

ABSTRACT

Horrific Beauty

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The world is full of really horrible evils. Horrific human suffering, meaningless animal deaths, and natural systems based on destruction work together to threaten our sense of meaning in the world as well as our ability to reasonably call the world good or perhaps even to give the world any positive evaluation.¹ This inability to reasonably claim that the world is, on the whole, good forms the basis for the philosophical discussion of the problem of evil: if the world cannot be positively evaluated how can we affirm the existence of God and especially of God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good and loving creator of the world. While this conversation has often been concerned with positive moral evaluation, the question of whether we can evaluate the world as aesthetically positive is rarely addressed. In this thesis I will argue that, while we may not be able to call our horror-laden world beautiful (by modern usage of the term) we can call it sublime. By expanding our discussion to include this concept, we can more appropriately address the condition of the world while maintaining positive value.

¹ I will sometimes use the phrase “positive evaluation” rather than solely relying on the word “good” in order to indicate that I am not primarily concerned with a moral evaluation, as somewhat implied by “good”.

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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

— Revelation 21:1–6

And thus pain, it is something, as to my sight, for a time; for it purgeth, and maketh us to know ourselves and to ask mercy. For the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this, and so is His blessed will.

And for the tender love that our good Lord hath to all that shall be saved, He comforteth readily and sweetly, signifying thus: It is sooth that sin is cause of all this pain; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner [of] thing shall be well.

...

And in these words I saw a marvellous high mystery hid in God, which mystery He shall openly make known to us in Heaven: in which knowing we shall verily see the cause why He suffered sin to come. In which sight we shall endlessly joy in our Lord God.

— Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, XXVII

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Topic

In this thesis, I will look at the question of how the world which engenders horrible evils can be called good, not in a moral sense but merely in a more general positive sense, and furthermore how a specific human life marked by horrific suffering can be good. Asking such a question will also involve asking how a human life in a world marked by horrific evil can be good as well as what positive aesthetic value could be given to a whole once it is marked by evil.

Some Parameters And Assumptions

My primary objects of evaluation will be the world as a whole and a(ny) human life as a whole; there are many intermediate wholes between these two ranges, such as the world for a specific time period, or a specific part of the world, or a family's lives taken together, and so on. While I will be dealing mainly with the first two, I think much of what I have to say can be applied to the full range, particularly as the world and a single human life form the basis for the other wholes. While I take this to become clear as an advantage once I have laid out my thoughts, I will largely limit myself to those first two instances for the purpose of this thesis. The dimension of evaluation will be whether, and how well, we can assign and recognize any positive value to the objects of evaluation. Within such a range of evaluation, I will be primarily concerned with aesthetic evaluation.

I will also be assuming the truth of classical theism and of the Christian God of the Bible. While the first of these assumptions is fundamental to my argument, the second is not

but provides a pre-established framework within which to discuss implications and applications and to play out hypotheticals.

While I do agree with Adams's contention that "horrendous evils require defeat by nothing less than the goodness of God"¹ and I further agree that "when it comes to defeating horrendous evils, the central doctrines of Christian theology—Christology and Trinity—have considerable explanatory power,"² I will be focusing not on such Christian explications of the defeat of horrors,³ but rather on setting up the problem and concepts which I take to be helpful for responding to the problem. I think much can be done in a specifically Christian context on the foundation of such groundwork but I will leave most of that aside in this thesis. Indeed, while I do not take any such a framework to be *necessary* to the argument I make in this piece, I do find it helpful to any conversation about suffering in *some* framework. Since I am a Christian, I will utilize the theological language that communicates the framework with which I am familiar. However, while I will be using theological language, this will remain a decidedly *philosophical* conversation. The evidence and reasoning will be carried out in a philosophical fashion.

The Problem

I will now flesh out the dimensions of the problem of the our ability to affirm God's existence and goodness in the face of horrible evils. Most generally conceived the problem of evil is simply the claim that because there is evil there is no God, or the existence of God

¹ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell University Press, 2000), 155.

² Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 164.

³ This terminology will become clear later on.

is not very likely.⁴ Generally, this is articulated as a contradiction, or an apparent contradiction at the least: certain generally accepted attributes of God, it seems, ought to render the presence of such evils impossible. Put formally and schematically:

- (1) If there is a God, there are no evils of kind *k*.
- (2) There are evils of kind *k*.
- (3) ∴ There is no God.

I will call the first premise the Incompatibility Premise as it states the incompatibility of God and certain evils. I will call the second premise the Factual Premise as it states the fact of certain evils.⁵

There are a couple of ways this articulation of the argument can be changed. First, a “probably” can be added to the , “There are *probably* evils of kind *k*.” If we are only probably sure that there are evils of the kind in question, it will be equally probable for us that there is no God. This might be particularly relevant if the kinds of evil selected are hard to definitively spot. This might be the case if they are quite subjectively defined, and require a first-person viewpoint to really say whether they qualify.

Second, calling this “The Problem of *Evil*” and referring to the contradiction between God and *evil* can make this seem like a morally focused discussion. Despite this, I take the conversation, both problem and argument, to be more broadly applicable to other evaluative judgements, such as aesthetic or appropriate to God’s character. In light of this, while I will use the word evil, I do not necessarily mean to make purely or necessarily moral judgments at all points. I will clarify exactly what sorts of ‘bad things’ I am concerned with later, when I discuss the range of values with which I am concerned. It is also true that, as

⁴ For more regarding this probabilistic approach, cf. William L. Rowe, “The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Indiana University Press, 1996), 262–85.

⁵ Todd Buras, from personal conversation, October 22, 2015, offered the names for the premises and proposes that most if not all formulations of the problem of evil (e.g. evidential vs. logical) can be fit in this argument.

long as God is agentially held responsible for bad things, we are making a moral judgment of his failure in relation to their presence in some way. Perhaps this is enough to make the moralized use of the word evil relevant in all cases.

Third, the definition of God as well as what is filled in for k can change the nature of the argument. For instance, traditional theism tends to conceive of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.⁶ It seems that if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good—God conceived of in this way is sometimes referred to as the ‘omni-god’—then evils of some sort would not exist. While some lesser evils like stubbing your toe once in a while, long life-time might seem like the sort of k even an omni-God might cause or allow, there are some which do not merit such dismissal as easily. It might seem that such a God would *have* to prevent, for instance, really horrendous human suffering,⁷ or unnecessary animal deaths,⁸ or the overall destruction of the world. If God is really good and knows about everything and is all-powerful, it seems that God would know about and prevent any such really bad evils. Yet, those evils (of the utterly gratuitous kinds listed above which are utterly destructive to any positive value of a whole that includes them) do exist. Some evils are incompatible with God and yet those evils seem to exist, so it seems that God must not exist, or, at least, it is very unlikely that God exists. This problem of evil, that it seems God

⁶ Cf. William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979), 335.

⁷ I will explain what I mean by “horrendous” later.

⁸ By unnecessary, I mean those which have no point, imagine a young deer dying miserably of a terrible fire, entirely unbeknownst to anyone, which has no benefit to humans nor to the ecosystem. This is unlike an animal death which benefits another animal or the ecosystem, like a lion eating an antelope, nor can we find any benefit for humans, like the moral benefit of getting to feel sympathy for the animal. Cf. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 337. Also cf. Nicola Hoggard Creegan, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

cannot exist given the evils in the world, is the problem I am concerned with answering: can we say that God does exist even in a world as horrific as ours?

Which Premise?

Regardless of how the problem is articulated—regardless of what values are filled in for God or the k for evils—there are two ways of denying the conclusion that God does not exist. These two ways correlate to the two premises. One could deny the first premise, denying the incompatibility of the two claims. Such an argument would claim that we would not expect God’s existence to correlate to the presence of certain evils. For instance, one might argue that good *requires* evil as a counterpart.⁹ One could also argue that God could exist without being good.¹⁰ One could also argue that God doesn’t owe us anything¹¹ and moreover has the right to inflict harm on us.¹² I take all of these attempts to fail. The first limits God’s power¹³ and problematically redefines goodness as something which is not fundamentally opposed to evil but which is on the whole better than evil.¹⁴ The second and third offer both a metaphysical problem and a Christian problem. First, it seems very

⁹ Cf. J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64, no. 254 (1955), 203. Also cf. Saint Augustine and F. J. Sheed, *Confessions (Second Edition)* (Hackett Publishing, 2007), Book V.

¹⁰ Such a view might be supported, or at least allowed, by the theological claim of voluntarism or divine command theory. Cf. Mark Murphy, “Theological Voluntarism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter (2014).

¹¹ Cf. Marilyn McCord Adams, “Getting Along with the God We’ve Got” (University of Texas at San Antonio, October 17, 2015).

¹² Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 258.

¹³ Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” 203.

¹⁴ Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” 204.

apparent that God, as the best being, would be good.¹⁵ Second, the God of the Christian Bible, regardless of that God's metaphysical goodness, has promised goodness. One could, on the other hand, deny the second premise, denying the fact of evil or of evils of a certain kind, *k*. Arguments which claim that evils are logically necessary in order to bring about much greater goods fall into this category by denying that the evils are on the whole worse.

The Motivation

There can be a number of reasons for engaging in these conversations about the relationship between evils of the really horrific kind, God, and God's existence. I will address a number of them now. First, of course, is the simple question—simple to ask, but not simple to answer—of whether it is reasonable to believe in the existence of God, given the state of the world. This can be useful, for both the uncertain agnostic and for the faithful theist in terms of defending the rationality of a possible belief, but I think this conversation is important *not merely* as a defense of God's existence.

I think it can also reassure us of the state of the world (or the eventual state of the world). This can be important for how we live in a world with evils and then how we respond to such evils. If the world is fundamentally evil or horrific in a defeating way, what reason would we ever have to attempt to do anything about those evils? Any attempt at mitigation will eventually fail in the final defeat by evil. On the other hand, if the evils in the world are not overwhelming but are (or will one day be) defeated by certain goods, such that we can affirm the overall and eventual goodness of both God and the world, our attempts to do something about evils are but one part in an eventual defeat of evils.

I further think this conversation can force us to question God in a way that ultimately strengthens belief in and understanding of God. It seems to me that a belief in

¹⁵ Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, "Monologian," in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5ff.

God which questions the basis of that belief is a more serious and well-founded belief, and a belief which does not require the believer to ignore certain facts about the world. This does have some biblical basis. For instance, the book of Job might be paradigmatic for the central role of questioning God about horrors. When Job cries out, unrestrained, about “the anguish of my spirit” and complains of “the bitterness of my soul,”¹⁶ he asks God why God continues to punish him without reason,¹⁷ lamenting the injustice of God’s actions toward him.¹⁸ Job laments not only the injustice of his punishments but furthermore the loss of friendship with God.¹⁹ After many conversations with his friends, arguments about the justifications for God’s actions, and laments against God’s injustice and absence, God shows up. God does not ignore Job’s plea for reassurance. God arrives and reassures him of his continual presence and just action of care toward creation: “where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”²⁰ For his questioning, Job is told of God’s capability and feels truly reassured that God is as just and good as Job had thought God was: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”²¹ Indeed, Job is rewarded after these exchanges with restored fortunes.²² Not only is Job materially restored but Job gains a new understanding of God: Job’s questioning is rewarded with more pictures, and hence a fuller and better understanding, of God’s justice and goodness toward creation. I think we are right to hope and expect that our own questioning might equally offer new

¹⁶ Job 7:11, ESV.

¹⁷ Job 7:19, ESV.

¹⁸ Job 19:7, ESV.

¹⁹ Job 29:4, ESV.

²⁰ Job 38:4, ESV. Cf. Job 38–39ff.

²¹ Job 42:2, ESV.

²² Job 42:10-17. ESV.

insights. Further, suppose Job had unfairly had his life taken from him and *not* complained. It may have been respectable and even admirable for some sort of stoicism, but it may also have done a disservice to God's character to accept such unjust treatment as the good response of God as Job's friend. I think the best way to take the great weight of suffering with appropriate seriousness is to probe the worst and most difficult instances precisely for their difficulty. We ought to ask God why God seems not to have treated us as God has promised²³ or as we would expect given certain characteristics deemed fitting of God, such as goodness.²⁴

Furthermore, Christianity centrally involves suffering, and, if we cannot make sense of it, we may not be able to make sense of Christian claims. The central claim of the Christian story involves the suffering Christ on the cross: the better we question suffering, the better we may be able to understand the Christian claims.

²³ For example, Jesus says we are more valuable than sparrows, whom God takes good care of, cf. Luke 12:6-7.

²⁴ I am ignoring Marilyn McCord Adams's critique of offering standards to which we can hold God, cf. Marilyn McCord Adams, "Getting Along with the God We've Got" (University of Texas at San Antonio, October 17, 2015). If I were to engage in such a discussion, I might take a response such as Eleonore Stumps' that such abstracted attributes can help us articulate and make sense of God, but that may not quite address Adams' critique, cf. Eleonore Stump, "The Personal God of Classical Theism" (The Thomistic Institute in New Haven, St. Mary's Church, New Haven, CT, April 4, 2016).

CHAPTER TWO

The Problem

Ways To Conceive Of The Problem: Why And How

Having offered these considerations and caveats, we can turn to the crux of the argument, which lies in the way in which the evils are conceived of coming into conflict with God's existence. I chart two main ways of doing this: why and how.¹ Marilyn McCord Adams helpfully distinguishes these as “reasons why” and “explanations how,”² onto which I map theodicies and defenses.

Reasons Why

The first way of conceiving of the conflict is in terms of a why question: why did God allow evils. Such an approach articulates the problem by stating that God failed in some problematic way when God created a world that produced evils. Nicola Creegan articulates this problem as “the problem of why it all had to be this way.”³ This construction has to do with God's reasons: the challenge posed by this question is to identify those greater goods that would justify God in causing or allowing evils of the relevant kind. If God has no reasons or bad reasons for allowing evil in the world, the presence of such evils is a problem. Call an explanation of God's allowing or even causing evils a theodicy. Such theodicies argue that, although evils of kind *k* seem, and indeed are, quite terrible they are logically

¹ Cf. Todd Buras, from personal conversation. Also cf. Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 187ff. Also cf. Marilyn McCord Adams and Stewart Sutherland, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 63 (January 1, 1989): 305–306.

² Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 189.

³ Hoggard Creegan, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil*, 2.

necessary for goods which are much better than, or are worth, the evils. So, although there are evils, they contribute to a much better world. Hence, God really knew what God was doing by allowing those evils in the first place, we just did not connect that the evil is necessary for a very good thing.

A somewhat over-simplified yet fairly instructive analogy for this might be the punishment a parent inflicts on their child for running into the street without looking: being chastised may be a bad thing, but the overall good—rescuing a child from being run over—makes it an overall good thing. An example of this approach would be the Free Will theodicy. Although attributable to a number of authors, I will look primarily at Richard Swinburne’s account.⁴ In the case of moral evils, those brought about by human action, he argues that the good of free will can explain their presence quite easily. He writes:

If humans are to have the free choice of bringing about good or evil, and the free choice thereby of gradually forming their characters, then it is logically necessary that there be the possibility of the occurrence of moral evil unprevented by God.⁵

In order to be moral agents we must be free to choose how we act and to suffer the consequences of our actions, without God’s intervention before the action or the consequence. In the case of non-moral evils, evils not directly related to human action such as natural disasters, Swinburne argues that these evils allow us to develop as moral agents by providing “opportunities for especially valuable kinds of emotional response and free choice.”⁶ In summarizing the efficacy he sees of the free will defense, Swinburne also summarizes well the approach of the general sorts of responses I have been looking at. He writes:

⁴ Cf. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 238–245.

⁵ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 238.

⁶ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 240.

So, by bringing about the natural evil of pain and other suffering, God provides an evil such that allowing it, or an equally bad evil, to occur makes possible, and is the only morally permissible way in which he can make possible, many good states.⁷

In other words, in response to the question of why God would be justified in allowing, or causing, evils we can respond by pointing to the greater good allowed for and necessitating such evils.

Of course, evils of the really gratuitous, widespread, and horrific kinds are hard to fit into this framework because they seem to block the possibility of a greater good by destroying all positioning meaning without any discernible end. Additionally, the experiential effects of the evil may not be made up for by the good. For example, if the parent, instead of gently chastising began violently yelling at their kid, and perhaps even hitting them, such abuse might outweigh the good that it brings about. It may seem that the world is not full of evils which can bring about (and are necessary for) greater goods but full of evils which outweigh any positive meaning or value they might bring about. I will go into more detail with specific examples of this type of problem and the various solutions in my next chapter, but this suffices to introduce the why question.

Explanations How: Reassurances

The second way of articulating the conflict involves asking how: how does (or will, or, even, can) God make right for evils. This asks not why there are evils—i.e., what God's reasons are for causing or allowing them⁸—but how the evils present can be redeemed from destroying positive meaning. If such an attempt to explicate how God can and will redeem evils fails, then the contention might be that some evils are so bad that there is not only no

⁷ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 243.

⁸ Indeed, Adams doubts we can come up with sufficient reasons, cf. Adams and Sutherland, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," 305.

reason for their existence but there is also nothing that can be done about them. A response to the problem of evil which does not try to explain God's reasons why but to defend how God will make right might count not as a full theodicy—i.e., that the (arguably apparent) contradiction between God and evil is not a real contradiction because the evil is a reasonable allowance for God—but rather as a 'defense'—i.e., that the contradiction might remain an apparent contradiction, but we still have reason to trust God's goodness and care toward us. In order to be counted 'useful', an answer to the *how* question may not need to solve the logical problem of evil nor claim to be a theodicy. In some ways, having reason to trust God's goodness and care for all creation may be more beneficial to faith than understanding why God's original design allowed for evil.

Defeat Rather Than Balancing-Off

I take Roderick Chisholm's discussion of organic wholes to be helpful for approaching my question.⁹ The distinction between defeating and balancing off might make some sense of what we are looking for with this second *how* question. An evil is merely balanced if the goods in a whole outweigh the bads. By contrast, an evil is defeated if there is no good greater than the bads, but the whole is still organically good, and indeed better than any of its parts. While I will be more concerned with balancing off and/or defeating evils, goodness can also be balanced off or defeated. For instance, "when goodness is balanced off then a whole that is not good has a part that is good, and, outside of it, a part that is worse than the whole."¹⁰ When goodness is balanced, a not-good whole has a good part and a worse-than-the-whole part and its overall value is not good. When goodness is

⁹ Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford University Press, 1990), 53–68.

¹⁰ Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," 26.

defeated, a not-good whole has a good part and a worse-than-the-whole part and the overall value is not good, or, if the defeat is only partial, the overall value is merely *less* good than the good part is. For example, if someone has pleasure in a perceived bad, such as a sadomasochist, the good of the pleasure is defeated by its cause. On the other hand, if someone has sorrow in a good state of affairs, the good of the state of affairs might be defeated by the improper response of sorrow.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am concerned not with whether evils can be balanced but whether they can be defeated. Merely adding a greater amount of good than evil into the world fails for a number of reasons. First, this fails on a global scale. Suppose the holocaust counted for 10 billion points of badness. Suppose that one butterfly is one point of goodness. Suppose then that in response to the holocaust, there are 20 billion butterflies (if these numbers seem insufficient, add more and more butterflies; I don't think any number of butterflies would be enough), but in a temperate greenhouse in Antarctica (a location I think sufficiently removed from the events of World War II to make the point). We could even suppose that everyone in the world not directly involved in the holocaust has the opportunity to witness this magnificent collection of beauty. This wouldn't do *anything* to defeat the terrible horrific evil of the holocaust, although the amount of evil on the global scale would be balanced by the amount of good: the butterflies are simply too far removed from the evil caused. Balance on a global scale has the potential of bads and goods that are totally separate and removed from one another, with no mutual interaction. This is a problem because it looks like a perfectly loving God would be person-centered and would pay attention to connecting the rectifying goods to the persons who suffered.

This example, with some modification, can expose the second problem with looking for an answer to evil in a balance of goods. Suppose the butterflies are not in Antarctica but flood into the concentration camps at every moment of the holocaust (but suppose, even if

this seems quite unlikely, they do not disrupt the events in any significant way). Even when the goodness which balances occurs in close, even intimate, proximity to the bads, their disconnection from the causes and effects of the bads render them ineffective at really doing anything about the terrible experiences of suffering and horrific death. Our world does not need more good things but needs the bad things to be organically rendered good by the internal and mutually informative relations of the parts: the bad needs to be defeated and engulfed by good.¹¹ Defeat, and not balance, highlights the sort of correction necessitated. The worry is not merely that evil is present but that, no matter how much good is brought about by it, such good is outweighed by the insidious presence of the evil in the whole. Shifting the locus of the problem from a need for balance to a need for defeat is facilitated by the earlier shift from reasons why to explanations how: I am concerned with an explanation for *how* God can (and will) *defeat* evils.

Possible Responses: Organic And Inorganic Wholes

Following the above, it is meaningful to think about this not in terms of wholes but in terms of what sort of solution we are looking for to the problem of evil. It is possible to ask only if there is little enough evil that the whole is not overcome by it. It is also possible to ask if there is enough of a good thing to make up for evil, as Planting does in his Free Will defense or in Supralapsarianism. These are both examples of non-organic wholes. It is possible to ask whether evil could contribute to a whole that made the evil worth it, as Hick does in his argument that the development afforded by having to mature and grow in the face of evil is much better than the lack of evil. This is a somewhat aesthetic argument, as the plenitude argument above was.

¹¹ Cf. Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 52 and 147.

What Kinds Of Evils: Horrors

I take as a starting point for my understanding of the worst kinds of evils the work of Marilyn McCord Adams's discussions on horrors.¹² While it is not very productive to ask how the bad of a stubbed toe can be defeated, it is much more productive to ask how really horrific experiences and states of affairs can be made up for. Adams defines horrors as "evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) have positive meaning for him/her on the whole"¹³ She provides, at many points in her work, lists of paradigmatic horrors.¹⁴ I offer one such list here: "the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, schizophrenia, or severe clinical depression, cannibalizing one's own offspring, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, parental incest, participation in the Nazi death camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent in the disfigurement or death of those one loves best."

I add to this list of horrors racism. I think M. Shawn Copeland's work *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* provides a helpful account.¹⁵ Her descriptions of "lynching, ... the sexual abuse of black women during slavery, ... [and] torture," to name a few of the

¹² Cf. Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Also cf. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹³ Adams and Sutherland, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," 299. Also cf. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 32.

¹⁴ These lists may function like Latourian Litanies, cf. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (U of Minnesota Press, 2012), 38ff. Indeed, such litanies of horrors may be an important act of lament, important in *addressing* horrors in solidarity, if not in thinking through their reality in the face of our conception of God. I take both these things to be helpful. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, "The Risks of Nostalgia" (Baylor University, Waco, Tx, March 15, 2016).

¹⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom* (Fortress Press, 2010).

atrocities she describes, seem to me to be paradigm horrors.¹⁶ Moreover, I think her work is helpful for adding to this conversation the idea of a performative midrash. A midrash is a Jewish method of interpreting the Scriptures.¹⁷ A midrash will take a passage or story and imagine a richer context to fill in any gaps. No single midrash provides the ‘correct’ imagined context; indeed, the point of a midrash is not to discover the historical reality of ‘what really happened’ behind the myth offered in the Bible, but to better understand the Scriptures. The entire body of such midrashes is taken to work together to foster a better understanding of the Scriptures. While Copeland originally uses the phrase to describe Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,¹⁸ a novel about an escaped slave shortly after the American Civil War, I think her work also acts as a performative midrash: Copeland uses a theological discussion of Christ and the Church to inform, and be informed by, her discussions of racism and slavery in the South. For Morrison as well as Copeland, the process of taking the facts of racism and retelling them, one in a novel and another in a theological work, is an important act of understanding the events. In a similar way, perhaps recounting the facts of real horrors, not merely imagined atrocities, may be an important part of understanding the condition of the world with which we are concerned. Moreover, perhaps we can only really reassure ourselves of God’s goodness in the face of the world when we have recounted those facts as part of our responding to the philosophical problem of evil.

¹⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 5.

¹⁷ Cf. “MIDRASH,” *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* (London: Routledge, April 23, 2013), <http://literati.credoreference.com/content/entry/sharpejft/midrash/0>. Also cf. Lawrence Kushner, *God Was in This Place & I, I Did Not Know: Finding Self, Spirituality, and Ultimate Meaning* (Jewish Lights Pub., 1993).

¹⁸ Cf. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007).

I think offering her list is helpful for two additional, connected reasons. I am a white, upper-middle class college student living in Texas in a city, Waco, with high numbers of black, poor people. Jonathan Tran articulated this dissonance well:

In (Waco), a city where one out of three people live below the poverty line, in a state teeming with folks who feel the need to fight—often with one another—for scarce resources, in a nation that suffers recession where millions go unemployed . . . in a world where 35,000 children die daily from poverty, where hundreds of millions live on less than a \$1 a day and eat less than a bowl of rice, we are very, very rich.¹⁹

This poverty is a product of white racist practices from the time of slavery. First, acknowledging those horrors whose effects still persist today and which I have not undergone can, I think, help ground the discussion in real sufferings which we must not easily justify nor explain away: we see their pervasive effects but we do not have the authority of first-hand experience with which to declare how bad (or, more relevantly, how not-bad) they are. I think this can confront us with the fact that we cannot easily declare evils okay—the problem of evil is a difficult conversation indeed. To defend God’s goodness and/or existence in the face of horrors is a difficult task and we ought not to make it easy. Moreover, by acknowledging those horrors, such as the persisting effects of racism, which are not far enough in the past to be forgotten or ignored and which have not yet been ‘fixed’, I think we can be brought not merely to an intellectual understanding of the goodness of God but to the necessary lament which is a good (if not the only appropriate) response to evil.²⁰ Before we explain the existences of evils, perhaps we ought to acknowledge the sorrow they carry. This may be most easily done with evils that are near to us. I think it is most helpfully done for the academic approach to the problem with those evils which are

¹⁹ “Christian Love for the Poor Demands Deeper Commitment than Charity,” *Baptist Standard*, accessed April 20, 2016, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/texas/14428-christian-love-for-the-poor-demands-deeper-commitment-than-charity>.

²⁰ Cf. Brueggemann, “The Risks of Nostalgia.”

not often not the academic's own yet are close enough to still prompt sorrow. I think that evils demand practical response of both right thought and right action and that the performative lament prompted by such lists of nearby but not personal horrors might be the best way to undertake both of those tasks.

Possible Responses: General And Horrific Evils

Not all discussions of the problem of evil do focus on horrific evils, or even on specific evils. While one could focus on more abstract or general conceptions of evil, I am more compelled by specific and horrific instances. I will look at this distinction, making a case for a focus on the more specific and horrific evils. This distinction was teased out above, in the work of Adams, but Simone Weil offers a similar focus. In her essay on “The Love of God and Affliction,”²¹ she writes of what we have been calling horrors, distinguishing what she calls ‘pain’ from ‘affliction’.²² I take affliction to be largely equivalent to the ‘suffering’ I have been concerned with. For Weil, merely transient and physical pain, “an hour or two of violent pain,” is not a serious problem (in terms of a discussion of God’s goodness to creation) as it “is nothing once it is over.”²³ This pain is merely physical. Pain which attacks a life “in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical” and involves “an uprooting of life” is, for Weil, the much more worrisome affliction. Such an experience is “more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the

²¹ Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in *Waiting for God* (Harper Collins, 2009), 67–82.

²² ‘Pain’ and ‘affliction’ are, of course, English translations. The French word Weil uses for ‘affliction’ is *malheur*, which connotes a sense of inevitability and doom. Cf. Note on Weil, “*The Love of God and Affliction*,” 67.

²³ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 68.

attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain.”²⁴ When such an experience comes about, the sufferer is made so acutely aware of this equivalent of death that their state of mind is “as acute as that of a condemned man who is forced to look for hours at the guillotine that is going to cut off his head.”²⁵ Weil writes of this distinction:

The great enigma of human life is not suffering [what I have been calling pain] but affliction [what I have been calling suffering]. It is not surprising that innocent are killed, tortured, driven from their country, made destitute, or reduced to slavery, imprisoned in camps or cells, since there are criminals to perform such actions. It is not surprising either that disease is the cause of long sufferings, which paralyze life and make it into an image of death, since nature is at the mercy of the blind play of mechanical necessities. But it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and to take possession of them as their sovereign lord.²⁶

This distinction precisely articulates a concern not with pain or evil as such but with its ability to destroy meaning in a person’s life. I do not think it will be helpful to catalog various pains and evils to see which qualify as horrific afflictions. First, because those which qualify will not change the difficulty of the effect which, undeniably, comes about in at least some cases. Second, because the *experience* of pain as either mere pain or excruciating affliction is subjective.²⁷

I think the philosophical conversation regarding the problem of evil benefits, in general, from any considerations that ground evil and suffering in the reality that people suffer. Eleonore Stump writes:

The contemporary philosophical debate in Anglo-American philosophy over the problem of evil has become complicated and technical; for example, intricate questions of probability have played an important role in some of the philosophical literature on the subject. The analytic precision in such

²⁴ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 68.

²⁵ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 68.

²⁶ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 69.

²⁷ Cf. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 29ff.

debate is a good thing; and I, along with many others, welcome it. But this turn in the discussion also has the vices of its virtues. In its focus on such philosophical technicalities as the appropriate patterns of probabilistic reasoning, it seems simply to sidestep much that has been at the heart of the problem of evil for many reflective thinkers. And so, to many people, there has also been something heartily unsatisfying about the direction of this contemporary debate.²⁸

I think horrors can be a helpful way of focusing the conversation into a more satisfying discussion.

The Horrific Threat Of The Condition Of The World

I contend that not only does *participating in* such horrors give the participant reason to doubt, but that, as a member of the human ‘family’, the fact that other members undergo such unimaginably horrific experiences gives the observer reason to doubt that their own life has meaning either. It may be that to converse about suffering at all is always to talk about the subjective experience of suffering but this may be either about suffering experienced or suffering shared through sympathetic identification as a threat to shared humanity’s potential for meaning. When someone I care deeply for, such as a close family member, undergoes a horrific experience, it often threatens, through mere sympathy, *my* meaning and quality of life. This happens both through a sympathetic identification *and* through my realization that the world arbitrarily structured to be threatening to positive meaning.

Hence, I add to Adams’s definition of horrors as meaning-threatening events which directly involve a human participant the more expanded definition of those events which seem catastrophic or otherwise ‘worrisome’ and hence threaten the meaning of a human’s life as part of such a system, such as the forest fire which devastates a species, the tsunami which lays waste to entire geographical areas, or the comet which lands just missing an area populated by humans. Not only are humans vulnerable to horrific evils but the world is

²⁸ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

prone to catastrophes which can affect not only us but also non-human creatures. William L. Rowe offers a classic example of unnecessary animal suffering:

Suppose in some distant forest lighting strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.²⁹

Such suffering seems entirely without reason. Moreover, such suffering does not depend on a human participant nor observer. If a human had watched the fawn suffer and die, unable to help it or prevent its suffering, perhaps we could justify the death of a mere animal by the (arguably) greater good of the human observer having the opportunity to develop sympathy. It is a good thing to feel sorrow and sympathy at another's suffering, whether an animal or a fellow human. The opportunity to practice such sympathy might be a good worth the bad of the fawn's death.

However, we can easily imagine there is no such human observer. Such appeals to cultivation of sympathy are not relevant to every case of animal suffering, just those we see. Then, there seems to be no reason why the fawn should suffer: nothing better seems to be brought about by it and nothing worse seems to be prevented by it. Hence, for Rowe, because the intense suffering of the fawn at least seems preventable and apparently pointless, it would appear that

...there do exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.³⁰

Of course, this invented example is not a decisive example as it may not ever be actual, it may not have been preventable in some way unknown to us, and it may bring about some good unapparent to us. However, it is conceivable and not very outlandish and illustrates well those horrors which seem likely in our world.

²⁹ Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 337.

³⁰ Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 337.

It is not only freak catastrophes The entire process of evolution as well as the necessary interrelationships of animals, both individual animals and whole species, seem to depend on horrific evils. Murray describes this fundamental orientation to evil well:

...the claim that organismic complexity and diversity was best explained by appeal to phenotypic variation and natural selection was a theological bombshell. Not only did Darwinism embrace the notion that animals—with all of their predation, pain, and death—preexisted human beings, but predation, pain, and death were now viewed as among the very instruments of creation. It thus appeared that the natural order was hatched via a mechanism fraught with evil at its very core.³¹

The fact that the animal world is oriented toward destruction presents another articulation of the evils which can be filled in for the kind *k*. Creegan writes of this incongruity, and the problem it presents for the existence of a good God:

...the course of evolution, a process that has taken up most of deep time, was filled with death and suffering and extinction. Animals seem to have suffered. Animals perhaps knowingly inflict suffering. This is one more reason not to believe in the omni-God, nor in the God of the Scriptures. How could God have brought humanity to be by this long, long process of ordeal only to turn around and say to us that love is the central law of the universe—not survival of the fittest, not competition to the death, not nature red in tooth and claw—but love.³²

It seems entirely incoherent to claim that God is good and exists in the face of the really horrifically destruction composition of the non-human world, even if we have shown that God loves and cares well for humans.

Such events and systems threaten our sense of safety and at-home-ness in the world in which we seem most naturally suited to live. Adrienne von Speyr, a Swiss Catholic physician, writer, theologian and mystic, describes the difficulty of finding meaning in a world like ours well. She writes:

But where can man conjure up a power strong enough to do battle with what menaces him? And indeed, he is threatened at all points: by sickness, natural

³¹ Michael Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

³² Hoggard Creegan, *Animal Suffering and the Problem of Evil*, 4.

catastrophes, unknown enemies, unforeseeable misfortunes that may strike him or any one at any time.³³

It is not merely my, or any person's, specific vulnerability to various calamities which proves worrisome, but also the unpredictable possibility for a calamity to befall anyone despite their apparent vulnerability or lack thereof. It is our sense of solidarity with humankind which creates a sympathetic experience of horror at the mere vulnerability to horrors that we all share. I take horror to include: Adams's definition of participation in horrific evils, as well as familial identification with a species vulnerable to such evils and existence in a world prone to horrible catastrophes.

Possible Responses: The World Or The Individual

Discussions of the problem of evil can focus on the world or on the individual. Looking at the world on the whole seems fundamentally important to our claims about God's goodness, as God over the whole. However, such a focus can tend to discount the reality of more specific instances of evil. Focusing on the individual can have the benefit of focusing on the details and reality of what evil is and of the experiences of suffering. However, such a focus can sometimes lose sight of a broader range of values. I will look at both of these. I am particularly compelled by the second of these—the individual and the world as it relates to individuals—but aesthetic values tend to lend themselves to the first—the world not construed in the context of individual lives—³⁴making for an interesting dynamic when looking at aesthetic values as applied to the second.

³³ Adrienne von Speyr, *The Mystery of Death* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 19.

³⁴ For an example of this, cf. Hud Hudson, "Beautiful Evils," *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 2 (2006): 387–96. I look at this piece in Chapter Three.

Possible Responses: Global Or Specific

The problem of evil can also be considered in terms either of the world on the whole or of some state of affairs on a smaller scale, such as a specific event or a human's life. While this is similar to the distinction between the world and the individual, it provides some different nuances. There may be issues with looking at evils isolated from their broader contexts, but I will leave that aside for now. Looking at the problem globally does not necessarily, although commonly, correspond to looking at evil without focusing on suffering. For instance, in "Supralapsarianism or 'O Felix Culpa,'" Alvin Plantinga analyzes all human suffering in the context of the whole world: human suffering is made up for by the great good of the atonement.³⁵

Values

I will now look at what I am asking for when I inquire about that 'positive evaluation' which I claim is threatened in the face of horrific things. In general I am concerned with contrasting positive and negative evaluations. Such contrasting evaluations can exist in a variety of parameters. I do not mean to provide an exhaustive list, but to provide those values I am most concerned with and lay out some of the comparable dichotomies to provide a sense of a schema of valuations. Morally, I take good and evil to be opposed to one another. I take these to be fairly self-evident. Often, when we judge something using the words either good or bad, we are making a moral claim. Often, this is where discussions of the problem of evil are concerned, asking how a morally good God

³⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Eerdmanns, 2004), 1–25.

could allow morally bad things to happen, especially to moral creatures to whom God might seem to have certain commitments.³⁶

Aesthetically, beauty and ugliness tend to be opposed, but there may be, as I will argue, a wider range of positive and negative options, depending on both subjective preferences and objective factors such as coherence, efficacy for some end, simplicity, balance, complexity, harmony, harmonized dissonance, and so on. Where moral judgments might be said to do with moral correctness, I take aesthetic judgments to do with fittingness of a whole. I will address the additional aesthetic values I take to be relevant and their differentiations in my third chapter.

³⁶ Marilyn McCord Adams critiques such language of God's commitments to creatures taking issue with implying that God, as creator who is so much metaphysically larger than creation, owes creation anything. We can however start with God's relational promises to creation such as in those explicit covenants found in the Old Testament. This is to say we cannot say 'God you owe me such and such' but we can say 'God you once cared, what happened?' Cf. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 43; and Adams, "Getting Along with the God We've Got" (University of Texas at San Antonio, October 17, 2015).

CHAPTER THREE

Aesthetic Values

A Critique Of Aesthetic Values

Before moving on, however, I think it will be helpful to argue for the importance of aesthetic values. Oftentimes, aesthetic values are taken to be less important than moral values, and are even often taken to be counter to positive moral evaluations. Take, for instance, the production of great cathedrals such as the Papal Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican. Such intricately complex designs and expensive gold leaf and opulent statues and paintings stand in a stark and problematic contrast to the deep poverty of Catholics in surrounding cities such as Rome. It can seem hard to justify these productions of great beauty (and, I would add, sublimity) in the face of such very real and basic human need. I will first address this concern aesthetically, through an experience I had. I will then look at a philosophical articulation of the same point.

An Aesthetic Defense Of Aesthetic Values

I am sympathetic to the concern of the moral problems which often seem to accompany prizing aesthetic values. The summer between my freshman and sophomore years I went on a study abroad throughout Italy. We landed in Venice and then travelled through Florence, Rome, and down through Southern Italy. Particularly at the front end of the trip, I struggled to determine an appropriate response to such wonders—and I do take wonders to be an appropriate description of what such buildings (which are works of Christian art) naturally evoke in us. On the one hand, they were undeniably beautiful and communicated to me aspects of the character of God. The intricacy of the varied designs on the pillars in St. Mark's communicated me of God's ordering of the universe, which is

equally varied and disparate, in a way I had not *known* before. While I may have known it in a shallow sense of the word, it seems clear that I had not fully felt nor understood it, nor even comprehended it in the sense of grasping and fully holding, as made clear by the Latin roots, *com*, together, and *prehendere*, grasp. On the other hand, such beautiful works stood in marked contrast to the poverty I saw in Italy right outside the door and in the broader world occupied by the Roman Catholic Church. I still take these concerns seriously, but I also cannot shake the way in which those very buildings, in the face of a dissonant world, assured me of God and God's love. Walking through the St. Peters—with shafts of light softly descending onto the marbled floor, the dome and walls full of stories of the Christian faith—everything offered a sense of God's magnitude and our smallness as well as God's care for beauty and by extension other goods which we can appreciate and be moved by. This thesis is in many ways my continued attempt to articulate God as both concerned with the poor, powerless, and marginalized, with those who suffer unimaginably, while also being concerned with crafting and creating works, lives, and a world, of great positive aesthetic value. I think these things can be held intension, partly because of those very monuments that raise the question.

I will now articulate a more philosophical defense of aesthetic values. This move is not because I take the experiences such as those I had in Rome to be useless or meaningless, but in an attempt to make sense of and articulate what such things reveal.

A Philosophical Defense Of Aesthetic Values: Narrative And Second-Person Experiences

I will look at Eleonore Stump's defense of narrative, which I take to be an aesthetic concept, and then use that to form the basis of my defense of aesthetics more generally. In

her Stob Lectures,¹ which form the basis of her later book *Wandering in Darkness*,² Stump proposes that the appropriate reading of Job is not as follows. First, Job asks God how God could be so powerful and yet not take care of him. Then, God appears and reveals how powerful God is. Finally, Job admits that God is powerful and is satisfied, but Job knew all along that God was powerful and this attribute was never in question nor needing to be affirmed.³ This does not seem like a satisfactory answer to the problem nor conclusion to the story. Instead, she proposes, second person experiences can communicate more than just the exposition they may contain, in this case, God's description of God's power. Narrative, as an aesthetic concept, is able to communicate second-person experiences in a way in which an expository work, like an essay, is unable to. In order to understand Stump's defense of narrative, I will first look at second-person experiences.

Stump uses the idea of second-person experiences, which are contrasted from both first- and third-person experiences, to explain how this story of Job's complaints with God both provide a satisfactory answer to the problem of God's goodness and end well as a story. I will use her conclusions about second-person experiences to elucidate the worth of aesthetic values. In order to briefly sketch this vocabulary of experiences, recall the discussion of narrative point of view in English class. A novel can be written in third-person: she said, he thought, she felt, etc. Third-person is the most common. A novel can also be written in first-person: I said, I think, I feel, etc. And a novel may be written in second-person: you said, you think, you feel, etc. Second-person narration is rather

¹ Eleonore Stump, "Faith and the Problem of Evil," in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986-1998*, ed. Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 491–550.

² Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*.

³ Stump, "Faith and the Problem of Evil," 515–517.

uncommon, but think of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* game books.⁴ For instance, “You walk up to the long hut. You still cannot see anybody. ‘This is too easy,’ you say to yourself.”⁵ Unlike the third-person voice, the second-person involves you. Unlike the first-person voice, the second-person voice distances you from the book a little. While you are unable to forget that you are reading a book, you also unable to forget yourself in the reading of it. Although this literary device does not exactly match onto the philosophical concept, it is helpful for sorting out the three categories.

I will now turn to the philosophical concepts. We easily accept that third person experiences, such as the exposition in this thesis, can communicate, and can communicate in ways not reducible to other experiences. We can also conceive of first person experiences, such as the experience I am having while writing this thesis, communicating in equally unique and irreducible ways. The difference between these is the difference between what we know by observing some experience, as a distant object, and what we know by being the subject of some experience. Take the now common philosophical example of Mary’s Room. In his seminal piece,⁶ Frank Jackson describes Mary, a scientist who has lived her entire life in black and white, perhaps, we might imagine her surgically fitted with black and white lenses that de-color her world, studying with astonishing success the world of color from this perspective. Jackson writes:

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like ‘red’, ‘blue’, and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the

⁴ Edward Packard, *The Cave of Time* (Random House Children’s Books, 1982).

⁵ R. A. Montgomery, *Lost on the Amazon* (Chooseco, 2005), 91.

⁶ Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 32, no. 127 (April 1, 1982): 127–36.

sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal cords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence ‘The sky is blue’.⁷

Suppose, now, that Mary has her contacts taken out and sees color for the first time. Has her scientific (third-person) acquisition of knowledge given her a complete understanding of color? Or does the (first-person) *experience* of seeing color give her some new information, inaccessible while handicapped in a colorless world? Jackson writes:

What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? ... It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete.⁸

Jackson thinks, and I agree, that we ought to conclude that experience gives us knowledge which expositional instruction and investigation *cannot* give us. We might say that first-person experiences are not reducible into third-person experiences. The former is inexplicable (or at least not entirely explicable) by the latter.

In addition to being relevant for Stump’s ideas about suffering and narrative, I think this thought experiment is helpful for beginning to reveal the ways we ought to think about those things which may not be able to be communicated by way of an essay or third-person experience. I will first look at the way in which Stump uses it in connection to narrative and then propose its relevance to a defense of aesthetic values.

Stump proposes, following this line of thought, that second-person experiences are likewise not reducible. She writes of the distinction between a second-person experience and first- or third-person experiences that, “it is necessary ... that you interact consciously and directly with another person who is conscious and present to you as a person.”⁹ What exactly

⁷ Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” 130.

⁸ Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” 130.

⁹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 504.

might second-person experiences communicate? Imagine Mary in a room, isolated from her mother. When she sees her mother for the first time, “it seems indisputable that Mary will know things she did not know before, even if she knew everything about her mother which could be made available to her in expository prose.”¹⁰ There is something in the experience of looking into her mother’s eyes and feeling her arms giving Mary a hug that communicate about her mother’s love in ways she never could have known from even a beautifully written novel. Put more generally, Stump proposes that there is something in the experience of a person—looking at them looking at you, being in front of *them*, and so on—which is likewise irreducible. Furthermore, narrative is a medium of second-person experiences—we can get at something more of the love of a mother by reading a novel than we can by reading a scientific explanation of maternity, although even the former may fall short of *experiencing* your mother’s hug. Narrative is also an aesthetic concept, which will become relevant as I move to a discussion of other aesthetic values. To bring this back to Job, Stump thinks we ought to read God’s response to Job as a second-person experience—Job is speaking with God—and as an *account* of a second-person experience—God describes God’s care for creation in the descriptions of power.¹¹

Aesthetic Experiences As Equally Irreducible

Let us return, more specifically, to the question of aesthetics. I propose that aesthetic experiences, at least comparably to second-person experiences, ought to be taken seriously for their ability to communicate uniquely and irreducibly about the condition of the world. Both the first part of this—the connection to aesthetic experiences—and the second part—the connection to the world—merit further discussion.

¹⁰ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 506.

¹¹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 522.

Recall, first, that part of the defense of second-person experiences had to do with an aesthetic experience: narrative. The written genre which got closest to communicating what is only accessible by way of a second-person experience is an aesthetic genre, one which can be beautiful, fitting, balanced, interesting, pleasing, ugly, and sublime, to name a few. There is something about second-person experiences which is innately connected to aesthetics in terms of how it can be communicated.

It may seem like a jump to argue that second-person experiences, which by definition involve interactions between two *people*, can tell us about the condition of the world, which is not a person. However, recall the discussion of the horrific threat of the condition of the world: part of the problem at hand is not merely those evils *I* experience but also those others do and even can experience. It can be hard to affirm meaning in a world in which anyone can undergo really horrific suffering. I think part of our (accurate) understanding of the world is a product of our sympathetic identification with others. I think we can shift from a discussion of second-person experiences to better understanding the world because second-person experiences allow us to see the world as a medium of communication between persons.

In light of both how second-person experiences can communicate—by of of aesthetic experiences—and in light of what second-person experiences, and aesthetic experiences by extension, can communicate—about both other people and the world, I claim that the nature and structure of aesthetic values can inform us about the values of the world, even outside a strictly artistic context. We can look to aesthetic considerations, such as beauty, ugliness, and, importantly for this thesis, the sublime, to tell us about truth, goodness, and perhaps God's personal presence as well.¹² This does line up with human experience, I

¹² This seems especially relevant given the connection between second-person experiences and aesthetics.

think: aesthetic experiences (often) have the power to give us lenses and pens, to allow us to see and imagine the world as it really is in light of how it could be.

Possible Responses: Aesthetic And Non-Aesthetic

Discussions of the problem of evil can take either aesthetic or non-aesthetic approaches; the latter of these is much more common. Aesthetic approaches can look at either the problem or the solution in terms of aesthetic evaluations. I think most often these go hand in hand. His theodicy, as much as it can be called such, proposes an aesthetic solution to an aesthetic problem: given the natural evil in the world why not suppose that these are necessary aspects of a four-dimensional work of such great beauty it makes up for the ugliness of the evil. There are a number of terms in this proposal that require some definition. Hudson focuses solely on natural evils which he takes to be those evils which consist “in the suffering of non-person animals.”¹³ By four-dimensional work, Hudson means some collection of things which form a whole only when viewed in the fourth-dimension; we are four-dimensional creatures, but we can only see a three-dimensional cross-section at any time. He argues that we ought to seriously consider the idea that there is a fourth-dimension view of our world that is beautiful while the slices that we see as three-dimensional creatures are quite ugly. This perhaps gets very well at what aesthetic values are and how they might perhaps be invisible to us from a certain perspective (whether spatial, temporal, size, etc.). However, I think it perhaps does not compensate fully for certain types of evils. Sure, some discomforts are easily made up for by beautiful experiences, even beautiful experiences with ugly cross sections—a part of the four-dimensional whole as seen

¹³ Hud Hudson, “Beautiful Evils,” 387. In some ways, this is an example of the way in which aesthetic responses are often taken to be concomitant more with global and abstract articulations of evil than with specific and concrete articulations of suffering. See the discussion of “Possible Responses: The World or The Individual” in Chapter Two.

in three-dimensions at any one point in time— but, in the face of really horrific suffering, or, in light of an awareness that such horrific suffering happens, what good can an aesthetic experience do?

Augustine offers another example of an aesthetic approach to the problem.¹⁴ His uses an aesthetic value to justify the condition of the world. The problem Augustine proposes is not quite the one we are used to in discussions of the problem of evil, but, rather, that there are *imperfect* things present in the world we ascribe to the creator. Any imperfection would seem to be a failure and certainly animals which have limited abilities or which need to feed on smaller, stupider, less-capable animals seem like a failure.

Augustine argues that it is better to have a variety than a single ‘perfect’ thing—the claim is that plenitude is preferable over simplicity, an aesthetic claim.¹⁵ I think this is worth considering, but it gets at only the condition of the world as a whole and not at the experiences of individuals. I do not think anyone would argue that a largely happy life (concerns about having loved and lost being better than not having loved at all¹⁶ aside) is worse than a life with every type of experience possible including every type of painful loss and painful suffering.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Macmillan, 1966), 76ff.

¹⁵ Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 127

¹⁶ Cf. Alfred Tennyson Baron Tennyson, “In Memoriam A. H. H.,” in *Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1830-1865* (Oxford University Press, 1910), 296–384.

¹⁷ There may be additional concerns about Augustine’s plenitude applying necessity to God’s actions in a way unmerited and unfitting, but this theological concern lies outside of the scope of this thesis.

The Problem Of Suffering With An Aesthetic Solution In Mind

With this further vocabulary laid out, I will rearticulate the problem given not only the problem but the resolution I am looking for. The problem is the possibility of assigning *any* positive value to a person's life or to the world in the presence of horror. My question, again, is how such horrors could be defeated or engulfed; if they cannot be, we have reason to doubt God's goodness. I will be drawing on aesthetic considerations as sources of potentially defeating positive value. In order to apply various evaluations to various states of affairs, I will start with a work of art, which, I think, is where we are most often accustomed to making aesthetic judgements. I will then move to the world and a human life by analogy. If a work of art depicts a pleasant scene in harmonious colors with a pleasantly balanced composition and pleasing colors, we might easily and I think accurately call it beautiful. Similarly, a world without evil, suffering, or horror might easily and accurately be judged morally good and aesthetically beautiful. However, it seems that, given enough of any kind of evil or any amount of some really terrible evils we could no longer call the world morally good. Likewise, given enough discordance, ugliness, and unpleasant subject matter, we might no longer call a work of art beautiful. Similarly, a world full of ugliness and unpleasing horror might no longer merit being called beautiful and a human life without any horrific evil experiences, and without any possibility of such experiences, might too be deemed good and beautiful. If we are to call the world in its current condition aesthetically positive at all, we must be able to assign positive evaluation that can coexist with the worst ugliness and discord, since those are present in the world in its current condition. I will be asking what we call that aesthetic good which incorporates great discord, not merely pleasant differences.

The Question Rearticulated

In this thesis, again, I will be asking: how can a person's life can be given any positive evaluation when their life is marked by horrors? How a person's life can be given any positive evaluation when other's lives are marked by horrors? And how a person's life can be given any positive evaluation when the world threatens potential horrors? I will not be asking why God might allow evils but rather how God might defeat them. The question is not why would God allow evils but whether those evils, once present, can be fit into a world that is good and so reconciled with a God who is good. I take the stakes for fitting such irrational and horrifying conditions into a positive valuation to require not merely the correct amount of balancing goodness, but the types of conditions that defeat the horrors.

CHAPTER FOUR

My Response

I will now turn to my response. In this thesis, I will propose that we could evaluate wholes that included meaning-defeating horrors as positively and aesthetically sublime in a way we might not be able to evaluate them as beautiful. I will first look at a discussion of the history of the sublime, before looking at its specific application to the discussion of the problem of evil.

The Sublime

I will take the beautiful and the sublime to be opposed and distinct. Defining the concepts in this way ignores much of the conversations about either term and does not attempt to articulate the sublime's relationship to the beautiful in any more nuanced way. In doing so, I am following much of the more modern discussions and ignoring pre-romantic and post-Kantian discussions alike. This does not mean that different definitions might entirely undermine my argument: it might be helpful to view the words 'beautiful' and 'sublime' as somewhat arbitrary in this conversation. If my definitions were incompatible with other definitions which seem more correct, one could easily substitute another word for each. I am concerned with the concepts and not their historical uses. I will focus only on those definitions and conceptions which I have found useful for dealing with the problem of evil.

I will be using, largely, the thought of Edmund Burke and Arthur Schopenhauer, as I have found their descriptions productive for this conversation. On the one hand, I take the beautiful to be largely a subjective judgment of what is simply pleasing. This defies much of the transcendental treatment of the beautiful, by which the beautiful is taken to convertible

with the Good and the True. For Plato, for instance, earthly beauty ought to lead us to absolute beauty. He writes:

And the true order of going is to use the beauties of the earth as steps along which to mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty: from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions until he arrives at the idea of absolute beauty.¹

My treatment of beauty as subjective follows the splitting apart of the beautiful and sublime into two concepts, which occurred along the following lines. Before the mid-Enlightenment and the move of Romanticism, it was generally accepted that aesthetic concepts, although they might have subjective aspects, were ultimately grounded in an objective reality of the transcendentals. Often, these subjective aspects were taken to be a product of beauty, and not the origin of a proper judgment of beauty. Crispin Sartwell writes that, “At latest by the eighteenth century, however, and particularly in the British Isles, beauty was associated with pleasure in a somewhat different way: pleasure was held to be not the effect but the origin of beauty.”² This change occurs over the course of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Take, for example, in the mid eighteenth century,

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others.³

Indeed, for Kant, not only is beauty made subjective, but *all* aesthetic judgment is rendered subjective:

¹ Plato, “The Love of Beauty: Selections from Symposium,” in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Phoenix Edition, P685 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 211c.

² Crispin Sartwell, “Beauty,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/beauty/>.

³ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays Moral and Political*, (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1894), 136. Quoted in Sartwell, “Beauty.”

The judgment of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*. Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective (and then it signifies the real [element] of an empirical representation), save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as it is affected by the representation.⁴

Accounts following these do accept that we can judge some preferences as better — we know the dismissal of kitsch, doggerel, or Thomas Kinkade as ‘bad taste’ — but they take this attempt at objectivity as a fact to be fit into the broader claim that beauty and aesthetics are subjective and preferential. Whatever may be put on top, aesthetics are grounded in individual judgements, not in a fact about the way things are. Moreover, the sublime and the beautiful are pitted against each other, with the former occupying the unpleasant realm of provocative and grotesque modern art and the beautiful being reserved for more mundane pleasures, appreciable by the common man. While I may have some critiques of this divide, I will take a somewhat caricatured account of this when looking at aesthetic values. While the terms may not line up with the history, I think it will be helpful to look at what sorts of values we can apply to a world with evil. Not only that, but I think that the definitions I offer get at *something* fundamental to each, even if they lack a nuanced relationship perhaps more accurate. Again, it doesn’t really matter whether I am right about the meaning of the word sublime. I am using the word to identify a concept that matters, no matter what name we give it and no matter how it lines up with historical uses of the name I am using.

I take the beautiful to be that which is judged pleasing. This will likely be a result of some basic tenants of design, such as the laws of Gestalt, a set of psychological principles

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1951), section 1.

of how the mind processes external stimuli⁵ and of how the pieces of a design can work together to form an aesthetically positive whole,⁶ much like Chisholm's organic wholes. These involve ideas such as objects in proximity are perceived as being related, or that we project symmetry and closure on objects, grouping things or filling in missing pieces to maintain such attributes. When a piece follows such basic principles well, and it strikes us as aesthetically pleasing, I propose that we call *that* beautiful. This is not to say that everyone must agree about what counts as beautiful or pleasing, but to acknowledge that we do tend to agree. And if we don't agree in specific instances, we tend to be able to agree about more abstract principles, like the laws of Gestalt. On the other hand, when something strikes us as unpleasant, off-putting, and even horrific or 'dangerous' yet still deserves our positive affirmation, I propose we call *that* sublime. Note that this second category, sublime, *could* follow the laws of Gestalt, but then the content would provoke this discontented reaction. Something sublime could also break most of the laws of Gestalt yet manage to provoke something 'meaningful', perhaps, in us.

Having laid out these broader distinctions, as I will be using them in this thesis, I will look in more detail at the 'sublime'. I will do this first by looking at its development from a concept that applied initially to poetry only to a more robust aesthetic concept in all of art.⁷ I will then look at some examples I take to be helpful to capture the essence of the sublime as I will treat it.

⁵ Dejan Todorovic, "Gestalt Principles," *Scholarpedia* 3, no. 12 (2008): 5345.

⁶ "Gestalt Psychology -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia," accessed April 20, 2016, <http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/232098/Gestalt-psychology>.

⁷ I found Tate's guide to the sublime immensely helpful in putting together the artistic history of the sublime. Cf. Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, eds., *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime>.

As an ancient term, the sublime was not much discussed, but was a term, most often used literarily, to identify greatness of such a lofty size that it prompted laudatory awe.⁸ Early in its modern development, the sublime was limited to poetic application. It was a term used for literature. Early in the eighteenth century, a number of figures began to describe *nature* as sublime, marking a turn to its broader use. The first published account is probably John Dennis's *Miscellanies*, in which he writes that the Alps are certainly as beautiful as music but are "mingled with Horrors, and sometimes almost with despair."⁹ Nature often in the Romantic era gets treated as this lofty, grand, and frightening place, where one can be confronted by an "agreeable kind of horror."¹⁰ It is precisely this connection with nature that allows the Sublime to move from its specific application in painting and art to a broader application as a philosophical term in aesthetics.

I will now turn to the history of painting as it is relevant here. This will be a quite simplified history, focusing only on those aspects that are relevant for our discussion of the sublime. Before the Romantic movement toward an 'agreeable horror' there were two acceptable subjects for a painting: portraiture or moral stories, which could be either biblical or classical. A painting of a landscape without one of these subjects in the foreground simply wasn't considered worthwhile. However, some painters began moving the stories to occupy a smaller portion of the canvas, allowing the landscapes, which had of course always been behind such stories, to occupy a larger part of the canvas. This allows for the focus to be landscapes without losing the moral component considered necessary for a painting to

⁸ Cf. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, ed. Andrew Lang, trans. H. L. Havell (London; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1890).

⁹ John Dennis, *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose a Quote / by Mr. Dennis*, (London: James Knapton, 1693), 138–139.

¹⁰ Joseph Addison, "Geneva and the Lake," in *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy Etc. in the Years 1701, 1702, 1703* (T. Walker, 1773), 261.

count as a work of art. In much the same way that meaning was found in nature because of its sublime character, the horror of the natural world becomes the basis for the validity of landscape paintings without moral stories.

Edmund Burke provides the developed concept of the sublime which legitimates the development of the sublime into a broader concept, and which provides much of a basis for my use of it as well. He writes that “whatever is in any sort terrible ... is a source of the sublime.”¹¹ However, this terror is not all bad. Indeed, “the passion caused by the great and sublime ... is astonishment, ... that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror,” leaving the mind “entirely filled with its object.”¹² While this is not precisely an easy or happy experience, this all-encompassing terror is taken to be a good thing in that it can elevate the mind of man.¹³ The infinite, or at least really large objects are often a source of the sublime in art, “has a tendency to fill the mind” with horror—not just any kind of horror but a “sort of delightful horror.”¹⁴

Given this history of the development of the concept of the sublime as I am concerned with it, I will catalog the characteristics of the sublime that I take to be operative, following the previous discussion. The sublime involves something horrific and terrifying, yet it is precisely because of those negative characteristics that it has a positive aesthetic value. Recall the descriptions from chapter one of organic wholes, wherein the whole is more than the sum of its parts: in the sublime, the positive value would *decrease* with the absence of such negative aspects. Schopenhauer’s descriptions are particularly relevant here.

¹¹ Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (J. J. Tourneisen, 1792), I.VII.

¹² Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, II.I.

¹³ Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, I.XIX.

¹⁴ Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, II.VIII.

Schopenhauer adds to the sublime not only a horrific character but a frightening character, which threatens to attack the very self experiencing it. I will look at his description of the beautiful as well as the sublime, to better understand the latter by contrast.

Schopenhauer thinks that aesthetic experiences are pleasing, beautiful, when they quiet our will and desires. An aesthetic experience is beautiful when it “raises us from the knowledge of mere relations subject to the will, to aesthetic contemplation, and thereby exalts us to the position of the subject of knowledge free from will;” that is, it is beautiful when it very naturally leads us from a subjective to an objective experience of the world.¹⁵ A subjective experience places the viewer in a central role as subject of what is happening: whatever I as the viewer bring to the painting becomes operative. An objective experience places the viewer in a subordinate role, not as a central subject but as one of many objects in the world. On the other hand, an experience is sublime when, because the experience itself presents a “a hostile relation to the human will in general”, the beholder is first made more subjectively aware of herself but, despite the natural inclination to do the opposite, “the beholder does not direct his attention to this eminently hostile relation to his will” and still moves to an objective view of the world and “quietly contemplates those very objects that are so terrible to the will.”¹⁶ The sublime is that aesthetic value wherein darkness is frighteningly good. The sublime is good in such a way that aesthetic evil (ugliness, black emptiness) can bring about, organically, a better good (such as escaping the will).

I find the following examples helpful for getting at this organic relationship between fear and positive value. Take three experiences. First, consider a sunrise, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and breathtaking sights on really beautiful mornings with good vantage

¹⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, “The World as Will and Idea,” in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Phoenix Edition, P685 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 461.

¹⁶ Schopenhauer, “The World as Will and Idea”, 461.

points. Second, take standing on the edge of a cliff at the Grand Canyon, with the wind whistling through your ears as rocks tumble and break as they fall to the bottom, undoubtedly a terrifying sight. Third, take seeing the sunrise from the cliff at the Grand Canyon—I think we would all be inclined to say that the terror of the location makes the beauty even more palpable. Something like this is the sublime in art: the horror and terror of a situation—the looming threat of destruction to the observer—makes the good even greater, and sometimes even produces a good by its terror alone.

Pascal describes something like the sublime, although he does not call it such. He helpfully points to the meeting of the finite and the infinite, the fear of loss of self, and the frightening or terrifying character of a sublime experience:

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me? *Memoria hospitis unius diei praetereuntis.*¹⁷
The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.¹⁸

How Does The Sublime Help?

Now that I have defined the sublime as I will be working with it in this thesis, we can ask: what can the sublime do to help us defend God's goodness toward creation despite horrors which defeat positive meaning? As addressed in chapter one, aesthetic considerations matter and may give us more help than other considerations. This is true for Stump, for Augustine, and for von Balthasar. I have already referenced Stump in chapter one. I have looked at Augustine as well in Chapter Two and will look briefly at him again in

¹⁷ The Latin is from the euterocanonical books the Wisdom of Solomon from the Vulgate, Wisdom 5:15. It reads, "the remembrance of a guest of one day that passeth by." Wisdom 5:15, Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition (DRA)

¹⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, iii.205-206, trans. W. F. Trotter, 1660.

Chapter Four. I will look at Hans Urs von Balthasar here.¹⁹ Beyond the ability of aesthetics to communicate something otherwise incommunicable, as in Stump, and beyond the mere value of being able to assign positive aesthetic value, von Balthasar brings the idea the untranslatability of aesthetic truths. For von Balthasar, there are some things which are incommunicable without an aesthetic or second-person experience, things we can only know or learn through aesthetic experiences. Important as well is the fact that aesthetic concepts can only be understood through experiences of particular instances of the aesthetic concept. These ideas highlight two things. First: the importance of particularity. For von Balthasar, some universal truths can only be communicated through the concrete details of a particular situation. More formally, it is true that all definitions eventually end in terms that can only be given ostensive definitions. Consider aesthetics. While we can speak of beauty or sublimity abstractly, we can really only explain beauty and sublimity by specific examples. We can talk about the way things are pleasing, but, eventually, we understand the particular way beautiful things please by pointing to examples. What is beauty? OED offers as a first definition, “That quality of a person (esp. a woman) which is highly pleasing to the sight; perceived physical perfection; attractive harmony of features, figure, or complexion; exceptional grace, elegance, or charm in appearance.”²⁰ The second and third definitions are various more specific qualities and the fourth provides the most abstract definition: “That quality of a thing which is highly pleasing to the senses generally.”²¹ When we explain what beauty is we

¹⁹ My understanding of von Balthasar is quite truncated. Many of his ideas which I have connected with this thesis come from Katherine LeNotre, “Flannery O’connor’s ‘Parker’s Back’ and Hans Urs Von Balthasar on Beauty and Tragedy,” *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 65, no. 5 (Fall 2013): 399–412.

²⁰ “Beauty, N.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/view/Entry/16688>.

²¹ “Beauty, N.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/view/Entry/16688>.

very quickly revert to describing things which seem most objectively experienced as aesthetically pleasing. What does it mean for something to be beautiful or pleasing? It means something is pleasing in the way these things please: the Mona Lisa, a sunrise, a supermodel, a favorite song. We conceive of and explain beauty only by particular examples. If there are some things we can only know or learn through aesthetic and particular experiences, the aesthetic value communicated by a specific instance seems essential to explaining the aesthetic value more abstractly, and perhaps to explaining the ideas as well. Being able to talk about whether the world, or smaller wholes within the world marked by certain types of evil, are beautiful or something else seems relevant to understanding the underlying character of the world and God.

The Sublime And The Problem Of Horrors

Now that I have introduced the topic, laid out the problem, identified the field of values I am concerned with, and offered a specific aesthetic value relevant to the problem, I can lay out my positive proposal. I think that the sublime can give us a vocabulary to describe the positive aesthetic value in wholes marked by ugliness and suffering. This connection may be obvious, but I will articulate the steps required to get there.

As hinted at in the discussion of the problem and of evil above, the world as a whole is quite frankly not aesthetically pleasing. The experience of the world is disturbing. It seems very natural to withdraw in horror and fear for self-preservation. Further, it seems very nature to withdraw from a lack of meaning, not only in the face of horrific things we ourselves experience, but even in the face of the horrific experiences of *others*. In some ways, the presence of beauty in a world of such inexplicable evils seems offensive: the holocaust happened and the sun still shines; children die of cancer and grass still grows soft and green; persons with disabilities and diseases (either mental or physical) are marginalized into

homelessness while we design grand and comforting homes. In the face of a world which seems entirely oblivious (to anthropomorphize the world)²² to the deep wrongs for which it is a stage, like a Disney woodland acting as home to gruesome murders as the animals who sing with Snow White carry the weapons of destruction, perhaps the only reasonable response is madness.

I propose that by conceiving of the positive aesthetic value of the world as sublime and not beautiful, this incongruity can be reconfigured and we can put ourselves in a position to see the seeming madness rightly as a good thing. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates references a madness that can be a “divine gift,” that, when properly understood is “the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men.”²³ Indeed, a specific instance of this madness is the madness Socrates describes as necessary for art. He writes, of “the kind of madness that is possession by the Muses” without which a poet will fail; once awoken “to a Bacchic frenzy” a poet can achieve truly fine works of beauty.²⁴ Socrates makes a similar point in the *Ion*. He writes:

You know, none of the epic poets, if they're good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all these beautiful poems. The same goes for lyric poets if they're good: just as the Corybantes are not in their right minds when they dance, lyric poets, too, are not in their right minds when they make those beautiful lyrics, but as soon as they sail into harmony and rhythm they are possessed by Bacchic frenzy.²⁵

²² Perhaps the anthropomorphization of the world is not merely a rhetorical tool but an articulation of the role we see God playing, in a way that leads to the problem of evil.

²³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M Cooper and D. S Hutchinson, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 244a

²⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245a.

²⁵ Plato, *Ion*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M Cooper and D. S Hutchinson, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 533e-534a. Cf. Plato, “Artistic Inspiration: Selections from *Ion*,” in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Phoenix Edition, P685 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 53–57.

There is a connection between some aesthetic value and madness and incongruity. In the modern period, we call that aesthetic value the sublime.

I think there are a number of reasons to think that the world could be sublime. First, the problem with calling the world beautiful was that it didn't fit with the horror and withdrawal we feel in response to the evils in the world. Such a gut response of withdrawing in horror would be not merely acceptable but *expected* in a sublime world. Second, in light of Adams's worries about human lives marked by horror, the sublime offers us a vocabulary to talk about their overall aesthetic good without ignoring the evil undergone: if in a work of art horror can get inextricably wrapped up with the good of the sublime in a magnificent organic unity, this might happen in a human life as well. Indeed, what could we call a redeemed life in which meaning has been restored but sublime?! It is not merely that horror can produce some aesthetic good but that it gets inextricably wrapped up with the sublime in a magnificent organic unity. The horror is engulfed and defeated by the sublime it produces.²⁶

Further, the sublime seems particularly relevant to a conversation about the problem of evil and God's existence, as the sublime has long been connected with religious experience. For Rudolf Otto, religious experience is very like the sublime.²⁷ Otto talks about the *mysterium tremendum* as that frightening, unknown, and compelling experience which humans have long associated with God. The holy is what is numinous: "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self"²⁸—a description uncannily similar to Schopenhauer's description of the sublime as that which lifts

²⁶ Produces perhaps not in all but in some instances.

²⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (OUP USA, 1958), 41ff. I am also indebted to Todd Buras for suggesting this connection to me and to Marilyn McCord Adams for suggesting it to him.

²⁸ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

the subject above itself. This sounds almost exactly like the sublime. If (the experience of) God is frightening and yet compelling, and if this is a good thing, I see no reason we would not expect the world created by God to have some of the same qualities.

The Sublime and Human Meaning

I must address here the concern that such a valuation leaves *out* the concern about meaningful human lives. I admit that it seems insensitive, unhelpful, and even offensive to offer to someone undergoing a horrific experience that their life viewed from the outside is sublime, which is good since it is similar to the experience of God. I can only offer the caveat that I am not writing this thesis to comfort those in the midst of suffering. I think the appropriate response there is to sit with, pray with, and live with those in their suffering. I offer this thesis as an aid to those who see such incomprehensible things and find it hard to conceive of God because we cannot articulate how God is good in the face of such horrors. Perhaps being able to make sense of the world as sublime can help those with such worries, offering an assurance of the hope for positive meaning in a life which feels defeated. Moreover, the aesthetic nature of this argument helps ground my answer not in ignoring or rejecting the suffering experienced, but in fitting them into engulfing and defeating organic wholes. I think there is an analogy between physical ugliness of a very concrete kind and experienced suffering. Just as physical ugliness cannot merely be ignored or escaped (although I suppose one could close ones eyes at a really ugly painting) suffering cannot be dealt with by merely ignoring it (this is how really bad habits and disorders develop). Similarly, however, just as physical ugliness can be made positive by its presence in a whole which is rendered sublime, so a human suffering might be made positive by its presence in a life which is rendered sublime.

At the very least, however, if God is sublime, perhaps we can hope that God might be able to rework the evils and bad things in the world—particularly as they appear ugly and not beautiful—into something sublime just as we, creatures, relate to God as uncreated.²⁹

The Difference It Makes Over The Others

I will now look at the difference that my proposal—that we could think of the world and other wholes, which have been marked with evil and ugliness, as sublime rather than beautiful—makes against others. To begin with, I think this helps in a number of general ways. First, it gives us a vocabulary for talking about wholes as having aesthetic good, even after they have been marked by evil. Without such an alternative, we are left either calling ugly and horrific wholes beautiful or denying that they can have any positive aesthetic value. The first option is simply wrong³⁰ and the second means we must deny God's goodness toward creation. Neither of these conclusions is very satisfying. I think the sublime offers a better option. Second, my proposal gives us a reason to think that horrors can organically be aesthetically fit into a positive whole. This is supported by our experiences of smaller and hence more comprehensible aesthetic experiences, like the sunrise at the summit of the Grand Canyon. Moreover, this does not seem like a mere possibility, but a very fitting way to defeat horrors because the sublime has an intimate relationship with such types of things. Third, my proposal applies to, as far as I can tell, any whole conceivable. The sublime is a value that can be applied to both individual wholes and global wholes. The world can be sublime and this or that state of affairs can be sublime and this or that life can be

²⁹ This may require something like the beatific vision, or at least life after death. There may be some evils which are so horrific when suffered that the mere span of 80 years cannot deal with such terror. Cf. Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 162ff.

³⁰ At least, it would be inaccurate to call horrific wholes beautiful given the way I have defined 'beautiful' for this thesis.

sympathetically identified from a distance as sublime, or my life can be experienced as sublime.

Moreover, I think my proposal has some distinct advantages against other solutions. I am only briefly touching on these issues. Many of the advantages, I think, have become clear throughout the discussion, but I will make note of some particularly relevant ones here. The whole problem with horrific suffering is that no other solution can adequately acknowledge the terrible defeat of meaning and goodness brought about by such horrors. Not only are horrors terrible, but there are clear cases of horrific suffering, both actual and easily imagined, making it hard to dispute the fact of them. Yet, it is hard to articulate a greater good which necessitates horrors without being undermined by their defeat of positive meaning. It is equally hard to see how they could be engulfed in a positive organic whole at all, without something like the sublime.

Second, my solution works on the full scale of possible wholes from the world on a whole to a single human life or a specific state of affairs comprising one experience. Third, recall the concern from Chapter Three that looking at the world as a whole, despite seeming fundamental to claims about God's goodness, might lend itself to discount the reality and severity of more specific instances of evil. By focusing on the sublime we are confronted with a value that does not require denying or ignoring the reality of really terrible things—focusing on mere aesthetic pleasure might lend itself to ignoring unpleasant things. Fourth, as an aesthetic value, the sublime lends itself to talking about specific instances and examples of things. As for von Balthasar in Chapter Three, aesthetics in general lend themselves not to abstraction but to concrete and specific discussions. If the sublime can only be understood by reference to particular situations and contexts that might prevent a focus on wholes leading to a focus on abstracted concerns. Fifth, the sublime has unique aspects directly suited to the individual experience of suffering: the sense of horror and threat to

self are particularly relevant. Recall Schopenhauer's explanation of the sublime as a positive aesthetic experience which, in itself, presents a "a hostile relation to the human will in general."³¹ The sublime as a value is specifically suited to discussions not only of the world's overall condition but also of individual, human experiences of even the most horrific suffering. Sixth, recall also many of the aesthetic approaches to discussions of evil. These often fell prey to this precise claim, such as Augustine's defense of imperfection in the world on the basis of plenitude. The aesthetic good of plenitude goes precisely against the defense of individual good and meaning by focusing on the good of a variety of things on the global scale and not on the good of individual thing. By providing a natural way in which horrors can organically contribute to and be engulfed by a good whole, the sublime naturally lends itself to responding to specific, individual cases.

Seventh, the need for particularity and experience to understand the sublime (recall, for instance, the description of the sublime in relation to the sunrise at the top of the Grand Canyon) encourages taking seriously not only the individual's suffering but both the bodily reality of suffering as well as the need for bodily good. Aesthetic values in general may encourage an emphasis on the bodily. Taking seriously a value which is understood best not in abstract but in a specific, often bodily, experience confronts us not with an abstracted escape from this world to some contemplative mental or heavenly realm but rather with the concrete and particular details of a situation which offer the content necessary for an aesthetic experience. Eighth, the sublime offers a way to fit our intuitions—such as our intuition that evil is horrific—into a world with space for God—our intuition of horror is not evidence of failure but may even be evidence of God. Finally, the sublime, in that it never dissolves the evil or terror but merely incorporates them, allows a way to take seriously evil and suffering without discounting it or giving up.

³¹ Schopenhauer, "The World as Will and Idea", 46.

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