both is and means happiness; the word "happiness" only means it. There is no happiness *in* the word, as there is in the smile. . . . A human face is more than a part of the body, an object; it is a part of the soul, a subject. . . . It is the place where soul . . . transfigures body. . . [33]

Like the face, suggests Kreeft, the cosmos not only exists, but *means*: 'the whole world is a face.' [34] Kreeft distinguishes between the conventional sign, like letters in an alphabet that could have been different, and the natural sign that 'is a living example of what it signifies.' [35] For example, 'There is happiness in a smile, as there is not a curve ball in the catcher's two fingers signaling it.' [36] Just as the

smile is a 'natural sign' of the happiness it signifies, so nature can be seen as a natural sign of that transcendent object of desire who makes Himself immanent therein.

Is this 'seeing' a true insight into ultimate reality, or a delusion? Again, in the absence of sufficient reason to doubt the existence of God, the principle of credulity would suggest that what seems to be the case is the case. One can easily explain how some people fail to 'read the sign', for we know that we can look at a sign instead of looking *along* it [37] to that which it signifies. Roger Scruton's thoughts on natural signs and religious experience parallels Kreeft's:

Milton tells us that 'Smiles from reason flow,/And are of love the food'. He means that only . . . reasoning beings smile, since only they have the peculiar *intentionality* which is expressed in smiling. . . Yet smiles would not appear in the scientist's 'book of the world'. . . We classify facial movements as smiles, because that is how we perceive and respond to them. . . There is an attitude that we direct [or are naturally led to direct] towards the human person, and which leads us to see in the human form a perspective on the world that reaches from a point outside it. That is what we see in a smile. And the experience of the holy, the sacred and the miraculous arises in a similar way, when we direct [or are led to direct] this attitude not to other human beings, but to places, times, and objects. . . A sacred place is one in which personality shines from mere *objects*. . . Such things have no subjectivity of their own. . . The experience of the sacred is therefore a revelation, a direct encounter with the divine, which eludes all explanation in natural terms. . . [38]

This revelation, which Scruton values for its role in overcoming human estrangement and re-enchancing a world demoralized by scientism, must nevertheless be considered by Scruton to be a groundless illusion, since he remains, as far as I can tell, an atheist. I am of course suggesting that this revelation is not an illusion - which is, after all, a more straightforward interpretation of the facts.

Maybe it is due to a misplaced generalization of the scientific method, looking *at* the natural world rather than *along* it, that more people do not experience the world as a natural sign. (Of course, if the world is a sign, one must take into account its 'fallen' nature; this is why we only see 'through a glass, darkly'.) Some people set up scientific delectability as a metaphysical criterion of objective existence that thereby excludes God from their world-view as a window excludes wind from a room. However, such a criterion cannot pass its own test. How could it be proven scientifically that only scientifically knowable entities are objectively real? Science consciously restricts itself to the impersonal (although scientific data can ground rational conclusions about agents, as in forensic science); but the person who declares that science disproves the existence of God is like a person who declares that windows disproves the existence of wind! Such a person would find no scientific category within which to place their own beliefs or personhood - can matter be true or false about anything? [39] Perhaps we need to open the window a bit:

Have you ever seen one of those picture puzzles that masks a face as jungle leaves or bushes? "Find the man in the picture." Once you do, the picture never looks the same again: it is not a jungle but a man. Once you see the face of God, the world is forever transformed into his features. [40]

How does sensitivity to the Numinous function as a variety of *Sehnsucht*? I believe that part of the explanation lies with beauty functioning as a link to the divine source and standard of all goodness and beauty. That is, *the link between objective beauty and objective goodness is the key to understanding the link between aesthetic and religious experience*. That link, simply put, is that goodness is beautiful, and beauty is good. It is therefore unsurprising to read Roger Scruton affirming that 'When art and religion are healthy, they are also inseparable. . . for the aesthetic is rooted in the religious' [41] Nor does it come as a surprise to find him admitting that:

In the sentiment of beauty we feel the purposiveness and intelligibility of everything that surrounds us, while in the sentiment of the sublime we seem to see beyond the world, to something overwhelming and inexpressible in which it is somehow grounded. . . it is in our feeling

for beauty that the content, and even the truth, of religious doctrine is strangely and untranslatably intimated to us. [42]

Despite these observations, Scruton denies the existence of God and recommends a 'let's pretend' philosophy of 'as if' to paper over the cracks of meaninglessness left in his secular world-view by the absence of God. High culture, says Scruton, 'teaches us to live *as if* our lives mattered eternally.' I think this speaks for itself, being inclined to agree with Peter Kreeft that 'Plato in the *Symposium* let the cat out of the bag. . . Only Beauty Itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, perfect and eternal, will satisfy the soul.' [44]

Aesthetic experience gives us something we want, but only in part, satisfying our desire only to reveal within us a deeper need that no natural object seems to satisfy:

We want so much more - something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words - to be united with the beauty we see. . . to receive it into ourselves. . . to become part of it. . . At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us feel fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in. When human souls have become as perfect in voluntary obedience as the inanimate creation is in its lifeless obedience, then they will put on its glory, or rather that greater glory of which Nature is only the first sketch. [45]

Art and The Line of Despair

Christian apologist and evangelist Francis Schaeffer analyzed modern culture in terms of the dichotomy it has set up between the rational realm of (objective, empirical) facts and the non-rational realm of (subjective, opinion relative) values. Schaeffer called the historical crossing-point after which this dichotomy arose 'the line of despair'. [46]

Schaeffer observed that a secular world-view that cuts a transcendent God out of its account of ultimate reality leads to the depersonalization of humanity in the realm of fact and the restriction of values (including moral goodness, beauty, and even truth) to the realm of subjective, relative, opinion. As a secular world-view grows, value is increasingly placed in what Schaeffer dubbed 'the upper story', where a leap of blind faith was required to avoid the obvious naturalistic conclusion that the 'death of God' leads to the 'death of value'.

While Schaeffer wrote in the 1970's, post-modernism was in its infancy, and culture as a whole still clung, though a non-rational leap of faith, to the existence of value. Today, the implications of the 'death of God', foreseen by Neitzche, have finally caught up with us:

Where is God?' [cried the madman]. 'I shall tell you. We have killed him. . . All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? . . . Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the horizon? What did we do to unchain this earth from its sun? . . . Where are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing?' [47]

Scruton notes that 'The announcement of the death of God is less a statement about God, than a statement about us. . . The death of God really means the death of an old form of human community - a community founded on holiness.' [48] It is as if society has become exhausted with the attempt to hold on to objective value in the face of a world-view that provides no basis for their existence.

Postmodern society is the result of the realization that without the transcendent reference point provided by God, the 'upper story' of value has become nothing but an incoherent miscellany of subjective, relative

opinions, governed more by fashion than common sense. Consider the similarities between the prophetic words of Nietzsche and Roger Scruton's view of current post-modern culture:

To understand the depth of the . . . 'as if' is to understand the condition of the modern soul. We know that we are animals, parts of the natural order, bound by laws which tie us to the material forces which govern everything. We believe that the gods are our invention, and that death is exactly what it seems. Our world has been disenchanted and our illusions destroyed. At the same time we cannot live as though that were the whole truth of our condition. Even modern people are compelled to praise and blame, love and hate, reward and punish. Even modern people . . . are aware of self, as the centre of their being; and even modern people try to connect to other selves around them. We therefore see others *as if* they were free beings, animated by a self or soul, and with more than a worldly destiny. If we abandon that perception, then human relations dwindle into a machine-like parody. . . the world is voided of love, [moral] duty and [aesthetic] desire, and only the body remains. [49]

Briefly put, *Postmodernism necessitates an inconsistent life*. In the realm of fact we 'know' that people are the unintended products of material necessity, plus time, plus chance. We 'know' that God is a figment of our imagination. We 'know' that there is therefore no objective value in truth, goodness, or beauty. However, we cannot live as if all this were true (but then again, perhaps it isn't true!). Therefore, we must be inconsistent and live the lie of 'as if'.

Schaeffer noted how some naturalists (such as Julian Huxley) admit that man 'functions better if he acts as though God is there', and he points out in a somewhat understated manner that: 'This is not an optimistic, happy, reasonable or brilliant answer. It is darkness and death.' [50] Roger Scruton seems to be repeating history because God-less philosophy has no-where left to run but the land of illusions.

Scruton's contention is that 'Culture. . . has a religious root and a religious meaning [such that] the point of being cultivated cannot, in the end, be explained without reference to the nature and value of religion.' [51] Scruton thinks that aesthetic objects invite us to place ourselves 'in relation to the thing considered', a search for a meaning that is not for practical benefit but 'for the insight which religion also provides: insight into the why and wither of our being here.' [52]

With the rise of naturalism and secularism in the (so-called) Enlightenment, art unsurprisingly came to the fore as a substitute religious experience: 'art became a redeeming enterprise, and the artist stepped into the place vacated by the prophet and the priest.' [53] Modernist culture rejected the Medieval recognition of the 'face of God' in nature and art, but continued to seek the Numinous experience of *Sehnsucht* that it craved in an art devoid of transcendent reference point:

The high culture of the Enlightenment. . . involved a noble and energetic attempt to rescue the ethical view of human life. . . which flourished spontaneously in the old religious culture. . . The rescue was a work of the imagination, in which the aesthetic attitude took over from religious worship as the source of intrinsic values. [54]

From the theistic point of view, one could say that the spiritual feelings of modernism were better than its philosophy. However, the rescue attempt (however noble in intent) was doomed from the start, and the theist has an explanation for this failure: God is the source of aesthetic value as well as ethical value. Cut off from its source, aesthetic value no less than ethical value was bound to wither and die. After the 'death of God' it would not be long before people realised this was so; but instead of preserving the meaning of spiritual experience by reacknowledging its transcendent source, post-modernism held on to naturalism and accepted the objective meaninglessness of all value. As Scruton says, 'When religion dies. . . the vision of man's higher nature is conserved by art. But art cannot be a substitute for religion, nor does it fill the void that is left by faith.' [55]

Walking through a Cambridge museum I was struck by the changing themes apparent in the historically ordered art collection. Many of the earlier paintings had a religious theme, paintings of nature became more prominent as time went on, but the general impression produced by these art- works was one of artistic beauty and meaning. I could sense that the artists were saying 'Look, this person or event is important (often theologically so)', or 'Look, this is beautiful.' As we reached the Enlightenment, detailed still-life studies and portraits of wealthy people who had paid to be immortalized on canvas dominated the collection. Art had begun to serve man. Finally, we reached galleries of twentieth century art. The change of mood was even more pronounced and all the more disturbing, for this art clearly expressed a disturbed mindset. Images of pain and depression filled me with a sense of tragic compassion in stark contrast with the beauty and hope we had just seen filling the art of so many preceding centuries. As Catholic theologian Hans Kung put it: 'Art has now become the expression of man's estrangement, his isolation in the world, of the ultimate futility of human life and the history of humanity.' [56] I think that the decline of beauty in art and the decline of faith in God are linked; it's just too much of a coincidence otherwise.

If God exists, then to worship the beauty of art in the Enlightenment manner is to make art into an idol, to mistake the sign for the subject, the face for the person. As Peter Kreeft warns: 'Since an idol is not God, no matter how sincere or passionately it is treated as God, it is bound to break the heart of its worshipper, sooner or later. Good motives for idolatry cannot remove the objective fact that the idol is an unreality. . . You can't get blood out of a stone or divine joy from nondivine things.' [57]

If art begins to reveal our broken cultural heart, then this is some confirmation of the suggestion that art as idol has failed (as all idols must); but the pain of artistic mis-use should re- direct us towards art's healthy, religious use (and by 'religious use' I do *not* mean art with a liturgical function or an explicitly religious subject matter; but rather art produced within a religious world view).

If, as Scruton claims, healthy art is inseparable from healthy religion, then either God exists and explains this connection, or God does not exist, and the world is absurd. Why absurd? Because a world in which aesthetic value depends upon the retention of belief in a non-existent God is a world that asks us to hypocritically predicate true value on a falsehood. Therefore, if the world is not thus absurd, God both exists and grounds aesthetic value.

The hypothesis that God is the only sufficient condition of the objectivity and meaningfulness of aesthetic value explains (what otherwise seems inexplicable) why the flower of artistic high culture that flourished under the world-view of Christendom turned to rancor in a secular society: 'if you consider the high culture of modern times', writes Scruton, 'you will be struck by the theme of alienation which runs through so many of its products. . . the high culture of our society, having ceased to be a meditation on the common religion, has become instead a meditation on the lack of it.' [58] What is it that people miss so much that they devote a large proportion of our culture's artistic output to mourning its loss? The answer is simple: God.

Schaeffer also pointed out how a naturalistic world-view leads to the denial of those aspects of personhood which is essential to the existence of meaningful aesthetic experience. The denial of any objective reality besides matter is the denial of what Schaeffer called 'the mannishness of man' (and which, in these more 'politically correct' times, we might call 'the humanness of humans'): 'Those aspects of man, such as significance, love, relationship, rationality and the fear of nonbeing, which mark him off from animals and machines and give evidence of his being created in the image of a personal God.' [59]

In denying that any reality, let alone ultimate reality, is personal, the naturalist has no room for the 'mannishness of man'. For example, atheist Francis Crick writes that, 'You. . . your sense of personal identity and free-will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.' [60] As Schaeffer put it: 'if man has been kicked up by chance out of what is only impersonal, then those things that make him man - hope of purpose and significance, love, motions of morality and rationality, beauty and verbal communication - are ultimately unfulfillable and are thus meaningless.' Naturalism therefore leads to Nihilism, of which post-modernism is really an expression: 'The existential vacuum which is the mass neurosis of the present time can be described as a private and

personal form of nihilism' wrote psychiatrist Victor E. Frankl, 'for nihilism can be defined as the contention that being has no meaning.' [62]

No one, says Schaeffer, has ever worked out how to obtain the personal from the impersonal (a feat that would involve getting the greater from the lesser). Thirty years of thought since Schaeffer produced his 'cultural apologetic' has not improved matters for the naturalists. Philosopher William Hasker concludes that 'naturalism experiences severe difficulties in its attempt to explain the phenomena of humanness. . . [whereas] in the universe as conceived by theism, the existence of these distinctive attributes of humanness is far less surprising.' [63] Theism, in which ultimate reality is personal, constitutes an eminently reasonable alternative to naturalism; in Schaeffer's own words: 'Our generation longs for the reality of personality, but it cannot find it. But Christianity says personality is valid because personality has not just appeared in the universe, but rather is rooted in the personal God who has always been.' [64]

The relevancy of this line of argument to the validity of aesthetic experience is straight forward enough: only persons can mean things, or impart meaning to things, and so only through persons can art have any meaning; but naturalism denies the 'mannishness of man' and thus the validity of artistic creation. Naturalism also fails to account for the existence of human experience, including aesthetic experience. The 'death of God' has led to 'the death of man' and hence 'the death of art'. Aesthetic value is an objective reality that cannot be reduced to 'nothing but atoms in the void'. Therefore naturalism should not look like a good candidate for a world-view to anyone who wants to retain a reasonable belief in aesthetic value, and this gives one reason to prefer theism. If one accepts that naturalism involves a denial of the 'mannishness of man' then one ought to look favorably upon theism as a world-view capable of giving art, and aesthetic appreciation in general, a welcoming home. [65]

Conclusion

I suggest that the four categories of aesthetic arguments for the existence of God deserve greater attention than has traditionally been the case. Secular philosophers, like Anthony O'Hear and Roger Scruton, recognize that aesthetics lends itself to religious treatment, and it is notable how strong a pull towards God they feel when considering aesthetic phenomena. However, being unprepared to follow this evidence where it leads, secular philosophy ends either by denying the objectivity and meaningfulness of beauty, or by requiring a leap of blind faith into Schaeffer's 'upper story' if the validity of aesthetic creativity and appreciation is to be retained. A theistic world-view, on the other hand, provides a natural environment for the existence, appreciation and rational understanding of aesthetic reality.

Endnotes

[1] This is also the case with my own apologetic work: *The Case For God*, (Monarch, 1999), which I wrote before my MPhil research led me to investigate these arguments in greater depth.

[2] See: Stephen R.L.Clark, *God, Religion and Reality*, (SPCK, 1998); William C. Davis, 'Theistic Arguments', *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray, (Eerdmans, 1999); Peter Kreeft, *Heaven, The Heart's Deepest Longing*, (Ignatius, 1989); Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, (Monarch, 1995); C.S.Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory' in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast - and other essays*, (Fount); Clark H. Pinnock, *Reason Enough*, (Paternoster Press, 1980); John Polkinghorne, *quarks, chaos & christianity*, (Triangle, 1994); W.S.Rhodes, *The Christian God*, (ISPCK); Francis A. Schaeffer, *Trilogy*, (IVP); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, (Oxford, 1991), *Is There A God?*, (Oxford, 1996) & *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, (Oxford, 1998); F.R.Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, volume two; Keith Ward, *God, Chance, & Necessity*, (OneWorld, 1996); & Peter S. Williams: *The Case For God*, (Monarch, 1999).

[3] William C. Davis, 'Theistic Arguments', *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray, (Eerdmans, 1999), p37, my italics.

- [4] J.P.Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Baker, 1987).
- [5] ibid.
- [6] ibid.
- [7] Anthony O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution*, p195.
- [8] ibid, p199 & 201.
- [9] ibid.
- [10] ibid.
- [11] ibid.
- [12] ibid.
- [13] ibid.
- [14] Anthony O'Hear, *After Progress*, (Bloomsbury, 1999).
- [15] ibid.
- [16] F.R.Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*.
- [17] Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*.
- [18] Katherine Tait, quoted by Luis Palau, *Is God Relevant?*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), p93.
- [19] Bertrand Russell, quoted by Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, p253.
- [20] Pascal, op cit, *Pensees* 181.
- [21] Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide To Modern Culture*, (Duckworth, 1998), p74.
- [22] C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. This is the greatest conclusion of any argument I know, since it argues not only for the existence of God, but for the existence of Heaven as well, including thereby the possibility of personal immortality.
- [23] Augustine, *Confessions*.
- [24] C.S.Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, (Fount).
- [25] Corbin Scott Carnell, *Bright Shadow of Reality - Spiritual Longing in C.S.Lewis*, (Eerdmans, 1999), p23.
- [26] C.S.Lewis found this in reading the works of the Victorian writer George MacDonald. Consider also *Lord of the Rings* by Lewis' friend J.R.R.Tolkien.
- [27] C.S.Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory'.

[28] C.S.Lewis.

[29] This illustration comes from C.S.Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (Fount).

[30] Evelyn Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, (Methuen, 1934), p170.

[31] Peter Kreeft, *Heaven - The Heart's Deepest Longing*, p99.

[32] *ibid.*

[33] *ibid.*

[34] *ibid.*

[35] *ibid.*

[36] *ibid.*

[37] A distinction drawn by C.S.Lewis, 'Meditation in a Tool-Shed.'

[38] Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide To Philosophy*, (Duckworth, 1997), p95-96.

[39] For a critique of naturalism see C.S.Lewis, *Miracles*, (Fount); Douglas Geivett & Gary R. Habermas ed's., *In Defence of Miracles*, (Apollos), Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions*, (Zondervan, 1999); & J.P.Morland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Baker, 1987).

[40] Peter Kreeft, *op cit*, p119.

[41] Roger Scruton, *op cit*, p17 & 75.

[42] *ibid.*, p29.

[43] *ibid.*, p14.

[44] Peter Kreeft, *op cit*, p214.

[45] C.S.Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory'.

[46] See *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, volume 1, 'A Christian View of Philosophy And Culture', (Crossway Books, 1994).

[47] Frederick Nietzsche, *Gay Science*.

[48] Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide To Philosophy*, p95.

[49] Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide To Modern Culture*, p68.

[50] Francis Schaeffer, *op cit*.

[51] Roger Scruton, *op cit*.

[52] Ibid.

[53] ibid, p36.

[54] ibid.

[55] ibid, p49.

[56] Hans Kung, *Art and the problem of Meaning*.

[57] Peter Kreeft, op cit.

[58] Roger Scruton, op cit, p17.

[59] Francis A. Schaeffer, op cit.

[60] Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, (Simon & Schuster, 1994).

[61] Francis A. Schaeffer, op cit.

[62] Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, (Washington Square Press, 1984), p152.

[63] William Hasker, 'Humanness as the Mirror of God', *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, Volume 1, Number 1, 1999, p108.

[64] Francis A. Schaeffer, op cit.

[65] A thorough defence of this argument would require a close investigation of the Philosophy of Mind. I refer interested readers to the following material: William Hasker, 'Humanness as the Mirror of God', *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, Volume 1, Number 1, 1999; J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Baker, 1987); Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, (Oxford); & Keith Ward, *In Defence of the Soul*, (OneWorld).

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