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IMAGO DEI AND THE APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY

Michael Jones

INTRODUCTION

"Man does not live by bread alone..."¹ Human life embraces more than just 'living' (material survival); the human soul thrives on many ambiguous metaphysical elements. One of these elements is beauty. The question motivating this article is the ubiquitous 'why'; why do people find beauty in various elements of their environment? Put another way, what is it that enables one to appreciate beauty? The thesis of this article is that a person's ability to appreciate beauty is a result of being created in the image of God.

THE ISSUE

The ability to appreciate beauty affects many human activities, both recreational and vocational. Beauty is not limited to the visual arts: music, literature, performance arts, cuisine, and the enjoyment of nature all depend upon the human ability to appreciate beauty.

Until recently, the majority of discussion that now falls into the domain of aesthetics was discussed under the label 'beauty'.² Although considerably more effort has been directed toward answering the question 'what is beauty', several theories have been advanced concerning the appreciation (perception, reception) of beauty. These theories have focused on either the art object, the artist, or the audience as the locus of the beauty-experience.

Object-Oriented Theories

Theories of beauty often focus on the artifact as the locus of the experience. One of the oldest theories is that of the Pythagorean school, which held that the universe is essentially mathematical. This school suggests that pleasure in music (and other art forms) "may be derived from its internal structural properties."³ Some modern proponents suggest that the sense which perceives beauty is similar in its operation to reason, which strives to find organization in its perceptions.⁴

The 'mimetic' school represents another very old object oriented school of thought. Mimetic theorists suggest that art is a mimic of reality.⁵ The appreciation of beauty comes from the pleasure derived from the experience of learning about reality through the artifact.⁶

Artist-Oriented Theories

Other theorists emphasize the role of the artist in the beauty experience. Expressionists generally assert that the experience of beauty-appreciation is a result of perceiving the expression of the artist. The artifact (be it visual, audio, or whatever) is essentially a vehicle for the artists' expression.⁷

Audience-Oriented Theories

A third approach focuses on the audience as the locus of beauty, emphasizing the subjectivity of the experience (eg. "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", or as Cezanne said, "Nature is on the inside."⁸). According to these theorists, an audience appreciates the beauty of an artifact because he/she projects something of himself onto it/into the experience, because something about the artifact corresponds to something within the audience,⁹ or because the artifact in some way meets some need of the audience.¹⁰

A Complimentary Approach

Although proponents of these differing theories usually represent their theories as being mutually exclusive, a more profitable approach is to treat them as complimentary but incomplete.¹¹ Each theory has its own contribution to make to the discussion. When the valuable contributions of each theory are combined, one achieves a more encompassing perspective on the issue and its solution. What is needed is a single overarching heuristic principle which can tie the valuable points of the above theories together into a unified systematic whole.

THE IMAGO DEI

The requisite heuristic principle can be supplied from Christian theology.¹² Genesis 1 records that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."¹³ What exactly this image comprises is debated.

The phrase translated "in his image" is the Hebrew 'betsalmu', which is 'tselem' with a masculine singular pronominal suffix preceded by the preposition 'be'. Used in the extant early Hebrew literature this word denotes a thing which is made in resemblance of something else, such as a son who resembles his father (Gen.5:3), a statue (Num.33:52), models of a less elaborate fashion than statues (1Sam.6:5), and later, drawings (Ez.23:14). The literal meaning during this period infers a concrete, tangible replication, but metaphorical usage is also a possibility.

Some have attempted to take 'tselem' in its most literal sense, suggesting that the imago die resides in the human bodily form.¹⁴ This is improbable, since the Bible depicts God as essentially spirit¹⁵ (as opposed

to flesh) and therefore without a bodily form to replicate. The many Biblical references to God's bodily parts are probably anthropomorphic attempts to relate Divine characteristics to human audiences.

It is probable that 'image' refers to something other than a persons' physical appearance. Augustine, following Aristotles' threefold division of the human soul, theorizes that each person is a reflection of the triune nature of God, having intellect, memory, and will.¹⁶ Others have suggested many immaterial attributes which may be involved in the imago dei, such as immortality,¹⁷ dominion over other creatures,¹⁸ volitional freedom,¹⁹ mathematical and logical ability,²⁰ morality,²¹ sociability,²² and creativeness. If the Bible represents God as having an interest in beauty²³, then this is probably a part of the imago dei as well. It is suggested, then, that each of the theories attempting to explain human appreciation of beauty described above focuses on one aspect of this facet of the divine image in man.

Object-Oriented Aspects

The Pythagorean theory of the mathematical nature of the universe reflects God's consistence and other mathematical aspects of the divine nature. God's creation is highly mathematical. People have mathematical capacities similar to God's because they are created in God's image. A person finds pleasure in the mathematical, proportionate, and organized nature of God's creation and the artistic ways people re-create God's creation.²⁴

The mimetic idea of pleasure derived from the learning experience reflects that people are created with the ability to learn and a thirst for knowledge. The omniscient God has perfect knowledge; humanity, created in God's image, is ever striving to perfect it's knowledge. People derive pleasure from learning about God, God's creation, and about their likeness to God. All beauty reflects its creator²⁵ and teaches lessons about Him. Because humanity is created in His image, people have a unique capacity to apprehend these lessons.

Artist-Oriented Aspects

Expressionist theory makes the point of communication from God to man via the medium of His creation. When one beholds beauty in nature, it is the result of a creative expression of God. In a similar way, appreciation of an expression of beauty through an object created by another human is appreciation of a mediated communication of the creative expression of God.²⁶

In as much as sociability is part of the *imago dei*, the appreciation of beauty in another human beings' creation further reflects the divine nature in persons. The human act of communication through art reflects the

creative/ expressive/communicative aspects of the *imago dei*.

Audience-Oriented Aspects

Audience-oriented approaches reflect that people have internal beauty in their own selves (as a creation of God, and also as a reflection of the *imago dei*). This beauty is complimented by the beauty of those things which a person beholds, perceiving the similarities resultant of Divine design, and at times projecting ones' own feelings or self-perceptions onto objects of appreciation. People feel a need to draw near to the God who has made them and who they are modeled after. People find themselves drawn to beauty, which helps meet this spiritual need.²⁷

RELEVANCE OF THE ISSUE

It is because people are made in God's image that they are capable of artistic creation. As A.A. Stockdale well said, "When the earth was formed God could have finished it; that didn't happen. God left the music unsung and the dramas unplayed and the poetry undreamed."²⁸ God created people with the ability to fashion and appreciate beauty, implying that He expected them to do so. If this is so, then beauty and art are natural and necessary aspects of human existence. They have intrinsic value in their own right, and do not need to be justified by any extrinsic utility. Human creativity and appreciation of beauty are both a right and a duty.

Because human appreciation of beauty is a result of the *imago dei*, effective art (or "good art") will be in accord with, and even reflect, theology. Art which suggests themes which are contrary to the revealed desire of the Creator is contrary to the best interest of mankind, because it contradicts those Divine desires which are built into humanity as part of the *imago dei*. Conversely, the effectiveness of art can be maximized by studying theology in order to harmonize the artifact and the Divine nature.

Furthermore, it would benefit both art and theology if (at least some) theologians studied art! This would help theologians aid artists in bringing art into harmony with revelation. And art is an effective way of communicating theology which has received insufficient attention in recent years.

As an important part of both the Divine and human nature, beauty (and the ability to create and appreciate it) has been grossly overlooked. It has been overlooked by artists and theologians alike, albeit in different ways. Those interested in a holistic approach to the Christian life should notice that the relationship between the *imago dei* and the appreciation of beauty is the key to integrating art into the Christian life.

ENDNOTES

¹Matthew 4:4, KJV.

²Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 39.

³Goran Sorbom, "Aristotle on Music as Representation," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.52 #1 (Winter 1994), 41; Shaftesbury, "what is beautiful is harmonious and proportionable," quoted in J.M. Baldwin, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (New York: MacMillan, 1901), 106.

⁴Hutcheson, "...there is harmony between reason, which seeks regularity or uniformity, and the 'sense' which finds beauty in the same..." quoted in Baldwin, 106.

⁵Plato is strongly mimetic, saying that "...when a painter paints a portrait not having the shadow of a likeness to the original" it is a "fault which is most serious"; Plato "Republic, Books II,III,X," translated by Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed., in *Art and Its Significance*, ed. Stephen David Ross (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 10-11.

⁶Sorbom 41; Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), presents a much more developed theory, summarized on 68-69.

⁷Kendall Walton, "Listening with Imagination: Is Music Representational?" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.52 #1 (Winter 1994), 47; Antony Newcomb, "Sound and Feeling," in *Critical Inquiry* Vol.10(1984), 614-5.

⁸Quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," translated by Carleton Dallery, in *Art and Its Significance*, 285.

⁹Merleau-Ponty 285, "Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them."

¹⁰W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 190ff.

¹¹Walton alludes to the compatibility of mimetic and expressive theories; Walton, "Listening with Imagination: Is Music Representational?" 47.

¹²This principle may, perhaps, be found in other religious systems. Because this writer is most familiar with Christian theology he will utilize the Christian system. No attempt is made in this paper at an apologetic on behalf of Christianity, although the cohesiveness with which the Christian system can be made to handle such issues may have its own apologetic value.

¹³Genesis 1:27

¹⁴John Skinner, "Genesis," in *The International Critical Commentary* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 32; Herbert Carl Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartbury Press, 1942), 90-91.

¹⁵John 4:24, "God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

¹⁶See John Calvin, "Genesis," in *A Geneva Series Commentary* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 93.

¹⁷Leupold, 90.

¹⁸Skinner, 32; Calvin 94; Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis 1-15," in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 31-32; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3* (New York: MacMillan, 1959), 37.

¹⁹Bonhoeffer 34; Franz Delitzsch says self-consciousness and self-determination, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 100; Leupold, 90.

²⁰Calvin, 95; Leupold, 90.

²¹Calvin, 94-95; Martin Luther, see Leupold 89; Leupold, 89.

²²Wenham lists Barth and Westermann as advocates of this view, 31.

²³Ex. 16:14, 31:1-11; Ps. 27:4, 50:2, 90:17, 96:9; Is. 28:5; Ez. 16:3

²⁴Bill O'Brien, "Image and Purpose," in *Review and Expositor* Vol. 87, (Fall 1990), 586.

²⁵Sorbom, 44, O'Brien, 585.

²⁶A.A. Stockdale, quoted in O'Brien, 587.

²⁷Nelson Goodman, *Language of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill Publishers, 1968), 246, "...aesthetic experience (is) a pacifier that only partly compensates for lack of direct acquaintance and contact with the Real."

²⁸A.A. Stockdale in O'Brien, 587.