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Aesthetic experience and spiritual well-being: locating the role of theological commitments

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Religious traditions are typically concerned not only with their adherents' moral and creedal commitments, but also their lives considered in aesthetic terms. This aesthetic interest is apparent in, for instance, traditions of architecture, music, poetry and painting, and in the bodily disciplines associated with worship and other devotional practices. Given these traditions, it is natural to suppose that aesthetic experience is in some way important for spiritual well-being, and in turn for the lived practice of religion, and in this paper, I consider how that might be so.

In the course of the paper, I shall discuss three accounts of the spiritual significance of aesthetic experience. Two of these perspectives I have taken from the recent literature in theological aesthetics, and the third I shall construct, building on Thomas Aquinas's conception of the goods of the infused moral virtues. This broadly Thomistic approach occupies, I shall argue, a middle ground between the other two, on account of its distinctive understanding of the role of theological context in defining spiritually significant goods. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but they do present rather different conceptions of the ways in which aesthetic goods can contribute to spiritual well-being, and provide a focus for religious practice.

I begin by setting out Thomas Aquinas's account of the goods of the infused moral virtues. I shall then argue that this framework can be applied not only to moral goods, as Aquinas proposes, but also to spiritually significant aesthetic goods.

1. Thomas Aquinas on the infused moral virtues

Aquinas was, of course, familiar both with Aristotle's understanding of 'acquired' moral virtues, such as temperance and courage, and with Christian treatments of the 'infused' theological virtues of faith, hope and charity.[1] He affirms both traditions and, characteristically, he also seeks to integrate

[1] The 'acquired' moral virtues are produced by a process of habituation, as Aristotle explains in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II. For instance, I can acquire the virtue of courage by repeatedly doing

them – in this case, by introducing a novel category, that of infused moral virtue.[2] To see how Aquinas understands this category, let's briefly note two passages from the *Summa Theologiae*. In these texts, Thomas is concerned, in turn, with the relationship of the infused moral virtues to the theological virtues, and with the connection between the infused moral virtues and the acquired or Aristotelian virtues. When first introducing the notion of infused moral virtue, he writes:

> 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.[3]

On this account, the infused moral virtues share their teleology with the theological virtues, as God-directed, but differ in their subject matter – since the infused moral virtues are concerned, in the first instance, or 'immediately', with the person's relation to 'created things', whereas the theological virtues are concerned directly, or immediately, with relationship to God. We can see, more exactly, why Aquinas finds the infused moral virtues of spiritual significance if we consider his account of their relationship to the acquired moral virtues. In the following passage, he is concerned, in particular, with the distinction between infused temperance and temperance as conceived by Aristotle, but it is clear that he intends this account to be generalisable to other infused moral virtues and their acquired counterparts. He comments:

> 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.[4]

Here, Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of good. There is, first of all, the kind that is realised in so far as the person's life is appropriate relative to their human nature. To take the example that Aquinas gives here, I can secure the good of bodily health in so far as my dietary habits are appropriate for a creature of my kind: one set of dietary habits of will be appropriate for me,

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the courageous thing in situations of danger. The theological virtues, by contrast, depend directly on the agency of God, and are in this sense 'infused'.

[2] For a helpful discussion of the relationship between Aquinas's account of the virtues and that of his philosophical and theological forebears, see John Inglis, 'Aquinas's Replication of the Acquired Moral Virtues', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 27 (1999), pp. 3-27.

[3] *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae. 63. 3 ad. 2. Unless otherwise indicated, I am following the Blackfriars translation of the *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964-74).

[4] *ST* 1a2ae. 63. 4.

considered as a human being, and another for members of other species, and I realise the good that is the object of acquired temperance so far as my life is ordered by the first set of habits. But my habits of eating and drinking are also capable of realising another kind of good, where it is some theological truth, rather than my human nature, which provides the standard for the appropriateness of my practice. Given its original literary context, it is clear that in the passage from 1 Corinthians that Aquinas cites here, Paul is concerned with the goal of sharing in the life of God in eternity. And Aquinas's proposal is, then, that this theological truth, concerning the 'supernatural' end of human beings, in the beatific vision, can provide a measure for human thought and conduct in the present, since our thought and conduct in the present can be assessed as more or less appropriate relative to this truth concerning our eschatological future.[5]

It follows from this account that the infused moral virtues are targeted at a distinctive kind of good – not goods of the kind that are relative simply to our human nature, nor God-directed goods that concern a person's 'immediate' relation to God, but goods that are realised in our relation to the material order, in so far as that relation proves to be fitting relative to our theological context. So the goods of the infused moral virtues have a hybrid character: they are world-directed – in this respect, they resemble the goods of the Aristotelian virtues – and at the same time 'subordinate to God', since they are concerned with the congruence between a person's world-directed activity and their relationship to God – and in this respect, they are like the theological virtues. In this way, the infused moral virtues serve as a kind of hinge, bringing together the Aristotelian virtues, whose subject matter they share, and the theological virtues, with which they share their teleology. So these virtues, and the hybrid goods at which they aim, have a special part to play in the spiritual life, by ensuring that world-directed forms of thought and activity can be integrated into relationship to God.

We might wonder what makes a given world-directed mode of life 'fitting' or 'appropriate' relative to some theological narrative. Aquinas's discussion of infused temperance might suggest that the relevant relation is, broadly speaking, causal. In the passage from 1 Corinthians that Aquinas cites, Paul is developing an analogy between bodily and spiritual discipline, and we might infer that just as a regime of physical training can be deemed more or less appropriate according to whether it improves the athlete's prospects of success in the games, so dietary abstinence can be judged more

[5] The text reads: 25Everyone 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. 26Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. 27No, 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)

or less appropriate according to whether it increases the spiritual practitioner's chances of attaining a 'crown that will last forever'. However, some of Aquinas's examples invite a rather different reading of the relationship between spiritual practices and the goods of the spiritual life. Let us take an example of this second kind.

While Aquinas does not classify it as an infused moral virtue, neighbour love is at least a closely related case, since it is directed to the world (specifically, it concerns our relations to rational creatures) and at the same time ordered to relationship to God.[6] In the following passage, Thomas is discussing the appropriateness of love for the angels. This might appear to be a somewhat arcane question, but the case he makes here is representative of what he says more generally about the grounds of neighbour love, so has a wider significance. He 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.[7]

Here, Aquinas grounds the appropriateness of love for the angels in the truth that they will one day share with human beings in the beatific vision. So on this account, neighbour love proves to be fitting not because of its causal efficacy in bringing about a spiritually valuable state of affairs (such as the vision of God), but as a response to an already established truth concerning our eschatological future. We could record this point by saying that the appropriateness of neighbour love is more existential than causal. In the immediately following article, Aquinas notes that love of sinners is appropriate because: 'In this life, men who are in sin retain the possibility of obtaining everlasting happiness'.[8] Here too, the fittingness of neighbour love appears to be existential rather than causal – only the appropriateness of the relevant practices is now anchored not in the idea that we will one day share with other human beings in the beatific vision, but in the thought that we may do so. I shall not explore further why this relation of existential congruence should obtain in such cases, but a rough analogy would be provided by the case where my past friendship with a person, especially if that friendship ran deep, is taken to set certain constraints on how I am to treat the person in the

[6] I have not made much of the 'infused' character of the infused moral virtues, that is, their status as directly God-given, rather than as produced by way of some process of habituation, but it is also true that neighbour love shares the aetiology of the infused moral virtues. See *ST* 2a2ae. 24. 2, where Aquinas is discussing whether love of God is infused, and *ST* 2a2ae. 25. 1, where he maintains that 'it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbour', in the Benziger Bros translation, available here: http://dhspriory.org/thomas/summa/index.html, accessed 28 January 2017.

[7] *ST* 2a2ae. 25. 10. Here again, I am following the Benziger Bros translation of the text. Charity here is 'caritas', or what I am calling neighbour love.

[8] *ST* 2a2ae. 25. 11 ad. 2, Benziger translation.

present, even if our friendship has now lapsed. Aquinas seems to be dealing with the future-directed, eschatological, counterpart of this sort of case.

In sum, Aquinas's discussion of the infused moral virtues, and neighbour love, suggests that human beings can realise various hybrid goods in their relations to the created world, providing that those relations are congruent with their theological context – and congruence or appropriateness in this context can be understood, I have been suggesting, in existential or in causal terms. Of course, in the texts we have been discussing, Aquinas is concerned with, broadly speaking, moral goods – goods that arise in so far as we treat other human beings, and our own bodies, appropriately. Next, I want to consider whether this framework can be extended to the case of aesthetic goods. If that can be done, then we will have a way of representing the contribution of aesthetic, as well as moral, goods to the spiritual life.

2. Extending Aquinas's discussion: the case of bodily demeanour

It is of course a requirement of neighbour love that, in relevant circumstances, I should act beneficently towards other human beings – and doing that will require, in the normal case, that I move my body appropriately. For example, if someone is thirsty, then I may be required to extend them a cup of water. Accordingly, if we follow Aquinas's account of the rationale for neighbour love, then we should say that, in the requisite interpersonal setting, the movements of my body can be assessed as more or less appropriate relative to theological context. In this sort of case, the requirements of neighbour love seem to be moral in character: if it is true that I will one day share with others in the beatific vision (or if it is simply possible that I will do so), then I am required to treat them beneficently, and in general with moral respect, here and now. But religious traditions also display another kind of interest in the movements of the body, one that is not simply, if at all, a question of the moral appropriateness of those movements. Think, for instance, of the iconographical conventions governing the representation of individuals of acknowledged sanctity, such as the Buddha or Christ, and the attention that is accorded in these contexts to the figure's facial expressions and comportment. Here, the focus is not evidently on the moral efficacy of the body's movements. Rather, it seems that the cast of the person's body, or their countenance, is taken to signify their transparency to a divine or sacred order, rather than, directly, the quality of their moral or inter-personal relations.

Botticelli's Cestello annunciation provides a helpful example of this wider phenomenon. In this picture, the inflexions of Mary's body are evidently supposed to constitute a fitting

acknowledgement of the angel's address.[9] And to the extent that the disposition of her body is indeed appropriate relative to this particular theological context, then her response will realise a good of the same structure as the goods of the infused moral virtues as Aquinas conceives them. But in this case, the relevant good is not evidently moral, or for that matter causal: Mary's bodily demeanour is not a response to the presence of any human being, nor is she trying to effect any change in her environment, whether of a morally significant or other kind. Instead, the disposition of her body reveals her attunement to the theological context that is disclosed in the angel's address, and is fitting on these existential grounds.

The examples I have cited so far – of depictions of figures such as Christ, the Buddha, or Mary – may suggest that this kind of interest in the disposition of the body extends only to spiritually remarkable individuals, or has relevance only in rather specialised contexts. But it is not difficult to find further examples, where the bodily demeanour of ordinary people, in unexceptional circumstances, is assigned the same kind of significance. Hence C.S. Lewis can write in these terms of the role of bodily demeanour in disclosing the 'new' humanity of Christians: 'Their very voices and faces are different from ours; stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant.'[10] And while he does not address the point directly, it seems clear that Lewis takes this transformation in the bodily appearance of Christians to be appropriate not as a means to effecting some change in the world, but because this is a way of registering in bodily terms the sense of the Christian theological narrative: if a person subscribes to that narrative, then it is only right that they should greet the world, in bodily terms, in this spirit of quiet radiance.

Similarly, Aristotle famously notes that 'a slow step is thought proper to the proud man, a deep voice, and a level utterance'.[11] Here the focus is upon an interpersonal rather than theological context, but in this case too, a certain bodily demeanour is taken to be appropriate not because it is apt to bring about good outcomes, but as a way of registering the significance of the relevant context: the 'great souled' man is a person of superior accomplishments, and in his comportment, he enacts this truth about his capacity to manage his affairs on his own terms, and free from dependence on others. Or again, Raimond Gaita has written of the 'demeanour' of a nun in her interaction with the patients on a psychiatric ward, meaning by this 'the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body'.[12] On Gaita's account, the inflexions of the nun's body

[9] For an illustration of the painting, see https://www.virtualuffizi.com/the-cestello-annunciation-by-sandro-botticelli.html, accessed 20 April 2017.
[10] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: William Collins, Sons & Co., 1944), p. 186.
[11] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, tr. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Book IV, Section III.
[12] Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2000), p 18. Gaita associates the nun's example with 'the impartial love of saints' (p. 24), and we

have a moral significance, in disclosing our 'common humanity', but here again it is the movements of the body themselves, and what they signify, rather than their capacity to bring about good outcomes, that is the focus of interest.[13]

Suppose we mark this distinction by speaking on the one hand of 'bodily demeanour' and on the other of 'behaviour', where 'demeanour' is reserved for the case where the appropriateness of a disposition of the body is understood in existential rather than causal terms. So far, we have been considering the idea that demeanour, in this sense, and not only behaviour, is capable of realising a hybrid good of the kind that Aquinas associates with the infused moral virtues. But we have not yet addressed the question of why we might suppose such goods to have an aesthetic dimension. I am not suggesting that in every case where bodily demeanour is appropriate relative to theological context, the resulting good will be, at least in part, aesthetic. But it seems that aesthetic values will be importantly involved in some central instances of such goods. For instance, in the Cestello annunciation, the inflexions of Mary's body are surely supposed to be appropriate at least in part because they constitute a graceful acknowledgement of the theological context that is revealed in the angel's address. And we might suppose that something similar can be said of familiar iconographical traditions, to the extent that the figures they depict can be deemed dignified or graceful at least in part because of the body's attunement to the relevant religious or spiritual context. So let us allow that in central cases, even if not universally, hybrid goods will have an aesthetic dimension when they are grounded in the congruence of the body's demeanour with the relevant theological context.

It is worth distinguishing this understanding of the contribution of aesthetic goods to the spiritual life from one that has been presented by Richard Swinburne. Speaking of 'beautifying the universe', among other activities, Swinburne comments: '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'.[14] On this account, the activity of 'beautifying the universe' will have a further dimension of significance if there is a God, because it will then be, in some way, relevant to the contemplation of

might reasonably suppose that he regards her conduct as a paradigm of neighbour love. Perhaps, then, the concept of neighbour love implies not only certain behavioural tendencies, of the kind that we have noted, but also an appropriate bodily demeanour.

[13] We might be inclined to say that Gaita takes the bodily demeanour of the nun to be appropriate as an acknowledgement of the moral status of the patients. But that way of putting the matter would not be faithful to the strand of his thought which represents this sort of response as, at least in part, constitutive of the 'common humanity' of human beings, rather than simply a recognition of it.

[14] 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), p. 305.

God. Similarly, Swinburne notes how 'artistic creativity' will be obligatory if there is a God, because in that case we will owe God, as our benefactor, a life that is productive in aesthetic and other terms.[15] And if that is so, then artistic work will also acquire an additional significance if there is a God, because it will then fulfil an obligation – and a particularly weighty obligation, namely, one that is owed to God.[16]

In each of these cases, an activity which is anyway aesthetically significant, independently of reference to any theological context, comes to bear a further dimension of significance if we introduce a theological context. But the additional goodness that attaches to these activities if there is a God is not itself aesthetic. For instance, in the second of the examples I have taken from Swinburne, the additional goodness that attaches to artistic activity if there is a God turns out to be moral rather than aesthetic in character – since this activity is additionally good by virtue of fulfilling a moral debt that is owed to God. By contrast, the case we have been considering concerns an additional aesthetic good. In Botticelli's painting, Mary's demeanour can, no doubt, be seen as graceful from a purely secular vantage point; but once we have introduced the relevant theological context, then her demeanour will count as graceful for a further reason, because it will then count as graceful as a response to that context. So with Swinburne, we have noted how aesthetic goods may be integral to the spiritual life, but by contrast with his account, we have been concerned with the case of theologically grounded aesthetic goods, namely, goods whose aesthetic dimension consists at least in part in the body's attunement to the relevant theological context.

I have been suggesting that Aquinas's discussion of the goods of the infused moral virtues may be extended, so that it applies to aesthetic as well as moral goods. Next, I want to touch on two further accounts of the contribution of aesthetic goods to the spiritual life. We will then be in a position to compare these accounts with the perspective we have derived from Aquinas.

3. Two further approaches to the nature of spiritually significant aesthetic goods

In the following passage, Jeremy Begbie is discussing the figure of Christ on the cross, and considering how even such a figure can be considered as beautiful:

> in and through this particular torture, crucifixion and death, God's love is displayed at its most potent. The 'form' of beauty here is the radiant, splendid form of God's self-giving love.

[15] *Ibid*., p. 305.
[16] Swinburne distinguishes between 'subjective' and 'objective' obligations: this obligation will be, at least, objective. See *ibid*., p. 295.

> As Cardinal Ratzinger … put it: 'in his Face that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, extreme beauty: the beauty of love that goes to the end.'[17]

On this account, despite being twisted and distorted, the face of the crucified Christ can be considered beautiful. Indeed, it can be reckoned beautiful precisely in its twistedness, in so far as it is in his disfigured appearance that Christ's self-sacrificial love is revealed. Here, the notion of beauty is being moralised: even if a body is by conventional aesthetic standards an object of horror rather than aesthetic attraction, it can still be termed beautiful, if it discloses the beauty of an edifying moral purpose. Ratzinger's, and in turn Begbie's, position suggests the further idea that Christ's life does not simply illustrate the nature of true love, and therefore of 'genuine' moral beauty, but serves as the paradigm of such love, by providing the standard against which other examples are to be judged. Similarly, Begbie writes as follows of the final part of James MacMillan's work *Triduum*, which is concerned of course with the events of Easter morning:

> The 'resolution' enacted in *Symphony: Vigil* neither effaces the harshness of the memories of the preceding days nor accords them any kind of ultimacy… Its beauty is anything but tidy; the forms overlap, material is scattered, dropped and picked up again…[18]

On Begbie's account, MacMillan's piece conforms to a distinctively Christological aesthetic ideal, by mirroring the ragged, 'untidy' kind of beauty that is evident in the New Testament narrative of Jesus's death and resurrection. So here again, we are concerned with a moral ideal of beauty, which is realised primordially in the Jesus story – only here that beauty is rendered in musical rather than visual form.

This is one conception of the spiritual significance of beauty to set alongside the Thomistically inspired account that we considered earlier in the paper. Let's consider now one final account of these matters. In the following text, George Pattison is discussing a video installation which was located for a time next to the baptismal font of Durham Cathedral. The video depicts a naked man who sinks down through a body of shimmering water, until lost from view, before returning gradually to the surface, so that his form comes slowly into focus once again. This cycle lasts about thirty minutes, and is then repeated. The artist, Bill Viola, produced the recording for this site, but did not intend his work to bear any specifically Christian doctrinal meaning. Pattison comments:

> Although Viola himself is informed more by Buddhist than by Christian spirituality, the work projects itself almost effortlessly towards Christian appropriation precisely because of its use

[17] Jeremy Begbie, 'Beauty, Sentimentality and the Arts', in D. Treier, M. Husbands, and R. Lundin (eds*), The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic, 2006, p. 63.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

> of a language before language that is the primary matrix of symbolic formation and that is shared by Christian and non-Christian art alike.[19]

In the book from which this excerpt is taken, Pattison defends the familiar view that to apprehend the aesthetic significance of a work of art, we should appreciate the work simply for itself, by attending to its sensory qualities, and bracketing out any theological or other interpretive frame.[20] When we approach the work in this mode, we are reliant upon what he calls in this passage, following an expression he has borrowed from the sculptor Antony Gormley, the 'language before language' of the body. It is in the body's non-verbal, pre-discursive responses that we apprehend the work's primordial meaning. In this case, the bodily impact of this sequence of images, of the man sinking through the water and then returning to the surface, elicits in the viewer thoughts of drowning, death and rebirth, and perhaps also of cleansing, independently of reference to any culturally specific interpretive lens. In these ways, according to Pattison, works of art can sensitise us to the universal, bodily significance of water and the other elemental constituents of the sensory world.

But for Pattison, there can then be a further step of interpretation, when the work is 'appropriated' using the categories of a particular cultural or religious tradition. Hence we can also read Viola's work in terms of specifically Christian categories, and water's significance in the Christian rite of baptism, as an instrument of spiritual cleansing and rebirth. Pattison's suggestion is that the religious power of a work for a given religious tradition is revealed when this second phase of interpretation can build constructively upon the first. So when it is apprehended in terms of the language before language of the body, Viola's video discloses the elemental significance of water for creatures such as ourselves; and its specifically Christian import is then revealed when this primordial significance is further elaborated using the categories of the Christian narrative of baptism. It is the fit between these two readings of the video, the pre-discusive and the doctrinally articulated, that establishes the work's religious importance, and allows it to speak, as Pattison says, 'almost effortlessly' into a specifically Christian cultural context. So on this account, aesthetic goods have a part to play in the religious life by grounding spiritual values – such as the ideal of spiritual cleansing or rebirth – in the life of the body, and its primordial sensitivity to the sensory world.

4. Aesthetic goods and spiritual well-being

[19] George Pattison, *Art Modernity and Faith* (London: SCM, 1998), p. 185.
[20] For a helpful discussion of this 'contemplative' tradition in aesthetics, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Art and the Aesthetic: The Religious Dimension', in P. Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), Ch. 18.

We have been sketching three conceptions of the contribution of the arts or, more broadly, of aesthetic values to the spiritual life – those of Begbie, Pattison, and the Thomistically informed perspective that I have expounded with reference to Botticelli's Cestello annunciation. As we have seen, these accounts are all concerned with the spiritual, and aesthetic, significance of the human body, but they differ in their understanding of the relationship between aesthetic and theological values.

Begbie's perspective and the approach we have been exploring by reference to Aquinas are alike in identifying a kind of bodily beauty that is evident only from the vantage point of the relevant theological frame. On Begbie's account, that frame is provided by the story of Christ, which generates a distinctively theological measure of aesthetic value, which in turn makes it possible to find beauty even in a twisted and distorted body, in so far as it is relevantly Christ-like. Here, the introduction of a theological frame involves the substitution of a theological measure of aesthetic excellence for more conventional measures, which would yield a very different verdict in this case. The Thomistic account we have been considering differs on this point, since it adopts a conventional construal of categories such as gracefulness. In this case, the theological frame does not displace our established measures of aesthetic value, but introduces an expanded context within which those measures may be deployed. Hence, in the Cestello annunciation, Mary's bodily demeanour, which can be recognised as graceful from a secular point of view, proves to be graceful in a further respect once it is located within the relevant theological context. Here the theological frame deepens the aesthetic judgement we would anyway be inclined to make, whereas on Begbie's approach, the frame overturns the aesthetic judgement that we would otherwise make.

While Begbie starts from a theological frame, Pattison's account of aesthetic value invites us, in the first instance, to set aside theological and other interpretive categories, and to consider the artwork simply by reference to its import for the body. We might see this procedure as somewhat reminiscent of Aquinas's employment of a 'rule of reason' in his account of the goods of the acquired moral virtues: here, we are concerned with the artwork on the basis simply of our humanity, and independently of any culturally specific frame of reference. However, Pattison is interested in an assessment of the work that is at first simply bodily in character, rather than being ordered in discursive or conceptual terms, and in this respect the two approaches evidently differ.

On Pattison's view, once we have appreciated the work in these terms, we can then, as a second interpretive step, introduce a theological frame of reference. And this move may sound rather like Thomas's account of the way in which the infused moral virtues build on the acquired virtues, rather than displacing them. But for Pattison, a work seems to count as theologically fruitful simply by

virtue of introducing, via the first phase of interpretation, various humanly universal themes, such as death, birth, and bodily vulnerability, which can then be further specified in theological terms. The theological appropriateness of the work depends, therefore, on its capacity to lead us into conventional theological themes, via a set of associations that are elicited in the first instance through the work's pre-theoretical, pre-discursive impact upon the senses. For example, Viola's installation discloses the primal significance of water in human life, and thereby lends itself to theological appropriation, since theological perspectives on the import of water can be grafted onto this pre-discursive apprehension of its role in a human life. So we might say that on Pattison's view, the introduction of a theological frame does not point to a new set of aesthetic values, but simply enables the further specification of various theologically suggestive themes that are evoked in our initial, aesthetically informed encounter with the artwork.

By contrast, on the view we have been developing, the introduction of a theological frame informs our appraisal of the artwork in aesthetic terms. In the case of Botticelli's annunciation, for instance, we can find a new beauty in the figure of Mary once we locate her bodily demeanour within the relevant theological context. So we could register the difference between Pattison's approach and the Thomistically informed perspective that we have been developing here by saying that on the first account, aesthetic values, of the kind that are evident from a secular vantage point, serve as a route into theological themes, whereas on the second account, theological themes serve as a route into aesthetic values which are theologically grounded and therefore invisible from a secular vantage point.

In these ways, these three approaches yield different prescriptions about how we are to interpret the spiritual import of a work of art. Think, for instance, of any traditional representation of the annunciation, say, Fra Filippo Lippi's depiction that hangs in the National Gallery in London.[21] If we read this image in the style of Begbie, then we will concentrate on the resemblance between Mary's gestures and demeanour and those we might associate with the historical Jesus. Perhaps we will take these gestures (her downward gaze and slightly stooped figure, for instance) to express a Christ-like humility, and to be beautiful for this reason. If we follow Pattison, we will attend first of all to the play of shapes and colours on the canvass, and in general to the purely formal properties of the painting, in abstraction from any theological context, before using theological categories to elaborate upon various themes that are suggested by the work's bodily impact.[22] By contrast, on the

[21] See https://www.nationalgalleryimages.co.uk/imagedetails.aspx?q=NG666&ng=NG666&frm=1, accessed 28 January 2017.

[22] Compare Pattison's treatment of Craigie Aitchison's Crucifixion 1994. Despite its overtly religious subject matter, he seeks to read the picture in the first instance independently of any theological frame: *Art, Modernity and Faith*, pp. 186-188.

approach we have been considering, there is a distinctive, theologically grounded kind of beauty in the inflexions of Mary's body, where this distinctiveness reflects not the introduction of a novel measure of aesthetic value, but a different context, to which her gestures are gracefully attuned. Independently of that context, we could still see those gestures as beautiful, and perhaps as bearing a kind of moral significance, in so far as they connote humility. But on the account we have been developing here, we should say that it is only when we know the theological narrative within which Mary is acting, and know the content of the angel's message, that we can grasp in full the beauty of these gestures, and see how they bear a certain gravity, and exhibit a certain grace, as responses to this particular theological context.

5. Concluding thoughts

We have been considering three accounts of the contribution of aesthetic goods to the spiritual life, with particular reference to the role of the body in realising spiritually significant aesthetic values. I have suggested that one of these perspectives in effect collapses aesthetic values into spiritual values: on this view, for certain purposes anyway, spiritual or theological measures of aesthetic excellence take the place of conventional aesthetic standards. On a second view, on the contrary, conventional aesthetic standards operate independently of theological considerations, whose role is to elaborate upon various themes that are introduced in aesthetic experience. Finally, we have considered a view that occupies a kind of middle ground between these two: on this further account, some aesthetic values are indeed relative to our choice of theological perspective, but this is not because aesthetic values have been absorbed into theological values, but because theological narratives can provide a further context within which familiar aesthetic values may be realised. According to this final approach, some aesthetic goods share the theologically grounded, hybrid character of the goods of the infused moral virtues as Aquinas represents them in his discussion of the well-lived spiritual life. This third approach has a special affinity, of course, with Aquinas's conception of grace as perfecting nature, in the epistemic and metaphysical as well as moral domains.[23] But its general spirit is, I suggest, very much evident in other religious traditions – for there too we find the idea that religious narratives are concerned not simply with other-worldly possibilities, but with a deepening of the kinds of significance that can attach to our dealings with the material world, in our everyday lives, here and now.

I began this paper by suggesting that aesthetic values appear to be important for many forms of lived religion, given the wide interest of religious traditions in, for example, the arts and in the regulation of the disposition of the body in worship or devotion. Our findings corroborate this initial

[23] See his comment: 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it': *ST* 1a. 8 ad. 2, Benziger translation.

assessment. The theologically grounded aesthetic goods that we have been examining are potentially pervasive, because they can, in principle, be realised whenever we adopt a particular bodily demeanour in our dealings with the everyday world, which is to say much of the time. And they concern a profound spiritual good, since they arise in so far as a person's bodily life is properly aligned not simply with some localised state of affairs, but with a sacred or transcendent context. If all of this is so, then we have the beginnings of an account of why aesthetic values should be fundamental to the practice of lived religion.[24]

[24] In this paper, I have concentrated on the contribution of bodily demeanour to the realisation of spiritually significant aesthetic goods. Elsewhere, I have argued that such goods can also be realised in our perception of the everyday sensory world. See my paper 'Aesthetic Goods and the Nature of Religious Understanding', in F. Ellis (ed.), *New Models of Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Ch. 6. I am grateful to the John Templeton Foundation, and the Happiness and Well-Being project, hosted by St Louis University, for a grant which supported the writing of this paper. I offer my thanks too to two referees for the journal for their most helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.