

Article

Might Beauty Bolster the Moral Argument for God?

David Baggett

Department of Philosophy, School of Christian Thought Apologetics, Houston Christian University,
Houston, TX 77074, USA; dbaggett@hbu.edu

Abstract: John Hare argues that Kant, in his *Third Critique*, offers an aesthetic argument for God's existence that shares premises with his famous moral argument. Karl Ameriks demurs, expressing skepticism that this is so. In this paper, I stake out an intermediate position, arguing that the resources of Kant provide ingredients for an aesthetic argument, but one distinctly less than a transcendental argument for God or an entailment relation. Whether the argument is best thought of as abductive in nature, a C-inductive argument, or a Pascalian natural sign, prospects for its formulation are strong. And such an argument, for its resonances with the moral argument(s), can work well in tandem with it (them), a fact not surprising at all if Kant was right that beauty—in accordance with an ancient Greek tradition—exists in close organic relation to the good. More generally, along the way, I argue that the sea change in Kant's studies over the last decade or so should help us see that Kant is an ally, rather than foe, to aesthetic theodiscists.

Keywords: kalon; good; beauty; sublime; Immanuel Kant; John Hare; Karl Ameriks; aesthetic argument; moral argument; Critique of Judgment; transcendentals

1. Introduction

This exploratory essay wishes to broach the connection between two sorts of evidence for God's existence, namely, that from beauty and that from goodness. Both sets of considerations are experiential in nature because they tend to be predicated on a certain sort of phenomenological appeal—of beauty, in the first instance, and of goodness (or oughtness or human value or justice or some other important axiological or deontic moral reality) in the second instance.¹

Rather than thinking of the evidential significance of the two sets of considerations as altogether independent, it might be worthwhile to explore whether their juxtaposition, if not their integration, might enhance their cumulative power. What animates the study is the traditional view in the history of Christianity, not to mention other important philosophies and religions, that the so-called “transcendentals” (truth, goodness, beauty, unity, etc.) are ultimately, in some sense, of a piece. Iris Murdoch, to mention just one among a plethora of examples that could be adduced, wrote in *The Sovereignty of the Good*, echoing a central claim 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 that 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” (Murdoch 1989, p. 40).

We will take the general logical schema of moral arguments for God's existence, whatever their specific content, to go something like this:

(P1) There are various moral phenomena that stand in need of explanation.

(P2) The only or best explanation of such phenomena is God.

(C) So, these moral phenomena give us reasons to believe in God.

We will not take a position on whether instances of such a form are sound, nor on how much evidence such arguments may provide, besides mentioning a spectrum of possibilities. Our concerns lie elsewhere, in what might be called overall dialectic features



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of the resultant discursive structure. Among the moral phenomena that the first premise might adduce include moral goodness, intrinsic human value, moral rights or duties, or other putative moral facts. Obviously, a defense of the moral realism of the first premise would require offering positive reasons in its favor and a critique of various meta-ethical alternatives like constructivism, expressivism, and nihilism. This essay will not be doing such work, vitally important as it is. (Jerry Walls and I are finishing a book on this topic.)

The second premise would require positive reasons for thinking that theism provides a good explanation of the moral phenomena in question. Accomplishing this task requires two goals to be achieved: providing those reasons, along with reasons for thinking that nontheistic alternative explanations do not explain the moral phenomena just as well or better. The sort of theism we have in mind is the usual suspect: something in the neighborhood of classical theism or theistic personalism, according to which God is the possessor of the various omni-qualities, the maximally compossible set of great-making properties. There are of course less ambitious ways to formulate the second premise, some of which will be mentioned later, but this suffices to get our discussion underway.

Now, among the moral phenomena in the world are not just duties and rights and values, but conspicuous disvalues, discordant ethical realities, grave injustices, horrific tragedies, and heinous evils. So, it is incumbent on proponents of the moral argument, at some point, to provide explanations of these moral realities as well. This creates a shared space for moral apologists and theodists.

When William Sorley was writing his Gifford lectures on God and ethics, he received news of the death of his son Charles, who had been fighting in the First World War. The whole tenor of his subsequent lectures seems tinged with tragedy, a poignant recognition that he somehow could not just discuss moral goodness, but also the tragedy and evil that we encounter in this world (Sorley 1935).

How might beauty—and aesthetic considerations more generally—inform our understanding of the tragedies of this world? And might doing so help bolster the moral argument for God's existence?

2. Misguided Efforts and Kant's Aesthetic Judgments

One reason that many might be skeptical about aesthetic insights making important contributions to a discussion of theodicy owes to what amounts to painfully bad and patently superficial efforts to do so. Terence Penulhum argues at length against thinking that, as he puts it, "minor aesthetic advantages could outweigh major moral and physical disadvantages". He uses as a rhetorical example the "charming pink flush" of a tuberculosis patient (Penulhum 1992). Timothy O'Connor and Philip Quinn, without denying the reality of aesthetic values, agree, echoing similar skepticism over aesthetic considerations having much to offer theodicy. Eleonore Stump is more open to what nonmoral values might contribute to the discussion, but she remains tentative and provisional (O'Connor 2002; Quinn 1992; Stump 1985).

Among the several reasons why many retain skepticism about contributions of aesthetics to theodicy is the formidable influence of Immanuel Kant, because a common reading of his *Third Critique* is that aesthetics is a largely subjectivist matter. Marilyn Adams cites this volume of Kant's—his *Critique of Judgment*—as a significant explanation why thinkers like those just mentioned enforce a compartmentalization of aesthetics and ethics (Adams 1999). Philip Tallon, in his brilliant and erudite *Poetics of Evil*, gravitates toward such a reading of Kant, even while lamenting that such a reading lends itself to divorcing aesthetics and theodicy. Tallon assigns quite a bit of primacy to what Kant has to say in the *Third Critique* about a rigid distinction between aesthetic judgments on one hand and recognition of something's purpose or function on the other.

The crux of this point pertains to the role of *concepts*. In concert with a common reading of Kant, Tallon discerns "a sharp break between Kant's theory and the mimetically driven accounts of Plato and Aristotle. Further, Kant is keen to break with the Medieval emphasis on formal properties and principles of the kind frequently described by Augustine as

proportion or order (to which Aquinas adds luminosity and integrity)" (Tallon 2012, p. 52). Tallon takes the import of Kant's denial that there is an empirical ground of proof that would force a judgment of taste on anyone to be tantamount to arguing that aesthetic judgments are largely devoid of cognitive content, a reading that lends itself to a strongly subjectivist understanding of beauty that bears little relevance to ethics (and thus theodicy).

This reading of Kant resonates with a great deal of Kantian exegesis and the way Kant has often been historically understood. Even Kant himself, in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, began with a note indicating that the sensory character of taste disqualifies it from being characterizable as pure and objective. Subjectivist readings of Kant's philosophy still abound (sometimes not just in aesthetics, but also in ethics and metaphysics). As Karl Ameriks puts it, "Ever since the interpretive tradition of Hegel to Gadamer and then beyond to the deconstructionists, Kant's aesthetics has been interpreted—sometimes favorably, but often for dismissive purposes—as the inauguration of a subjectivist turn in aesthetics" (Ameriks forthcoming). Such readings are understandable. Kant himself even often characterized items like space, time, and empirical knowledge in subjective terms, not to mention various moral and religious experiences.

While conceding Roger Scruton's point that Kant did not altogether separate aesthetics and morality, Tallon seeks out more points of contact between them than he thinks Kant's subjectivism allows. Kant's dismissal of the deliverances of art critics suggests to Tallon that there is no room, to Kant's thinking, for adjudicating between divergent aesthetical appraisals. Even worse, Kant affirms the autonomy of aesthetic objects qua aesthetic objects, rendering their use for other purposes impossible. As Tallon puts it, "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 nonexistent" (Tallon 2012, p. 53).²

Even among those who have neither the time nor inclination to read Kant can often be found a subjectivist construal of aesthetics. The notion that beauty resides in the eye of the beholder is ubiquitous nowadays, even among a range of art critics, a loss of nerve that Tallon dubs a "near-Kantian philosophy". Assuming objectivist ethics are often tacitly presumed verboten. Tallon concludes, "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 theodicyists as well" (Tallon 2012, p. 54).

3. Kant in Context

Hans Urs von Balthasar famously argued that Kant's arrival at beauty only in his *Third Critique* (after truth in the *First* and goodness in the *Second*) represents the way philosophers tend to privilege truth and goodness over beauty. Balthasar argued that this is a mistake. He thought that beauty paves the way to thinking of goodness and finally truth in the right sort of way, making beauty the appropriate place to begin. It can offer an enrapturing vision of how the world ought to be, something that includes our will within God's animating providence. Whether or not he was right about this claim is not our present concern, but this essay is definitely predicated on the intriguing possibility that aesthetic considerations, including evidential ones, can augment and supplement the dialectic forging a vital connection between God and ethics.

Perhaps even more indicting was von Balthasar's critique of those strands of Enlightenment thought that relegate aesthetic considerations to the realm of the subjective, with Kant's approach being the most pre-eminent among them. He read Kant in saying that aesthetic realities are confined to the world as it appears to us rather than the world as it is in itself as suggesting that beauty is delimited to psychic states of imagination and empathy rather than as one of the transcendental aspects of Being as such (von Balthasar 1982). Following various church fathers, as mentioned, Balthasar opposed how Kant merely concluded his trilogy with beauty and suggested instead that beauty should be our proper

starting point. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, similarly, argued that art puts us in touch with the "other", in opposition to the "radical subjectivization of aesthetics" that followed Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Gadamer 2004).

Such readings of Kant are common. Still, a serious case can be made, and has been made, that subjectivist readings of Kant's aesthetics, though eminently understandable and quite widespread, are nevertheless quite mistaken. In just the last few decades there has been quite a sea change in Kant studies, with scholars like John Hare, Stephen Palmquist, and Karl Ameriks playing leading roles.³ If this fresh set of interpretations of Kant is on the right track, then Kant may actually be a powerful ally to aesthetic theodiscists, even if not all Kantian exegetes are as cordial or amenable to the enterprise.

Although it is true that early on Kant thought aesthetic judgments are, of necessity, subjective for being tied to pleasure and the faculty of feeling, he quickly nuanced his view and struck a different note. In an edition of the *First Critique* published several years before the *Third Critique*, Kant turned to the view that aesthetic feeling has a more than merely sensory significance, for there is a *pure* judgment of taste that can be distinguished from mere sensory reactions and impersonal empirical observations.

Feelings, of course, are easily and notoriously construed in contingent and subjectivist terms, but here, Kant's mention of "disinterested pleasure" in quality is relevant. Tallon and others take the import of such disinterestedness to preclude looking to the aesthetic with an eye for application to religious concerns, including that of theodicy. But Ameriks and Hare, among others, see its import differently: Kant's point lifts taste above the acquisitive contingencies of our sensory nature and also differentiates it from the concern with actualization essential to the moral will (Ameriks forthcoming). It is instructive, indeed striking, that Kant's first *positive* depiction of aesthetic taste comes with the claim of *universal validity*, a conception rife with objective significance. Indeed, that a judgment of taste rightfully makes a claim of validity for *all* other human perceivers is about as objective as it can be. And as Ameriks puts it, "Taste is not disadvantaged by not providing a direct access to things in themselves, or by an inability to rest its claims on deductions from mere concepts in pure theoretical arguments" (Ameriks forthcoming).

While acknowledging the brilliance of Kant's effort to solve the antinomy of subjectivity and universality, Tallon focuses inordinately on the subjective component. In the process, he potentially misses out on seeing that Kant may be more friend than foe in the effort at constructing an aesthetic theodicy. In truth, we can find in Kant's work more organic connections between beauty and goodness than Tallon thinks. This will become increasingly clear, especially as we explore the possibility that Kant aimed to provide not just a moral argument for God's existence, but an aesthetic one. First, let us address a few lingering points from earlier.

What about the critique that Kant's aesthetics leave little to no room for discussion about art with a philosopher? Here, recall that the antinomy of judgment with which Kant struggled involves the thesis that aesthetic judgments are personal and subjective and the antithesis that we argue, and rightly so, about those judgments. The former suggests that aesthetics lacks guiding concepts, and the latter that it does not. By turns, both seem true, thus the antinomy.

Kant's solution, which we will have occasion to discuss more in a moment, aimed to effect a rapprochement between objective and subjective elements, not vitiate the former altogether. Of course, the challenge of generating such a synthesis is real, as anyone can attest who has tried to convince someone not already convinced of or, worse, dead set on rejecting the beauty of something. If someone wishes to deny the sublime and transcendent qualities of the most beautiful of sunsets or orchestral movement, she is at liberty to do so, and powers of persuasion quickly reach their limits. No logical demonstration is available like we find in geometry. But just as a good argument need not be found to be universally persuasive, the limitations of rational efforts at aesthetic adjudication are no evidence against objective beauty.

This is arguably related to Kant's refusal to listen to arguments and reasoning when an alleged art critic is invoked as a definitive authority. Perhaps on occasion such resistance is attributable to a sort of obstinacy or recalcitrance, incorrigibility or hubris, but on other occasions it is eminently justified. If an art critic, in the spirit of Oscar Wilde, divorces beauty and goodness, and heaps accolades on (say) Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a 1987 photograph depicting a small plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's urine, we remain skeptical. Art critic Lucy R. Lippard has presented a constructive case for the formal value of the artwork that she thinks ineffably mysterious, "a darkly beautiful photographic image . . . the small wood and plastic crucifix becomes virtually monumental as it floats, photographically enlarged, in a deep rosy glow that is both ominous and glorious" (Lippard 1990). With Kant, we are rather unapologetically inclined to stop our ears and to demur from rather than defer to the "expert".

Lastly, for now, does Kant's aesthetic theory preclude consideration of what a piece of artwork or beautiful scene objectively provides? Ameriks does not think so, writing:

[T]here is something significantly objective about an aesthetic judgment's being rooted even in a feature of the first moment of taste, its involving pleasure in the specific way that it does as a matter of sensory *givenness*. This is because pleasure in taste is not a mere internal event but is the result of a *special* kind of positive *reaction* to a general feature of something that is originally given to us from *outside*. As with other reactions to the impact of external objects, it is only appropriate to presume that taste rests on some kind of objective causal features that make talk of "universally valid" judgment possible. The special significance of the *Faktum* of *natural* beauty for Kant depends on the fact that the pleasure involved here is not to be understood as initially a mere reverie but as a response to an *appropriate external form* (Ameriks forthcoming).

If this recent shift in Kantian exegesis rightly tracks strongly objectivist elements in his aesthetic analysis, it is good news for an aesthetic theodicy because it means that, rather than Kant being a detractor, he might instead be a staunch ally. We can see this perhaps more clearly as we look at what may well be something of an aesthetic argument for God's existence in Kant's *Third Critique*.

4. Kant's Aesthetic Argument

Earlier, we briefly sketched a general schema for moral arguments. Kant is well known for offering a moral argument. A word is in order by way of quickly capturing its gist and concrete flavor because, if John Hare is right, Kant also provided an aesthetic argument that is closely related to it. If Hare is even close to being right, it will show that Kant may help rather than hurt or hinder an aesthetic theodicy.

Kant is well known for writing in the preface to the second edition of the *First Critique* that he found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith. There is a moral argument from grace found in Kant, but here the focus will be on an argument from providence.⁴ The argument, with a gloss from Hare, goes something like this: we have to postulate that God exists, even though this goes beyond our knowledge, in order to believe with rational stability in the real possibility of the highest good, which is the end that morality gives us and which is made possible by the will of the supersensible author of nature (Hare 2023).

A key question is how to rank the priorities of happiness and virtue, and Kant thought that though duty should come first, we still retain both incentives. We need to believe rationally they do not, in the end, conflict, and this is how morality naturally leads to religion. We are not the authors of the moral law ourselves, but, owing to the experiential element of morality, we have to appropriate its truths for ourselves. This is the meaning of how we make morality a law for ourselves, and part of that procedure is recognizing our duties as God's commands. For only in this way can we reasonably believe in the real possibility of the highest good, right and good coming together, happiness and virtue reconciled. A loving and providential God is what ensures that righteousness and peace

kiss. (Again, this is not the place to anticipate or try to answer some or all of the objections that could be raised to the argument.)

A central problem that emerges, which Kant hoped to address, is how to sustain the moral life. Respect for the moral law is important and deeply animating, but what happens when respect wanes, especially when the demands of the moral law become onerous and demanding? This is where, Hare argues, Kant introduced aesthetic considerations to fit the bill. What we need in those moments of temptation and weakness of will is a supplement not explicitly connected with the moral law. Recall that Kant spoke of beauty as a symbol of morality. Tallon is less than impressed with the image, writing that while the beautiful, for Kant, may be the mascot of the moral, it cannot play on the team, inhibiting its usefulness in theodicy. Hare would disagree, arguing that, in Kant's view, beauty makes moral ideas perceptible by a kind of analogy. The relationship between goodness and beauty is an intimate one, and the way to understand Kant on beauty is first to get clear on what he said about goodness.

The *Third Critique* came after the *Second*, where Kant accorded to the practical a kind of primacy. It is true that in the *First Critique* Kant eschewed theoretical efforts to demonstrate God's existence, but the *Second Critique* augmented the picture. Taking the inference to God as merely regulative merely warrants acting as if God exists; but taking it as constitutive, as Kant thought his practical argument made possible, warrants believing that God actually exists. The aesthetic argument of the *Third Critique* is constructed only after and in tandem with the moral argument of the *Second Critique*. Arguably, it is less an independent argument than an extension of the first, which was an adumbration of the second.⁵

Aesthetic pleasure, for Kant, provides a foretaste of the ultimate unity between nature and freedom, the unity to come that we will enjoy between our moral purposes and the world. We will experience this fully when our highest good is realized, which is God's purpose for us. This is why Ameriks thinks the most important locution of Kant's famous phrase "the starry heavens above and the moral law within" is the conjunction *and*. It is their ultimate union—nature and morality—that is the most breathtaking of all.

So, Hare argues that when Kant spoke of beauty as a symbol of morality, he spoke of a symbol because a symbol features structural similarity to that which is symbolized. Beauty is a symbol of morality because there is an analogy by which something true of morality is presented by a perceptible vehicle: the beautiful object. Herein lies Kant's solution to the antinomy of taste. When we experience harmony between the world and our faculties, we are encouraged to think the same supersensible author of nature is producing the analogous harmony that is our destination.

And thus, the beauty of various sensuous and finite things can and rightly should point us beyond those things to the deepest source of beauty itself. Aesthetic taste declares certain pleasures rightly valid for all humans as such, and not just for each person's private feeling. Kant's suggestion was that there is something all humans should value that the aesthetic enjoyment connects with and depends on. Because of differing tastes, what is universal is the highest good, of which aesthetic pleasure gives us a foretaste. This rationally requires, writes Hare, that we believe in God as the ground for the union of our happiness and our virtue and as the ground for the analogous fit between the aesthetic object and our faculties (Hare 2023).

If Kant intended to provide an aesthetic argument, overlapping considerably with his moral argument from providence, then the notion that his aesthetic theory has little to add to theodicy is deeply misguided. The aesthetic argument is largely predicated on aspects of the moral argument and is inextricably tied to it, and as such constitutes additional reasons to take value considerations into account in figuring out the nature of reality. The moral argument and the problem of evil are locked in a zero-sum game, each vying for primacy on how best to pronounce a verdict on the moral evidence of this world. The aesthetic argument, if Hare is right, provides additional reason to think not just that God exists, but that God is good. And this, once more, stands in diametric opposition to the notion that aesthetic judgment adds nothing to our stock of knowledge about the world, nor asserts

that there is order and purpose in the world, nor is relevant to making judgments about God's goodness.

5. Some Thoughts on Explanation

We will not provide an assessment of Kant's argument at this point, but we would like to focus a bit of attention on Hare's claim that Kant advanced such an aesthetic argument for God's existence. Some might be dubious about it. Adjudicating this point of difference would require a fine-grained exegetical analysis of Kant's *Third Critique*, which we will not be conducting. Rather, we intend to take the occasion to discuss a few matters in the vicinity of this potential disagreement. (Readers uninterested in this digression are free to proceed to the final section).

Although we will not presume to try to settle this disagreement, we do find ourselves drawn to staking out something of an intermediate position between them. Not that we are suggesting that the right interpretation of Kant is this middle ground, but rather that we find ourselves gravitating to something in between these two claims: first, that aesthetics for Kant provide a compelling and altogether distinct argument for God's existence and, second, Ameriks' weaker assertion that "the phenomena of taste, as Kant construes them, can be given an especially good religious explanation *if* one *already* has a warrant on other grounds for making reference to a divine power" (Ameriks forthcoming).

Even if we are persuaded that there is a robust religious explanation of various aesthetic phenomena, we harbor the suspicion that we can push for a bit more than that. But why harbor any misgivings about the stronger claim that the beautiful and sublime, for Kant, can provide an argument for God's existence?⁶ Here our reticence owes to Ameriks' characterization of the claim. So, let us first provide that characterization, and then we will aim to problematize it a bit and, in the process, push for there being Kantian resources for constructing an aesthetic argument for God's existence after all, though perhaps not one able to satisfy Ameriks' strictures.

So how does Ameriks characterize Hare's claim that Kant provided an aesthetic argument for God? This is not an exhaustive set of characterizations, but first, he quotes Hare himself with these words: "an argument that leads from our aesthetic experience of beauty to the existence of a supersensible ground and thus to God". Then, in turn, Ameriks casts the argument as involving features of our experience sufficient to ground a reference to God, an argument that grounds religion, a positive claim providing a logical or epistemic kind of derivation, a sufficient condition to show that theism is true, and an argument entailing a positive logical connection between aesthetics and religion.

By the way, we do not think any of these characterizations are unfair or uncharitable on Ameriks' part, and indeed we think they are eminently understandable in light of Hare's careful, systematic, and methodical effort to lay out what he takes to be a Kantian aesthetic argument in the *Third Critique*. Hare admits the argument can seem obscure and that it stands in need of careful unpacking and explication. Exactly because of the explicitness and rigor with which Hare does this work, Ameriks, to our thinking, is warranted to identify junctures at which the argument, thus explicated, can be called into question—and indeed whether Hare was right in the first place to think such an argument is even implicitly there. Admittedly, we think the argument construed in certain particular ways—especially when associated with notions of a transcendental argument for God, of logical or epistemic sufficiency, or of entailment—at best is subject to serious scrutiny and at worst can be argued with some plausibility was not intended by Kant.

So why are we drawn to an *intermediate* position here—an aesthetic argument that is less ambitious than a transcendental argument for God or an entailment relation, but more than merely a set of considerations that can fortify belief in God among those who are already theists that the beautiful and sublime evidentially point to God? To explain this, allow us to explore a bit more this idea of *making an argument for God's existence* because such language can be ambiguous in multiple ways.

Kant eventually came to see a conspicuous parallel between ethics and aesthetics, except in the latter the rapprochement, integration, or reconciliation between freedom and nature took a different form, namely, between our higher faculties as human beings, especially our imagination and understanding on the one hand, and an objectivist reading of aesthetic realities in the world on the other. Kant largely presupposed the latter to be there. Certain experiences of (say) the beautiful and sublime have the capacity to confirm within us an aesthetic approval of them as a matter of “universal validity”, analogous to the moral law that applies to us all.

For Kant this “should” is not a moral should, but it functions similarly. There is something normatively prescriptive about certain aesthetic experiences that applies to all of us, and these experiences generate a hope within us of the greatest good coming to fruition—the ultimate correspondence of virtue and happiness, of unity between human beings and the world. In this sense, the beautiful and sublime offer a “foretaste” of the glory to come. Kant thought, and Hare and Ameriks agree, that the extraordinary purposiveness of such experiences calls for some kind of special explanation.

Invoking the category of *explanation* is telling here. The question that demands an answer, even if we grant that something supersensible is needed to account for the coordination of the intricately connected aesthetic structures within human beings as well as without, is whether the further inference to God is warranted. Unless God is not just the best or only explanation, but the only possible explanation, a transcendental argument all the way to God does not seem practicable. A transcendental argument can be seen as a sort of deductivism on steroids.

It is similar for more garden-variety entailment relations. Why think that God would be the only explanation for aesthetic union? Ameriks for one explicitly denies it when he writes, “Even if the excess of beauty is astonishing and is not demonstrably necessary for nature to exist at all, there are, as Kant’s early work on cosmology stresses, all sorts of natural causes that appear to explain practically all that we know of the impressively complex general organization of the cosmos” (Ameriks forthcoming). If God is one among other explanation candidates, hankering after anything like deductive entailment is bound to disappoint.

That said, we are skeptical that Hare intends to convey something so strong as entailment. For example, consider these words of his: because there is a sense of an extraordinary “fit” in aesthetic experience, just as there is in moral experience, “we are encouraged to think the same supernatural author” is responsible (Hare 2023). “Encouraged to think” is an eminently judicious way to put it, bespeaking a fair bit of epistemic humility, and falling conspicuously short of an entailment relation.

Note Ameriks’ conclusion that “it is hardly immediately obvious that we have to move beyond natural explanations and say that aesthetic phenomena *themselves* provide adequate argumentative support for positing a *specific* kind of supersensible ground that has something tantamount to the extraordinary power of a being that can undergird the complex real possibility of the highest good and thereby warrant a belief in God” (Ameriks forthcoming). Yes, but even if true, pointing out that we are *encouraged to think* about a particular possibility falls shy of suggesting we are somehow epistemically obligated to embrace it, that we “have to” gravitate to it on pain of patent irrationality.

Again, the language of explanation is helpful to offer us less ambitious formulations of the aesthetic argument. Ameriks wants to claim that we have little reason to take Kant as providing an aesthetic argument; but we are not so sure Kant is not providing one, even if it is not best construed as a transcendental argument or an entailment relation.⁷ So, let us set aside categories like the only possible or even only explanation, and ask this question instead: Might God provide the best explanation of the sort of aesthetic phenomena Kant pointed to? And here, though more work may be required to make the case, we are inclined to think the answer is likely yes.

But this almost certainly requires that we move the discussion into non-deductive sorts of arguments—inductive ones, abductive ones, and perhaps even less ambitious

strategies than those. We begin, then, with the more ambitious and then move toward the less ambitious.

Consider an inference to the best explanation. Historically, in one like Peirce or Harman, abduction starts with surprising data points that call for explanation. Finding the instantiation of order and beauty in the world as we do in such resplendent abundance is a good example. A variety of aesthetic phenomena stand in need of serious explanation. God presumably is among the explanation candidates. We then identify other possibilities, including naturalistic ones, and see if God provides the better explanation of the phenomena by applying a principled set of criteria (explanatory scope and power, for example).

Here we would remark that the greater the array of relevant moral phenomena we adduce, the stronger the abductive inference is likely to be. A lesson from Hare and Ameriks when employing Kantian resources is not to be too quick to domesticate the aesthetic evidence and settle for superficial accounts; there is no replacement for close and careful attentiveness to the evidence—a point that also applies to the moral argument(s).

In that connection, we might suggest that in addition to natural beauty and sublime experiences in both nature and human artworks that first humiliate us and then remind us of our dignity (paralleling our moral experience), we should extend the range of relevant aesthetic evidence under consideration. The way aesthetic criteria seem so central to reliable epistemological standards in science and mathematics, to cite but one example, seems quite relevant as well.⁸

We need not reiterate the abductive procedure any more, but what we are doing here has been called by Mark Murphy an explanandum-based approach. One can also take an explanans-centered approach that, in this case, does not start with the aesthetic evidence, but rather with God himself.⁹ Then we can point out why God, as traditionally construed as (say) the possessor of the omni-qualities, is such a good candidate for answering the aesthetic questions that our experiences raise. Murphy suggests that this approach, though, carries no apologetic significance, since God's existence is presupposed. This at least superficially reminds us of Ameriks' effort to salvage a connection between aesthetics and God by saying that the theistic hypothesis may well be found compelling, but only to the already committed theist. Again, no argument for God is provided, Ameriks says; or as Murphy says, the explanans-centered approach provides no apologetic value.¹⁰

But again, we are inclined to think something more ambitious than that is possible. For we are not convinced that an explanans-centered approach lacks evidential significance. And for similar reasons that we retain skepticism that Murphy is right to suggest explanans-driven arguments are bereft of apologetic value, we harbor the suspicion that Ameriks' delimitation of the Kantian-inspired evidential connection of aesthetics to theism to those who are already theists is overstated.¹¹ Recall where we are in our dialectic: we are considering the question of explanation. If we see that (say) the God of classical theism is powerfully or even uniquely able to provide an impeccable explanation of important aesthetic phenomena, then that can arguably play a part in an evidential case for God's existence, a commitment at the heart of what has been called *explanationism* (McCain and Poston 2018).

Admittedly, this strategy remains rather ambitious, so let us ratchet it down slightly and consider an inductive aesthetic argument, starting with what Swinburne dubs a P-inductive argument, according to which aesthetic evidence shows that theism is more likely than not. Again, an ambitious agenda. Less ambitiously, though, we could construct a C-inductive aesthetic argument, which would merely enhance the likelihood of theism without making it more likely true than not.¹² It would add plausibility points to theism, and it could play a role in a larger case involving other sorts of arguments, the cumulative effect of which might constitute a P-inductive argument. But the basic idea on which such an argument is predicated is that we are more likely to assess the quality and quantity of aesthetic experiences we actually engage in based on theism rather than naturalism.

Note two points here. First, even if the best we can do using aesthetic considerations is to construct a C-inductive argument that but increases the likelihood of theism to some

extent (which even atheist Paul Draper accepts), there remains evidence and an argument. A good argument does not always have to render its conclusion likely true. And second, besides the possibility of a cumulative case going beyond aesthetics to include other resources from natural theology, there is also the possibility of a distinctively aesthetic cumulative case, encompassing aesthetic evidence alluded to earlier that exceeds the specific range of that adduced by Kant.

Less ambitious still, we could move the discussion into the arena of Reformed epistemology, as Plantinga does with design arguments more broadly (Plantinga 2011, pp. 225–48). As a convenient example, take Steve Evans' notion of natural signs, which fulfill the two Pascalian traits of being both widely accessible and easily resistible (Evans 2010). Aesthetic considerations are good candidates. Experiences of beauty and the sublime are ubiquitous, and empirical evidence suggests that such experiences not uncommonly in point of fact do dispose people to become more open to the transcendent and sacred, and on many occasions engender profound doubts about the adequacy of something like materialism, which seems to have the considerably harder time accounting for the texture, depth, and ingression of certain aesthetic experiences. Even on occasion folks have found themselves, either temporarily or permanently, gravitating to theism on their basis. Whether this is purely a naturalistic phenomenon or just the sort of experience one would expect if the beautiful and sublime are indeed natural signs can of course be debated, but again we have another potential example of the evidential significance of aesthetics.¹³ For present purposes, this is the sort of modest evidential appeal of most interest to the analysis of this paper.

Lastly, as laudable as is the effort to articulate with care the intricacies and nuances of Kant's analysis, it almost invariably seems to leave something of the existential element out, making it seem on paper less persuasive than it actually may be in practice.¹⁴ Not unlike moral arguments, aesthetic arguments are ineliminably experiential, which is related to Kant thinking them more practical than merely theoretical—and thus their deliverances constitutive rather than merely regulative. But for their essential element of subjectivity and personal appropriation, they remind us of the complicated process of our becoming convinced of anything. Human psychology, and just epistemology for that matter, are richer than what discursive arguments written on the board can always encapsulate.

As John Henry Newman's expansive epistemology would have it, a thousand things typically can and do contribute to our changes of mind; aesthetic considerations (as with ethical ones) are especially germane to deep acquisitions of understanding, as much akin to the catching of a vision as to the deliverances of a discursive analysis. If Kant is right, aesthetic judgments appeal to the whole person—both the head and the heart, the imagination and understanding—lending themselves not just to intellectual assents, but to an existential depth, profound understanding, and attitudes of reverence and awe, inspiration and gratitude.

At any rate, whether the case can be made that theism is not just a possible explanation of aesthetic phenomena but a plausible one, perhaps even the best one, remains to be seen, a work in progress, and is an exciting research agenda, even if we give up the more ambitious deductive or transcendental claims that it is, respectively, the only or the only possible explanation.¹⁵ If Balthasar was right, the experience and enjoyment of beauty might well sensitize one not only to the evidential significance of aesthetics, but also to that of morality, of which beauty, if Kant was right, is a palpable symbol. In this way, Kant harkened back not just to the Hebraic and Christian conception of the transcendentals¹⁶ but also to the ancient Hellenistic and Greek practice of the same word—*kalon*—being used to refer to them both.¹⁷ And if indeed Kant offered an aesthetic argument for God's existence, or even embraced a robustly objective reading of beauty, it puts the lie to the idea his work cannot be deployed in the service of an aesthetic theodicy.

6. Horror and Nothing Buttery

From mathematical equations to sunrises, from paintings to novels, from a woman's hair to a lasting friendship, beauty is multiform. And in various ways, those realities may well open us up to something more—something sacred, something transcendent. But just as there are bad things in this world in addition to good things, requiring explanation all, there are tragic and horrible and ugly things in this world, not just beautiful things. Hare recognizes this, writing, "We have made in Western culture asphalt and concrete wastelands, where we are starved of beauty. The lack of fit between these spaces and our faculties is also something that needs explanation. The experience of ugliness is not merely a personal distaste (like hating horseradish). It is a symbol of what is wrong with our world more deeply, lack of meaning and congruence between what ought to be and what is" (Hare 2023).

The truly tragic is radically bereft of the sorts of traits traditionally associated with beauty—harmony, balance, unity, integrity, and the like. And in the worst cases, it is enough to break our hearts altogether. The most challenging cases of the problem of evil involve unspeakable evils and tragedies featuring no beauty at all. Marilyn Adams takes up the challenge this poses to theodicy. Several features of her work make it stand out: she is opposed to generic sorts of solutions to the problem of evil, she is altogether willing to employ distinctively Christian resources to address the problem, and she considers the worst sorts of evils and most hideously ugly scenarios imaginable—a woman raped whose limbs are then cut off, for example.

Another feature of her work is that she intentionally employs aesthetic considerations. She directs her attention to horrendous evils, those that have the power to *degrade* by being *prima facie* ruinous of personal meaning. The worst of real-life atrocities rob people of their meaning, making them think their lives can never again be unified and integrated into wholes with positive meaning; note her use of aesthetic categories to cash out this dimension of the discussion and cast the problem in need of a solution.

Adams also departs from much of the theodicy literature by not trying to locate "morally sufficient reasons" for the sufferings people endure. Rather, employing a category of Roderick Chisholm, she prefers to speak of the *defeat* of evils. God must be understood as good to everyone, which includes all of those who experience the most horrendous of sufferings. If there is a great enough good the experience of which can defeat evils of the worst sort—as she thinks there is—then the problem of evil would be solved.

It has been this experiential dimension of beauty, too, that has been the primary focus here. We have resisted formulating the aesthetic argument in a tight discursive format for a few reasons, one of which is that in actual practice it might be less propositional than that. Recall the possibility of a "natural sign" approach instead: what is important is not propositions about the existence or features of beauty that matter most, but rather the transformative power of experiencing beauty itself that can play a critical role in the complicated process of persuasion. Although philosophers tend to privilege the propositional and discursive, many of life's decisions are simply not reducible to such things. The experience of the good and the beautiful may well be an example of something not properly deflated and compartmentalized.

It is no coincidence that among moral skeptics we can often find aesthetic skeptics as well. The emotivist A. J. Ayer, heavily influenced by logical positivism, saw his analysis of morality equally applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to aesthetics; and he was hardly alone in this.¹⁸ Ayer wrote that "any attempt to make our use of ethical and aesthetic concepts the basis of a metaphysical theory concerning the existence of a world of values, as distinct from the world of facts, involves a false analysis of these concepts. Our own analysis has shown that the phenomena of moral experience cannot fairly be used to support any rationalist or metaphysical doctrine whatsoever. In particular, they cannot, as Kant hoped, be used to establish the existence of a transcendent god" (Ayer 1952, p. 114).

Now that scientism and logical positivism, naturalism, and classical emotivism have all been roundly subjected to withering critical scrutiny, and metaphysics, cognitivist morality,

and even non-naturalism have made a comeback, it is a foregone conclusion that Ayer's view about the prospect of moral (or even aesthetic) arguments for theism leaves much to be desired. If morality and aesthetics were wrongly thought to fall together, perhaps they can rise together, and the time has come for us to reconsider the power of aesthetic evidence, especially working in conjunction with moral arguments, for God's existence.

By Kant's lights, we can and should look at the world in more than one way. From the perspective of understanding, we can see the world simply as a web of causal relations; but from the point of view of practical reason, we can apprehend free agency volitionally obedient to the laws of reason. As Roger Scruton puts it, "These two points of view are incommensurable: that is to say, we cannot derive from one of them a description of the world as seen from the other" (Scruton 2014, p. 35). Again, when it comes to the evidential significance of beauty, the suggestion has been that there may be discernible a kind of appeal whose force is not reducible to a propositional argument. There is something essentially, ineliminably experiential about it; for those who cultivate a taste for it, an openness and attentiveness to it, and the eyes with which to see it, the result may well be a more expansive perception of what is real. This possibility is one that this essay has gestured at, albeit in a preliminary sort of way; there is good work to be done here.

Scruton puts it like this in a suggestive passage, with which we will draw this exploratory essay to a close:

It is helpful . . . to register a protest against what Mary Midgley calls "nothing but-tery". There is a widespread habit of declaring emergent realities to be "nothing but" the things in which we perceive them. The human person is "nothing but" the human animal; law is "nothing but" relations of social power; sexual love is "nothing but" the urge to procreation; altruism is "nothing but" the dominant genetic strategy described by Maynard Smith; the *Mona Lisa* is "nothing but" the spread of pigments on a canvas; the Ninth Symphony is "nothing but" a sequence of pitched sounds of varying timbre [sic]. And so on. Getting rid of this habit is, to my mind, the true goal of philosophy. And if we get rid of it when dealing with the small things—symphonies, pictures, people—we might get rid of it when dealing with the large things too: notably, when dealing with the world as a whole. And then we might conclude that it is just as absurd to say that the world is nothing but the order of nature, as physics describes it, as to say that the *Mona Lisa* is nothing but a smear of pigments. Drawing that conclusion is the first step in the search for God (Scruton 2014, pp. 39–40).¹⁹

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Notes

- ¹ The arguments in question typically assume or assert that the relevant phenomenological experiences put us in touch with objective realities, either aesthetic or moral ones. But sometimes the inferences appeal merely to those aesthetic or moral experiences themselves while bracketing the issue of whether they put us in touch with objective realities. For example, see (Ashbach 2019, 2021).
- ² This paragraph provides a perspicacious summation: "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 for theodicy. While the beautiful, according to Kant, may be the mascot of morality, so to speak, it cannot play on the team. This means that a Kantian framework will likely inhibit its usefulness in theodicy. 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 order and purpose in the world.' If this is the case, then aesthetic judgment must be irrelevant in making judgments about God's goodness. Nor can

we look to the aesthetic with an 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 prevent *cooperation* with theodicy's task".

3 Palmquist's excellent work is well worth considering more than we can here; to mention just a few examples: See his (Palmquist 2009), which discusses a possible "religious argument" for God's existence in Kant's *Religion*. Focusing on moral/transcendental arguments that have an aesthetic element, Palmquist reads Kant's theory of religion as a sequel to the *Third Critique*, not the *Second*, so he seems to be claiming that Kant had some kind of aesthetic version of the moral argument in mind here. As such, it sets out to synthesize moral considerations with aesthetic ones (such as the cohesiveness of a religious community) in a way that seems to bolster the argument being defended in this paper. In addition, a paper Palmquist delivered at the 12th International Kant Congress in 2015 was published in the proceedings of that Congress, under the title "Creative Genius: The Aesthetic Basis for a Kantian Symbolic Theology". One last article to mention for now is his (Palmquist 1992).

4 Interestingly, providence is a crucial category in Tallon's effort to build an aesthetic theodicy, and this is one more way in which Kant's help might be enlisted and their projects parallel.

5 Note later that this is in line with Ameriks' notion that the aesthetic argument, if Kant provides it, is not altogether independent.

6 Hare spends quite a bit of time discussing not just beauty, but also the sublime, in Kant's aesthetics. His take is quite different from that of David Bentley Hart as we find in the latter's (Hart 2003).

7 Even if we were to grant that Kant gave an aesthetic argument and that it is transcendental in nature, what would be needed is something supersensible; it is unclear whether what is needed is that this supersensible object be God.

8 Consider these words from G. H. Hardy's *Mathematician's Apology* as but one example: "The mathematician's patterns, like the painter's or the poet's, must be *beautiful*; the ideas, like the colours or the words, must fit together in a harmonious way. Beauty is the first test: there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics".

9 Nicholas Wolterstorff dubs a similar approach "Anselmian" in this specific sense: "Anselm assumed the acceptability of engaging in a practice of reflection that presupposes the existence of God without first having proved the existence of God". This is Wolterstorff's *modus operandi* in (Wolterstorff 2008).

10 This bears some resemblance, too, to Eleonore Stump's effort through the use of Franciscan (rather than Dominican) second-person knowledge to make the case that in, say, Job there is a sort of answer to the problem of evil provided, though it speaks to the believer more so than the unbeliever. Some of this is reminiscent, too, of C. S. Lewis's *Til We Have Faces*. See (Stump 2012; Baggett and Baggett 2022). There is a relevant distinction in this vicinity, of course, between unbelievers having *less* of an ability to glean the relevant insights and having *none*.

11 In this NDPR analysis of Murphy's relevant work (*God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality*), Mike Almeida writes, "If an explanans driven approach has no apologetic value in the sense Murphy describes, then it is hard to see how taking such an approach could, as described above, move us ultimately to a theistic account of morality. If consideration of the distinctive features of God in relation to morality does not at least increase the likelihood of the hypothetical explanans, then the explanans driven approach is not particularly well-suited to at least one goal (admittedly, not the most pronounced goal) of the book. But further, if Murphy is right about the lack of apologetic value in the explanans driven approach, then presumably there would be no corresponding decrease in the likelihood of the hypothetical explanans even if the distinctive features of God in relation to morality yielded a moral picture broadly and deeply inconsistent with the moral explananda. But then the explanans driven approach so described would amount to an odd exercise in determining what morality might look like under the assumption of a hypothetical explanans whose nature makes it an essential explainer of morality. I think it is good news for the project that Murphy is probably mistaken about the apologetic value of the explanans driven approach. There is really no reason not to believe that consideration of the distinctive features of God in relation to morality either increases or decreases the likelihood of the hypothetical explanans". See <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/god-and-moral-law-on-the-theistic-explanation-of-morality/> (accessed on 25 March 2023.)

12 From Swinburne's *The Existence of God*: An argument is C-inductive just in case $P(h/e\&K) > P(h/K)$, which means some evidence (e) increases the probability of a particular hypothesis to a higher level than it would otherwise be given our background knowledge. Whereas an argument is P-inductive IFF $P(h/e\&K) > 1/2$, which means some evidence (e) increases the probability of a particular hypothesis to over 50%, rendering the conclusion likely true. See (Swinburne 2004).

13 Some might assert that this sort of appeal is an example of a problematic "God of the gaps" argument, but God here is not an explanation in lieu of a scientific one, but rather the ground of any explanations at all, including scientific ones—at least if Hare's appeal to the need for a supersensible author is right. But to make this case requires careful attentiveness to the full array and rich significance of the aesthetic evidence rather than an a priori insistence on their domestication and deflation.

14 Of course, this is also ironic because the pains Kant took to point out the subjective elements of aesthetics (and morality) is exactly why some have misread him as denying their objectivity.

15 A smattering of resources on arguments from beauty and beauty as theodicy include (Moreland 2004; Swinburne 2004; Viney 1985; Wynn 1999; Tennant 1930; Dubay 1999; Wiker and Witt 2006; Swinburne 1998; Pruss 2004; Williams 2001; Stump 2007; Zemach 1997); Jim Spiegel has some good thoughts on the argument from beauty in a series of posts entitled, "An Anti-Naturalist

Argument from Beauty” and “Why Beauty is an Objective Quality in the World” (Howell 2007; Tallon 2008). Balthasar’s first seven volumes in his sixteen-volume “trilogy” focus on the beautiful.

- 16 Kant’s notion of beauty as *disinterested* arguably allows room for morally neutral expressions of it (or worse), leaving space for something of an apparent fragmentation among the transcendentals. That there could in principle be such postmodern phenomena as “immoral beauty” or “ugly virtue” (or “ugly truth” for that matter) might be thought to represent counterexamples or defeaters to the notion that they are ontologically on par or necessarily congruent with one another. But canonical teaching among (say) the great monotheistic traditions that such fragmentation is not normative and that, in a world redeemed, it will no longer be so, can make sense of our visceral intuition that such possibilities are not reflective of how reality ought to be.
- 17 In the *Septuagint*, too, God’s original creation was dubbed *good* for being an expression of God’s ordered beauty.
- 18 Error theorist J. L. Mackie largely put ethical and aesthetic judgments in the same proverbial boat, thinking the same sort of analysis applies, but he admitted a disanalogy. We have, he argued, fewer social reasons to objectify aesthetics than we do ethics, which is why, he thought, an error theory of aesthetics is, of the two, the more readily accepted. See his (Mackie 1977).
- 19 Thanks to two excellent anonymous reviewers at *Religions*.

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