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Aesthetic goods and the nature of religious understanding

1. Introduction

In this paper, I consider what kind of understanding is required if the religious or spiritual life is to be ordered not only to moral, but also aesthetic goods. I aim to answer three questions. First of all: what is, or ought to be, the contribution of aesthetic goods to spiritual well-being? Then: what must the spiritual or religious person understand, if their life is to be directed to spiritually significant aesthetic goods? And finally: granted that religious understanding has the content that is described in our response to this second question, how is that understanding to be realised? In general terms, my proposal will be that a deepened appreciation of the spiritual significance of aesthetic goods suggests a new and fruitful perspective on the bodily and perceptual character of religious understanding.

It is a platitude that moral goods are central to the well-lived spiritual life, and the question of how aesthetic goods may contribute to spiritual well-being has been, by comparison, rather neglected. Here, I shall begin with an account of the spiritual significance of moral goods, before sketching a perspective on the importance of aesthetic goods for the spiritual life. Specifically, I shall start by recalling Thomas Aquinas's category of infused moral virtue, before considering how that category may be extended, so that it encompasses not only moral but also aesthetic goods.

2. Thomas Aquinas on the goods of the infused moral virtues

As is well known, Aquinas inherited from his philosophical forebears the idea that there are acquired moral virtues, produced by a process of habituation, and from theological tradition the idea that there are infused theological virtues. When developing his own account of the good life, he retains both categories, but also introduces a further, hybrid category – that of infused moral virtue.[1] Aquinas explains the rationale for this intermediate category of virtue in these terms:

[1] Thomas was not the first to think of moral virtues as infused. His Dominican predecessor, Peraldus, was exercised by similar issues and drawn to somewhat similar conclusions. For an exploration of the relationship between the two, and the background to Aquinas's thought on these subjects more generally, see John Inglis, 'Aquinas's Replication of the Acquired Moral Virtues', The Journal of Religious Ethics, 27 (1999), pp. 3-27.

> The theological virtues are enough to shape us to our supernatural end as a start, that is, to God himself immediately and to none other. Yet the soul needs also to be equipped by infused virtues in regard to created things, though as subordinate to God. (Summa Theologiae 1a2ae. 63. 3 ad. 2)[2]

The key phrase in this text is 'in regard to created things, though as subordinate to God'.[3] So the infused moral virtues share their subject matter with the acquired, or Aristotelian, moral virtues, because they are concerned with 'created things', and their teleology with the theological virtues, since they aim at a mode of life that is 'subordinate to' God. Hence whereas the theological virtues are ordered to the person's flourishing in relation to God 'immediately', the infused moral virtues are directed to this same end indirectly – that is, via the person's relations to the created order.

To see more exactly how this picture is supposed to work, and its implications for an account of religious understanding, let's take an example of how Aquinas conceives the relationship between an acquired moral virtue and its infused counterpart. In the following passage, he is considering the virtue of temperance:

> It is evident the measure of desires appointed by a rule of human reason is different from that appointed by a divine rule. For instance, in eating, the measure fixed by human reason is that food should not harm the health of the body, nor hinder the use of reason; whereas [the] divine rule requires that a man should chastise his body and bring it into subjection [1 Cor 9:27], by abstinence in food, drink and the like. (ST 1a2ae. 63. 4)

From these remarks, it is clear that the acquired and infused moral virtues differ in their epistemology, as well as in their teleology. To take Thomas's example, in the case of acquired temperance, a dietary regime will be appropriate in so far as it is consistent with health of the body. And this measure of right consumption, and right desire, is relative to human nature, and accordingly knowable by reason: one kind of diet will make for health in a human being, and another kind for health in a porpoise or tortoise; and to determine, in

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, I am following the Blackfriars translation of the Summa Theologiae, ed. Thomas Gilby (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964-74).
[3] Thomas's text reads: Sed oportet quod per alias virtutes infusas perficiatur anima circa alias res, in ordine tamen ad Deum.

general terms, what kind of diet is appropriate for a creature of our nature, it is enough to defer to the relevant empirical enquiry.

By contrast, in the case of the infused form of the virtue, the measure of right consumption will be provided by a theological narrative. And typically, this narrative will be inaccessible to human reason. To take the example that Aquinas gives here, the appropriateness of dietary 'abstinence' rests on a truth that is disclosed in scripture, namely, the truth that human beings are called to share in the life of God, post-mortem, in the beatific vision, where this teaching yields a measure of right conduct that is relative not simply to human nature, but to our 'supernatural' end.[4]

So on this perspective, the infused moral virtues share their epistemology and teleology (and also their aetiology, as infused) with the theological virtues, and their subject matter, so far as they are concerned with 'created things', with the acquired moral virtues. For our purposes, what matters in this account is the idea that, in our relations to the material world, we can realise a good that is different from the goods that Aristotle recognised in his account of the virtuous life, because here the measure of the appropriateness of our relationship to the material world is provided not simply by our human nature, but by reference to our relationship to God in eternity. Let us think further about the nature of this additional kind of good, which will arise in so far as our engagement with the world is theologically appropriate. In this way, we can arrive at a fuller picture of what the spiritual practitioner needs to understand, if their life is to be ordered to the goods of the infused moral virtues.

Granted this account of the structure of the goods of the infused moral virtues, it is natural to ask: how can a theological truth, such as the truth that we are called to share in the life of God in the beatific vision, provide a measure of right action, and right desire, in our relations with the created order? If we follow Aquinas and take the case of infused temperance, we

[4] The role of the afterlife in this account is evident if we set the passage that Aquinas quotes from 1 Corinthians within its original literary context. The full text reads: '25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. 27 No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave [chastise my body and bring it into subjection] so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.' (New International Version) Paul's reference to a 'crown that will last forever' indicates that his concern here is with the person's post mortem life with God.

might answer: our dietary habits will count as appropriate relative to a divine rule in so far as they improve our chances of attaining the beatific vision. And perhaps that is partly what Aquinas has in mind. After all, in the text from 1 Corinthians that Thomas cites here, Paul is comparing the spiritual disciplines that are needed to secure a 'crown that will last forever' to the physical disciplines that are required for an athletics contest. And the measure of the appropriateness of disciplines of this second kind is, presumably, their tendency to raise the probability of success in the games.[5]

But there is a further way of thinking about how a theological narrative might ground a divine rule. In the following text, Aquinas is considering the rationale for neighbour love, a virtue which we can assign to the same family as the infused moral virtues in so far as it concerns our relations to the created world (specifically, to rational creatures), where those relations are treated as 'subordinate to God'. In this passage, Aquinas is considering, in particular, whether neighbour love is rightly extended to the angels. This might seem a somewhat arcane concern, but the account he provides here has the same general form as the answer he gives when considering a range of other questions concerning the scope of neighbour love, such as the question of whether neighbour love is rightly shown to our enemies, to non-rational creatures, to our bodies, and ourselves. So this answer bears on the question of who, in general, is to count as an object of neighbour love. Thomas writes:

> the friendship of charity is founded upon the fellowship of everlasting happiness, in which men share in common with the angels. For it is written (Mt. 22:30) that 'in the resurrection … men shall be as the angels of God in heaven'. It is therefore evident that the friendship of charity extends also to the angels. (ST 2a2ae. 25. 10)[6]

In this passage, Aquinas seems to be taking for granted that human beings will share with the angels in the beatific vision; and his suggestion is that an account of how we should relate to them here and now, so far as we have an opportunity to do so, can be 'founded upon' this truth.[7] And on the same basis, we could say that an account of how we are to

[5] For the passage from 1 Corinthians, see footnote 4 above. In the New Testament, Jesus remarks: 'blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Mt 5: 8, NIV). And we might, perhaps, take this teaching to imply that the disciplining of desires is in some way a metaphysical precondition for attaining the vision of God.
[6] Here I am following the Benziger Bros. translation (1947), available here: http://dhspriory.org/thomas/summa/index.html
[7] Aquinas's text reads: amicitia caritatis, sicut supra dictum est, fundatur super communicatione beatitudinis aeternae, in cuius participatione communicant cum Angelis homines.

relate to our fellow human beings, here and now, can be grounded in the truth that we will one day share with them in 'the fellowship of everlasting happiness'. To judge from this text, my treating other human beings, or the angels, as my neighbour is appropriate, therefore, not because it makes my participation in the beatific vision any more likely, but because it is, in some way, fitting relative to the already established truth that we will one day share in the beatific vision.[8] Let us call this kind of appropriateness 'existential', rather than 'causal' or metaphysical, as here the fittingness of my conduct is a function of its sensitivity to an already established theological context, rather than of its making certain outcomes more likely.

We are all familiar with the case where we reason from truths concerning the history of our relations to another human being to a truth about how we are to relate to them in the present. (To take a simple example, if I have broken a promise to someone, then that truth can condition the quality of my moral relations to the person in the present, for instance, by placing me under an obligation to make reparation.) In this text, Aquinas seems to be appealing to a structurally similar, although less familiar, kind of thought, by taking truths concerning our future relations to a person to ground a truth about how we are to relate to that person in the present. Such future truths may be hard to anticipate in the ordinary course of life, but the implication of this passage is that revealed truths concerning our eschatological future can play a role in determining how we ought to relate to others in the present.

In sum, Aquinas reiterates the story, familiar from Aristotle and theological tradition, that the well-lived human life comprises those goods that are realised in so far as our relations to the created order are appropriate relative to our human nature, and those goods that are realised in so far as our relations to God are appropriate 'immediately', that is, independently of our relations to the created order. And using the category of infused moral

[8] In the article that follows the passage I have quoted here, Aquinas writes: 'In this life, men who are in sin retain the possibility of obtaining everlasting happiness: not so those who are lost in hell, who, in this respect, are in the same case as the demons.' (ST 2a2ae. 25. 11 ad. 2) From this article, it is clear that for a person to be entitled to neighbour love, it is enough for them to 'retain the possibility' of sharing in the beatific vision. Accordingly, if we take this text as our starting point, then we may wish to say that the relevant theological teaching, against which we are to measure our relations to others in the present, is not the truth that one day we will share with them in the beatific vision, but the truth that, possibly, we may do so. The case I develop in the body of the text could be re-formulated in these terms.

virtue, he is able to elaborate on this story, by suggesting that, in addition to these two kinds of good, there is another, hybrid kind of good that is integral to the spiritual life, namely, the kind that arises in so far as our relations to the created order are appropriate relative to our theological context. As we have seen, the notion of appropriateness relative to theological context can be spelt out in various ways. In the following discussion, I shall mostly be concerned with the kind of appropriateness that is implied in Aquinas's account of neighbour love, that is, the kind that I have termed existential, rather than causal, but this is not to say that the other kinds of appropriateness have no relevance for an appreciation of the contribution of aesthetic goods to the spiritual life. Granted this general picture, we should say that if a person is to attain the goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues, then they will need to understand the relevant theological narrative, and also the normative implications of that narrative – which is to say, to keep our focus on the case that is of particular concern here, they will need to understand which world-directed habits of thought, desire and action are existentially appropriate relative to the narrative.

On Aquinas's account, these hybrid goods are integral to the moral dimension of the spiritual life: to the extent that we succeed in realising such goods, then our relations to the created order will be morally appropriate relative to our theological context. For instance, if I treat other human beings as my neighbour, then my relations to them will be morally fitting, relative to the truth that we will one day share in the beatific vision. In the next phase of this discussion, I want to build on Thomas's conception of the infused moral virtues, by considering whether a story of this kind might be relevant to the question of whether there are any theologically grounded aesthetic goods.

3. Extending Aquinas's case into the aesthetic domain: bodily comportment and the spiritual life

Religious communities are commonly concerned to regulate the disposition of the body in worship and other devotional contexts. There are also, of course, iconographical traditions which take a keen interest in the representation of the posture and facial expressions of figures of acknowledged sanctity, such as the Buddha and Christ. Or again, we might think of depictions of the annunciation, and the attention to the inflexions of Mary's body that is

evident in a picture such as Botticelli's Cestello Annunciation.[9] It is worth distinguishing this kind of interest in the comportment of the body from the kind that we have already encountered, when discussing neighbour love. If I am to treat someone as my neighbour, then in relevant circumstances, I need to treat them with beneficence; and in standard cases, beneficent action will require that I move my body appropriately. For instance, love of neighbour may require me to offer someone a drink, and to do that I may need to extend the person a cup of water. Here, the movements of my body turn out to be appropriate, relative to theological context, in so far as they are morally efficacious. But the interest in the body that is evident in, for instance, depictions of the annunciation does not seem to be of this merely instrumental kind. In the case where I hold out a cup of water, there is no interest in the body as such: all that matters is that its motions should secure the desired moral outcome. By contrast, in his depiction of the annunciation, Botticelli's interest is evidently in the gracefulness that is displayed in the inflexions of Mary's body. Here, and similarly in representations of say Christ or the Buddha, the focus seems to be not on the body's role in bringing about good outcomes, but on its capacity to register directly, in bodily terms, the significance of the relevant religious context. Let's mark this distinction by talking on the one side of 'behaviour' and on the other of 'bodily demeanour'.

Thomas's account of neighbour love invites us to suppose that a person's thoughts, feelings, attitudes and desires, and in the relevant sense behaviour, are all open to assessment as more or less adequate relative to theological context. But Aquinas's discussion, and standard treatments of the idea of neighbour love, do not, so far as I can see, touch on this further way in which a person's dealings with the world may turn out to be appropriate relative to theological context. Accordingly, by introducing the notion of bodily demeanour, we can identify a further kind of hybrid good, in addition to those that are involved in Thomas's account of the infused moral virtues.

There is some discussion of these matters in the philosophical and theological tradition. For instance, C.S. Lewis remarks that the 'new' humanity of Christians is evident in their bodily demeanour, suggesting that: 'Their very voices and faces are different from ours; stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant.' And famously, bodily comportment, in the sense that

[9] For an illustration of the painting, see: https://www.virtualuffizi.com/the-cestello-annunciation-by-sandro-botticelli.html, accessed 7 April, 2017.

concerns us, is integral to Aristotle's account of the properly 'proud' or great-souled man. As he says: 'a slow step is thought proper to the proud man, a deep voice, and a level utterance'.[10] Similarly, Raimond Gaita writes of the 'demeanour' of a nun in her interaction with the patients on a psychiatric ward – glossing 'demeanour' as 'the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body'. Gaita comments that the nun's comportment towards the patients 'revealed' their 'full humanity'.[11] But while he is evidently concerned with the moral import of the nun's demeanour, for Gaita too, it is the movements of the body themselves, and their appropriateness relative to context, rather than their tendency to bring about good outcomes, that is the focus of interest. My references to worship, and depictions of the saints, or of a scene such as the annunciation, may have suggested that the interest of spiritual traditions in bodily comportment extends only to certain special individuals, or to rather restricted domains of thought and action. But as these examples – from Lewis, Aristotle and Gaita – indicate, ideals of bodily demeanour can be applied very readily in our everyday relations with other human beings and the wider world, where those ideals are understood once again in terms of existential fittingness.

So we might seek to elaborate on Aquinas's account of the goods of the infused moral virtues by supposing that a person's demeanour, as well as behaviour, can be deemed more or less adequate relative to their theological context. And for our purposes, it is important to note that this further variety of good appears to have, in some instances, an aesthetic character. Let's take again Botticelli's depiction of the annunciation. Here, the inflexions of Mary's body constitute a fitting response to the relevant theological context – namely, the context that is revealed in the angel's address. And in this case, the resulting hybrid good has inherently an aesthetic dimension. Why? Because, here, the appropriateness of Mary's bodily demeanour is partly a matter of its constituting a graceful acknowledgement of the angel's address. Of course, from a purely secular point of view, it will also be evident that the movements of Mary's body are graceful. But in this scene, there is, in addition, a further kind of beauty, one which cannot be identified independently of reference to the relevant

[10] See respectively C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: William Collins, Sons & Co., 1944), p. 186, and Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, tr. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Book IV, Section III.
[11] Raimond Gaita, A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2000), p 18. As it happens, Gaita associates the nun's example with 'the impartial love of saints' (p. 24), and we might reasonably suppose that he considers her conduct a paradigmatic example of neighbour love.

theological context – namely, the beauty that is evident in so far as the disposition of Mary's body constitutes a graceful response to that context.

In his discussion of the goals of the religious way of life, Richard Swinburne has drawn attention to the contribution of aesthetic goods to spiritual well-being. For instance, speaking of 'beautifying the universe', he remarks: 'If there is a God, such tasks will necessarily be vastly more worthwhile than secular tasks – for there will be a depth of contemplation of the richness of life of a person, God, open to us which would not be open if there is no omnipotent and omniscient being'.[12] Here, 'beautifying the universe' turns out to have a further dimension of significance if there is a God, because it can then prepare the way for, or perhaps in some respects it will just be a form of, the contemplation of God. Similarly, Swinburne notes how 'artistic creativity' will be obligatory if there is a God, and for this reason too, we should suppose that aesthetic commitments will have a further dimension of significance in a theistic universe, for they will then satisfy an obligation that would not otherwise obtain (and a particularly weighty obligation – one that is owed to God).[13] In these ways, Swinburne shows how aesthetic goods will have an additional importance if a theistic world-view proves to be true, and how the truth of theism gives us additional reason, therefore, to pursue such goods.

But in these remarks, Swinburne is concerned with the additional non-aesthetic goodness that will attach to aesthetically significant activities, if there is a God – and not, at least not explicitly, with the idea that a further kind of aesthetic goodness may be realisable, if there is a God. Our discussion has been concerned with this latter possibility. To take again the example of the annunciation, it is not just that the gracefulness that is evident in Mary's bodily response to the angel's address will be additionally good if there is a God, because it will then, for example, satisfy an obligation to God, or in some way contribute to her friendship with God. In this case, we should say that if there is a God, then the inflexions of Mary's body will realise an additional kind of aesthetic good, because they will now count as graceful not only for the reasons that are evident from a secular perspective, but also

[12] Richard Swinburne, 'The Christian Scheme of Salvation', in Michael Rea (ed.), Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology. Volume 1: Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 305.

[13] 'The Christian Scheme', p. 304. The relevant obligation will certainly be 'objective' if there is a God, and may also be 'subjective': for this distinction, see p. 296.

considered as an acknowledgement of the theological truths that are disclosed in the angel's address.

So here is one way in which we may extend Aquinas's discussion of the goods of the infused moral virtues, namely, by allowing that bodily comportment, and not only bodily 'behaviour', can stand in a relation of existential congruence to theological context. And in some such cases, I have suggested, the resulting hybrid good will have inherently an aesthetic character. I shall turn shortly to the implications of this extension of Thomas's account for the theme of religious understanding. But first of all, let us see if we can identify a further example of a hybrid good that is fundamentally aesthetic rather than moral in nature.

4. **Perception of the sensory world and the spiritual life**

It is a commonplace of reports of conversion experience that it is not simply the person's beliefs, desires and behaviour that have changed following conversion, but also their perception of the everyday world. As William James puts the point:

> When we come to study the phenomenon of conversion or religious regeneration, we … see that a not infrequent consequence of the change operated in the subject is a transfiguration of the face of nature in his eyes. A new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth.[14]

Illustrating this general tendency, one of the converts cited by James remarks:

> Natural objects were glorified, my spiritual vision was so clarified that I saw beauty in every material object in the universe…[15]

And Jonathan Edwards, as reported by James, comments:

> 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

[14] William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), p. 151.
[15] Varieties, p. 250.

> stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind.[16]

These reports are puzzling, and we might well wonder what exactly has changed in the person's experience of the world. However, the prevalence of this sort of testimony should lead us to suppose that some such change does indeed occur in, or in close association with, conversion experience. Let us see whether it is possible to understand the spiritual significance of this sort of perceptual change in the terms provided by Aquinas's discussion of the infused moral virtues.

If we want to describe the shift in the perceptual field that is reported by converts, two phenomenological categories seem to be of very direct relevance. First of all, it seems that there is a change in the 'hue' of the convert's perceptual field, so that the world now appears brighter or more vivid. And in addition, in some cases, there seems to be a change in the patterns of 'salience' that structure the perceptual field: before conversion, the world had appeared relatively 'flat', whereas following conversion, the patterns of salience that inform the perceptual field are more boldly defined, so that objects now stand out more clearly relative to one another.[17] It seems that in both these respects, that is, with respect to hue and salience, the appearance of the world can be assessed, in principle, as more or less adequate relative to our theological context. Let's take first the case of salience.

In our everyday dealings with the world, some objects stand out, as relatively salient, while others are consigned to the margins of our awareness. And implied in a given ordering of the perceptual field of this kind is a judgement about what is properly deserving of attention. Hence, we can assess patterns of salience both in moral and theological terms: a particular pattern will be morally appropriate in so far as it affords most prominence to those objects that are morally of most importance, and will be theologically fitting in so far as the salience of objects is directly proportional to their significance relative to the relevant theological narrative. Accordingly, we might understand conversion experience as a matter

[16] Varieties, p. 249.

[17] Compare James's description of Tolstoy's experience of a period of existential crisis: 'Life had been enchanting, it was now flat sober, more than sober, dead': *Varieties*, p. 152. See too his description of the experience of the man 'sick with an insidious internal disease' whose experiences of laughing and drinking 'turn to a mere flatness' (p. 141).

of the patterns of salience that inform the convert's perceptual field coming to track a divinely ordered hierarchy of values.

To the extent that the world's appearance is so structured, then it will hold up a kind of mirror to the divine mind: the relative significance of objects, as that is recorded in the patterns of salience that inform the perceptual field, will now match the relative importance of these objects from the divine vantage point. This is one way of thinking about Jonathan Edwards' comments, as cited by James. Following his conversion, Edwards takes the divine wisdom to be manifested in the everyday world. And perhaps this possibility can be understood as, in part, a matter of the patterns of salience that are inscribed in the perceptual field coming to reflect the relative importance of things in the divine conception of the world.

Some reports suggest that as well as the relative salience of objects changing following conversion, the patterns of salience that inform the perceptual field become, in general, bolder or more sharply defined. Perhaps this development can be understood in similar terms: if the perceptual field is relatively flat, then it will fail to register any significant difference in the importance of objects and this, it might be said, must contrast with the divine perspective on the world, which involves, surely, a profound sense of the differentiated import of things. So in this case too, we can understand the change in the perceptual field, so far as it involves a generalised deepening in patterns of salience, as a matter of the field coming to mirror a divine scale of values.

Perhaps we can give a similar kind of account when thinking about the change in hue that seems to be a recurring feature of conversion reports. These reports speak of the world as seeming brighter following conversion, or, as the account I mentioned above has it, as seeming newly 'glorified'. In this respect too, it seems that we can assess the appearance of the world as more or less fitting relative to our theological context. For if God is the creator, and if the world bears at least in part the vestiges of its divine origins, then, it might be said, it is only appropriate that it should appear to us as bright or vivid, rather than as dull or lacking in lustre. As with the other cases we have just discussed, this appropriateness is best understood in existential rather than causal terms.

These reflections suggest that a person's experience of the everyday world, as well as their bodily demeanour, can in principle be judged as more or less adequate relative to their theological context. If that is right, then Aquinas's account of the structure of the goods of the infused moral virtues will be relevant in this further case too. Moreover, it seems clear that the new appearance of the world following conversion commonly has a strongly aesthetic dimension: converts report that the world appears newly beautified, or newly glorified, or as James puts it in his summation of such reports, as 'transfigured' or such that 'a new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth'. Are these aesthetic goods of the kind that Swinburne has described in his account of the goods of the religious life, or should we suppose, rather, that they have a distinctively theological ground?

There is some reason to take the latter view. The brighter appearance of the world that converts report could be appreciated as beautiful, no doubt, from a purely secular point of view.[18] Similarly, we might think of the bolder, more vivid definition of the contents of the perceptual field as beautiful independently of reference to theological considerations. But it is also clear that some converts see the world in its post conversion guise as beautiful, at least in part, on account of its participation in the divine beauty or divine glory. Hence Edwards writes that 'there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything'. And as we have seen, James remarks that the experience can be represented in terms of a new heaven shining upon a new earth. The language of 'glory' also invites the thought that the new-found beauty of the world involves in some way a breaking in of the divine beauty. So if we take these reports at face value, as a record of the phenomenology of such experiences, there is some reason to say that the new beauty that is encountered in the world, post-conversion, is taken to be beautiful, at least in part, because of its perceived relation to a primordial divine beauty. To the extent that these experiences can be read in these terms, then we should say that this new-found beauty has inherently a theological structure: the experience of this beauty consists, at least in part, in material objects appearing as translucent to their divine source.

Once again, we can understand this phenomenology in terms of hue and salience. As we have seen, using these categories, we can give some sense to the idea that the world as it

[18] Aquinas is explicit that 'brightness' (or claritas) is a constituent of beauty, along with 'integrity' and 'proportion': see Summa Theologiae 1a. 39.8.

now appears, post conversion, holds up a kind of mirror to the divine mind. We might say, then, that the experience of the divine beauty being manifest in the beauty of ordinary things is a matter of the convert registering the character of the divine mind in visual terms – or following Edwards' formulation, we could say that, here, the material order appears as diaphanous to the divine 'wisdom' and 'excellence'.

So bodily demeanour and the appearance of the everyday world can both be assessed as more or less adequate relative to theological context, and accordingly both can realise hybrid goods of the kind that, on Aquinas's account, serve as the object of the infused moral virtues. And by contrast with the examples that Thomas gives, there is some reason to suppose that in these further cases, the hybrid good has, sometimes, an inherently aesthetic character. Allowing for this similarity in the structure of the goods that are realised by bodily demeanour and the appearance of the everyday world, there remain some differences. In the annunciation scene, the relevant beauty rests on the body's agency: it is as minded and purposeful, rather than as simply a set of movements, that the inflexions of Mary's body count as a graceful, and therefore beautiful, acknowledgement of the angel's address. By contrast, from the convert's perspective, the new-found beauty of the world, following conversion, does not appear to supervene on anything they have done, but seems instead to be a consequence of God's agency, at work in them. Moreover, in this case, the beauty that is encountered in the world is taken to be beautiful, at least in part, because translucent to a divine beauty. And there is no parallel for this relationship in the annunciation scene, where the beauty in the inflexions of Mary's body, although theologically grounded, can be identified independently of any reference to the divine beauty. So while the relevant aesthetic value has a theological structure in each of these cases, there are also some notable differences.

It is worth observing that these theologically grounded aesthetic goods are, potentially, both pervasive and deep – pervasive because they can be realised, in principle, whenever we perceive the world, and whenever we adopt one or another bodily demeanour in our dealings with the world, which is to say in much of our lives; and deep because they concern the appropriateness of our lives not simply in relation to some finite good, or localised context, but with respect to the divine good and our ultimate context. Accordingly, there is some reason to suppose that these hybrid goods are of fundamental importance for the

spiritual life. And in that case, they will be of corresponding significance for an account of the nature of religious or spiritual understanding.

5. **Religious understanding and the aesthetic dimension of the spiritual life**

It is time to return to the three questions I posed at the outset. Let's take them in turn. What is, or ought to be, the contribution of aesthetic goods to spiritual well-being? On the basis of our discussion here, we may say, to put the point concisely: aesthetic goods are integral to the spiritual life because of the inherently aesthetic character of some hybrid goods (and perhaps for other reasons too). And what must the spiritual or religious person understand, if their life is to be directed to these spiritually significant aesthetic goods? In brief, we may say: they must understand both the relevant theological narrative, and what constitutes an appropriate disposition of the body, and ordering and colouring of the perceptual field, relative to that narrative. That leaves the third of our questions: how is this understanding to be realised, if its object is as just described? Let's approach this question by considering first of all the case of bodily demeanour.

When I am at a football ground or graveyard, or in a classroom, or wherever it may be, the movements of my body need to be properly adapted not only to the physical contours of the space, so that I don't bump my head or trip over, but also to its social significance, so that I am not the source of confusion or offence, or some such failing. And the social significance of a place can sometimes be, as with a graveyard, a function of its history. In such cases, we are sensitive to the social, and storied, meaning that attaches to the place. And this sensitivity is not typically a matter of rehearsing various thoughts about the place and its significance in a purely mental way, before reading off the implications of those thoughts for the proper orientation of the body in the place, before then enacting the relevant bodily disposition. Rather, when in a graveyard, for example, or equally when in a football ground or shopping centre, if I am functioning in the normal way, then I apprehend directly, in the responses of my body, how I should be oriented in the space, if I am to give due recognition to its social and storied significance.[19]

[19] Compare Pierre Bourdieu's account of the habitus, and its role in guiding the body's orientation in the world. See Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice, tr. R. Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990; first published in French, 1980), p. 53.

In this discussion, we have also been concerned with the story-sensitive disposition of the body. Of course, we have been interested, in particular, in theological stories, such as the story of the beatific vision, where those stories are taken to condition the significance of the objects we encounter in the world, including our fellow human beings, and food and drink. But allowing for this difference in subject matter, these theological examples seem to be of the same general character as the more familiar, everyday cases I have just mentioned, where we orient ourselves in graveyards and so on, by taking stock of the storied identity of a material context in bodily terms. And it seems reasonable to conclude that the same kind of understanding is at work in both the theological and the everyday case.

Accordingly, we should say that if a person is to attain those hybrid goods that are conditional upon the orientation of the body in space, then their understanding of the relevant relations of congruence, between the body's movements and a given theological narrative, will need to be, fundamentally, in the body. That is, whether we are concerned with the cast of the person's facial expression, or their bodily comportment, or even, if we follow Aristotle, with the rhythms and timbre of their speech, in each case alignment with theological context will require, in the normal case, that the person's body be capable of tracking the relevant place-relative meanings directly, rather as when in a graveyard, I do not give my body instructions about how to move in ways that give due acknowledgement to the storied identity of this place, but instead simply reckon with its significance directly in bodily terms.

The same sort of perspective seems to be relevant when we move from bodily comportment to perception of the everyday world. In the usual case, I register the importance of objects directly, by reference to their salience and hue in the perceptual field.[20] Of course, a more inferential understanding is also possible, but standardly, when I move about in the world, my understanding of the relative significance of items in my environment is realised in the first instance not in some relatively discursive or theoretical mode, but directly in perceptual terms. And it seems reasonable to suppose that the same kind of competence is displayed when my assessment of the relative importance of objects

[20] Compare Lawrence Blum's account of 'moral perception', in his book Moral Perception and Particularlity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), for instance, pp. 31-3.

in the perceptual field tracks their theological significance. Here too, the understanding will be realised in the first instance in perceptual terms.

In sum, our understanding of the ways in which the body's demeanour may be properly aligned with a theological narrative is, standardly, not available in some relatively abstract, discursive mode, but realised directly in the dispositions of the body. And similarly, our understanding of the ways in which the appearance of the world may be appropriate relative to a theological narrative is, in the normal case, realised directly in the ordering and colouring of the perceptual field. So in brief, if the aesthetic goods that we have been examining here are indeed of some spiritual importance, then in central cases, religious understanding will take as its object relations of existential congruence between the body, both as moving and as perceiving, and our theological context. And that understanding will be realised, primordially, in the body's tendencies to orient itself in space, and in its habits of perception. Such is the understanding that is displayed, we may surmise, in the lives of the saints, in their relations with the created world.[21]

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