# Beauty as a Divine Attribute: Sources and Issues

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Up until the eighteenth century, beauty was the most important concept in aesthetics. Plato's *Hippias Major*, one of the earliest works in the history of aesthetics, was focused on the question, 'What is beauty?' and it was this question that informed much of aesthetic thought for the next two thousand years. With the emergence of the notion of the fine arts as well as the systematic formulation of the idea of aesthetic appreciation in the eighteenth century, however, the question about the nature of beauty lost its traditional centrality in aesthetics and has never since regained it. An interesting parallel to this development is the way in which modern philosophical theology since the eighteenth century has, by and large, neglected discussion of beauty as a divine attribute. Philosophers and theologians in the patristic and mediaeval eras, as well as a number of later thinkers down to, and including, the eighteenth century, had considered the concept of beauty to be central to any discussion of the divine nature.

In the paper that follows, the two main sources for this philosophical discussion of divine beauty are briefly explored, an overview of the development of the discussion given, some problems with regard to attributing beauty to God looked at, and finally some solutions suggested.

## Two sources

The designation of beauty as a divine attribute in the Western philosophical tradition ultimately has two main sources, Platonic thought and the Bible. Plato's most significant discussions of beauty in this regard occur in the concluding section of his *Philebus* and in a small portion of his *Symposium*.

Central to the *Philebus* is the discussion of a question that is not primarily one of aesthetics, namely, whether pleasure or knowledge is to be regarded as humanity's supreme good. Seeking to distinguish 'pure' from 'mixed' pleasures, Socrates adduces one example of the former, namely, pleasures evoked by objects that are intrinsically beautiful. Simple geometrical shapes—'something straight or round and what is constructed out of these with a compass, rule, and square, such as plane figures and solids'—single colours, and musical notes are cited as examples. The existence of beauty

in such objects is considered to be independent of, nor affected by, external perception. They are intrinsically beautiful precisely because they are 'by their very nature forever beautiful'. This concept of the intrinsic is clearly being used to secure the stability of the experience of beauty.

This perspective on the intrinsically beautiful is logically developed in the Symposium, where there is an overt hypostatization of beauty. There the priestess Diotima tells Socrates:

> First,…[Beauty] always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. …[it is] itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in it, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change.

On the basis of this ontological understanding of beauty, Socrates is urged by Diotima to climb the so-called 'ladder of beauty', ascending from examples of beauty in this world—physical and moral beauty, and the beauty of various fields of knowledge—till he finally comes to absolute beauty, and so spend his life in contemplation of what is supremely beautiful.

The other key source in the western tradition for the description of God as beautiful is the Bible. Most of the texts in the Hebrew Bible which ascribe beauty to God are to be found in the Psalms. For example, in Psalm 27:4 the Psalmist asserts, 'one thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord' (NRSV). Here, beauty is ascribed to God as a way of expressing the Psalmist's conviction that the face-to-face vision of God is the profoundest experience available to a human being. Again, in Psalm 145:5 the Psalmist states, that he will meditate 'on the glorious splendour' or beauty of God's majesty (NRSV). Similarly, the eighth century B.C. prophet Isaiah can predict that there is coming a day when God will be 'a garland of glory and a diadem of beauty' to his people (Isa. 28:5, NRSV).

The most important biblical concept in this connection is probably that of 'glory'. When used with reference to God it emphasizes his greatness and

transcendence, splendour and holiness. God is thus said to be clothed with glory (Ps. 104:1), and his works full of his glory (Ps. 111:3). The created realm, the product of his hands, speaks of this glory day after day (Ps. 19: 1-2). But it is especially in his redemptive activity on the plane of history that his glory is revealed. The glory manifested in this activity is to be proclaimed throughout all the earth (Ps. 96:3), so that one day 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord' (Hab. 2:14, NRSV). In other words, it was their encounter with God on the plane of history that enabled the biblical authors to see God's beauty and loveliness shining through the created realm.

## The development of a tradition

It is well known that Platonism played a significant role in the formulation of a number of aspects of early Christian thought. This is especially evident in those texts of the western tradition that ascribe beauty to God. The fourth-century North African author Augustine (354–430), for example, identifies God and beauty in a famous prayer from his Confessions—

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

The material realm is only beautiful because it derives both its being and beauty from the One who is Beauty itself, namely, God. Augustine intimates, that if he had been properly attendant to the derivative beauty of the world, he would have been led to its divine source.

Like many of the ancients, Augustine appears to have been fascinated by beauty and, following Plato, used his love of beauty in its many aspects to help him love the beauty of God. But, Augustine stressed that the two should not be confused. Thus, speaking about God's creation of the heavens and the earth, Augustine can state again in the Confessions—

> It was you, then, O Lord, who made them, you who are beautiful, for they too are beautiful; you who are good, for they too are good; you who are, for they too are. But they are not beautiful and good as you are beautiful and

> good, nor do they have their being as you, their Creator, have your being. In comparison with you they have neither beauty nor goodness nor being at all.

There is a tension here. On the one hand, there is Augustine's desire to maintain a clear distinction between the beauty of God and the beauty of creation, a distinction that derives from the emphasis of the Bible on the otherness and uniqueness of God. On the other hand, his imbibing of Plato leads to the argument that what is beautiful in creation derives its beauty solely from its participation in ultimate Beauty.

The same tension is found in one of the most influential of these early discussions of God as beautiful, namely, *The Divine Names*, a treatise written in the early sixth century by a Syrian monk known nowadays as Pseudo-Dionysius. In it, he says that the Good, which is one of the ways that he designates God, is called beauty because it imparts beauty to all things. Furthermore, in a statement that is clearly dependent upon Plato's Symposium, the Good/God is the all-beautiful and the beautiful beyond all.

> It is forever so, unvaryingly, unchangeably so…, beautiful but not as something coming to birth and death, to growth or decay, not lovely in one respect while ugly in some other way. It is not beautiful 'now' but otherwise 'then,' beautiful in relation to one thing but not to another. It is not beautiful in one place and not so in another, as though it could be beautiful for some and not for others. Ah no! In itself and by itself it is the uniquely and the eternally beautiful. It is the superabundant source in itself of the beauty of every beautiful thing.…From this beauty comes the existence of everything, each being exhibiting its own way of beauty. For beauty is the cause of harmony, of sympathy, of community. Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things.

In the words of the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, Pseudo-Dionysius views 'the universe as an inexhaustible irradiation of beauty, a grandiose expression of the ubiquity of First Beauty'. Yet, there is still the consciousness that one must affirm a distinction between that Beauty which is God and the beauty of the universe.

This philosophical discussion comes to full flower in the mediaeval era. For instance, Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274), the quintessential mediaeval philosopher and theologian, carries on this discussion in relation to a two-

pronged argument for ascribing all perfections to God. He must have all perfections since he possesses the attribute of aseity, that is, he is a self-subsistent being. Moreover, he must have them because he is the cause of perfections in his creatures, and any cause must always possess the perfections of its effects.

In his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names*, Aquinas applies this argument specifically to beauty as a divine attribute. There he argues that God is called Beauty because, as Aquinas comments, 'he gives beauty to all created beings, according to the properties of each'. He is, Aquinas goes on, most beautiful and super-beautiful, both because of his exceeding greatness (like the sun in relation to hot things) and because of his causality, as the source of all that is beautiful in the universe. He is thus beautiful in himself and not in respect of anything else. And since God has beauty as his own, he can communicate it to his creation. He is, therefore, the exemplary cause of all that is beautiful. Or, as Aquinas puts it elsewhere: 'Things are beautiful by the indwelling of God'.

As one enters the modern era, a profound reconstruction takes place in aesthetic thought. The watershed is the eighteenth century, when there is a dramatic shift away from the question of the nature of beauty to a focus upon the perceiver's experience of the beautiful and the determination of those conditions under which beauty is appreciated. Aesthetic perception now becomes the basic concept in aesthetics. And it is intriguing that there is a corresponding diminution of interest in the ascription of beauty to God. Nevertheless, one can still find vital representatives of the older tradition. One such figure is the New England philosopher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758).

There is no doubt that beauty is a central and defining category in Edwards' thinking about God. He regards beauty as a key distinguishing feature of the divine being: 'God is God', he writes in his Religious Affections, 'and distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above them, chiefly by his divine beauty, which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty'. Unlike creatures who receive their beauty from another, namely God, it is 'peculiar to God,' Edwards writes elsewhere, 'that He has beauty within Himself'. Edwards' conception of divine beauty thus serves to accentuate the biblical idea of the uniqueness and transcendence of God. Typical of the older tradition in aesthetics, his central interest is not in what he calls 'secondary

beauty', the beauty of created things, but 'primary beauty', that of God. His writings contain no extended discussion of the nature of the fine arts or of human beauty. Even his occasional rhapsodies regarding the beauties of nature function chiefly as a foil to a deeper reflection on the divine beauty. Secondary beauty holds interest for him basically because it mirrors the primary beauty of spiritual realities.

Yet, in distinction from the Platonic emphasis on ascending from derivative beauty to that of the ultimate, Edwards moves in the opposite direction. In his *Personal Narrative*, for example, where he is describing his conversion to Christianity, he indicates that his conversion wrought a change in his entire outlook on the world—

> The appearance of everything was altered: there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon, for a long time; and so in the daytime, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things…

What is striking about this passage is what Michael McClymond has recently called 'Edwards' mysticism, his capacity for seeing God in and through the world of nature'. As McClymond goes on to note, this mysticism could be explained in terms of the Platonic ascent to the archetype of beauty. Yet, as he rightly points out, Edwards' experience of God precedes his transformed view of nature. The New England philosopher travels from the primary beauty of God to the secondary beauty of the created realm. This recasting of the traditional perspective is typical, though, of a thinker who was consciously seeking to undo what Hans Frei has called the 'great reversal' characteristic of early modernity, in which a theocentric worldview was replaced by an anthropocentric one.

## Problems and issues

This traditional attribution of beauty to God raises various problems for contemporary philosophers and theologians. For some, the very concept of beauty is considered outmoded since they would regard beauty as simply

a matter of taste, something that varies from person to person and from culture to culture. The idea of divine beauty itself presents further difficulties for others. Beauty is commonly understood in terms of colours, shapes, sounds, and so forth—things experienced through the senses. But how can God, who by definition is without spatial dimensions and a body of any sort, be described as beautiful? Similar problems can, of course, be raised with regard to other divine attributes, such as wisdom, power, and love. But theists are able to get around these problems by explaining these attributes in terms of the relevant divine actions, e.g., God's wise government of the world, the manifestation of his power in natural phenomena, and his love shown in providence. In the case of beauty, however, it is difficult to find any corresponding actions beyond God's creation of beauty in the world. Those who attempt to go further than this tend to say that God's beauty is ultimately inexpressible; or else they produce an analysis similar to that of Aquinas, for whom God's beauty could be defined as the integrity, harmony and radiance of his being.

At the root of these problems is the fact that we lack a proper vocabulary to support our ascriptions of beauty to God. Contemporary western culture usually employs the term 'beautiful' in one of two ways: either as an overall verdict on a work of art or a natural phenomenon, or to qualify another term, as in the phrase 'beautifully reasoned.' In either case, the term is supported by a vast array of concepts: by other aesthetic terms like 'elegant' and 'graceful', or by particular words describing the qualities of colours, sounds, and so on. Most of these terms, however, are inappropriate for describing God—what would a pretty, handsome, or elegant God be like?

In the case of divine beauty the neighbouring or supporting concepts are drawn from other sources. From the language of power, there is, for instance, the biblical term 'glory' which speaks of God's omnipotence and transcendence. From the realm of ethics, there are terms that relate to moral and spiritual qualities—goodness and holiness and the like. God's beauty is also often linked to light, in the sense of intellectual or spiritual illumination, and thus to wisdom, knowledge, and truth. It would, appear, therefore, that the idea of divine beauty is obscure both in itself as well as in its relation to more familiar types of beauty.

## Some suggested solutions

These various difficulties with the concept of divine beauty are formidable, but by no means insurmountable. Although currently aesthetics is not as

interested in beauty as earlier centuries, the concept is still the subject of much philosophical reflection and writing. Moreover, it is not true that beauty is ascribed only to colours, lines, sounds, and so forth. We commonly speak of the beauty of a scientific theory or the elegance of a mathematical proof, of beautiful personalities, sweetness of character, or moral deformity. If, therefore, we still recognize moral and intellectual beauty, there seems to be no good reason to exclude discussing beauty in relation to God. As Patrick Sherry admits, though, it is difficult to see how one might go on from this point, given the paucity of recent reflection on divine beauty in both philosophical and popular literature.

Sherry goes on to suggest that there are, in principle, two other possible starting points for a philosopher or theologian here: the divine nature itself and the beauty of creation. As regards the first, one might discuss God's beauty in terms of the relationship between his various attributes.

With regard to the second, a discussion of the topic that begins with our apprehension of beauty in nature, would need to answer some common objections. Some have argued that modern thinkers have found the ascription of beauty to God more problematical than, say, power or wisdom. This is not exactly true though. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), the Roman Catholic poet of the Victorian era, certainly did not think so when he penned the following words—

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil…

And one finds similar thoughts in the writings of Simone Weil (1909–1943), the French philosopher and social activist, who can describe the beauty of the world as the appearance of divine beauty.

Jonathan Edwards' writings, written in response to early modernity, are also of value in this regard. For him, the beauty of creation exhibited, expressed and communicated God's beauty and glory to men and women. In nature God's beauty is visible. Thus, he could state with regard to Christ—'…the beauties of nature are really emanations or shadows of the excellencies the Son of God'.

So that, when we are delighted with flowery meadows, and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we see only the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ. When we behold the fragrant rose and lily,

we see his love and purity. So the green trees, and fields, and singing of birds are the emanations of his infinite joy and benignity. The easiness and naturalness of trees and vines are shadows of his beauty and loveliness. The crystal rivers and murmuring streams are the footsteps of his favor, grace, and beauty. When we behold the light and brightness of the sun, the golden edges of an evening cloud, or the beauteous bow, we behold the adumbrations of his glory and goodness; and, in the blue sky, of his mildness and gentleness. There are also many things wherein we may behold his awful majesty, in the sun in his strength, in comets, in thunder, in the hovering thunder-clouds, in ragged rocks, and the brows of mountains.

Edwards' approach could also be helpful in that it explains why aesthetic experience is for many people also a religious experience. Moreover, by emphasizing that the beauty we perceive in the created realm is a mode of God's presence he avoids the seeming nebulousness of much of the discussion about divine beauty.

It follows, of course, for Edwards that those who ignore the beauty of God in creation are committing a religious fault. Moreover, Edwards is convinced that men and women uniformly fail in this regard for they have lost the faculty to see the visible beauty of God in his creation. They perceive the secondary beauty, but fail to see the divine beauty that saturates nature. This faculty thus needs to be restored—but exploring this area of Edwards' aesthetic thought would take us down other avenues beyond the range of this paper.

However, his approach is, I judge, correct in that he recognizes that any account of divine beauty must relate it to the beauty we perceive in the world. Any further philosophical treatment of this question will need to deal with the relationship between God's beauty and the other divine attributes, as well as to elucidate further the relationship between God and the universe.

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ENDNOTES

1. Philebus 51C [trans. Dorothea Frede in John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, (eds.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianopolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 441].
2. Philebus 50E-52B.

3. Philebus 51C-D (trans. Frede in Cooper and Hutchinson, eds., *Plato*: Complete Works, 441).
4. Symposium 211A-B (trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff in Cooper and Hutchinson, (eds.), *Plato: Complete Works*, 493).
5. Symposium 211C-D.
6. William A. Dyrness, "Aesthetics in the Old Testament: Beauty in Context", Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 28 (1985), 425-26.
7. Confessions 10.27, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), 231-232.
8. Confessions 11.4, trans. Pine-Coffin, 256-257.
9. The Divine Names 4.7 [trans. Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*: *The Complete Works* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 76-77]
10. Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1986), 18.
11. Summa Theologiae Ia.4.2.
12. Sherry, "Beauty", 280-281; "Umberto Eco", *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 27-28.
13. Cited Thomas C. Oden, The Living God (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 170.
14. Stolnitz, "Beauty", 264-265.
15. Ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 298.
16. Cited Roland André Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards. An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1968), 152.
17. Michael J. McClymond, Encounters with God. An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 34-35.
18. Personal Narrative [Letters and Personal Writings, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1998), 793-794].
19. *Encounters with God*, 25.
20. *Ibid.*, 25-26.
21. *Ibid.*, 112.
22. This section and the next are indebted to Sherry, "Beauty", 281-85.
23. Summa Theologiae 1a.39.8.
24. "God's Grandeur" in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, selected W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1953), 27.
25. Covenant of Redemption: "Excellency of Jesus Christ" in *Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections*, selected by Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson (Rev. ed.; New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), 373-74.