

# ATTRACTIVE APOLOGETICS: MAKING AN IMPACT

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*There is a contemporary recognition that philosophy takes place within the body. This makes the realm of aesthetics—how we are affected by things—more important than has before been recognised. Contrary to popular belief, aesthetics is the most practical side of apologetics, because it pays attention to the impact of things and ideas on the person.*

There has been great interest in recent times in the body in philosophy and theology. I guess there always has been, but it has received a kick-along recently, probably due to the influence of such all-encompassing scientific endeavours as the Genome Project and neurological and psychological research into the emotions ('emotional intelligence'). All of this work seems to have driven an interest in the fact that we are thinking *things*, that we do "philosophy in the flesh" as one book title has it, and that the body is as much part of Christian living as is the mind or indeed the soul/spirit.

Doing philosophy in the flesh brings the realm of aesthetics to the fore to a degree that it hasn't been for some time. In using the term 'aesthetics', I am not invoking a view of nature and art that tries to exclude all discussion of morality, politics, utility or psychology for the sake of some sort of pure, heightened experience (what is sometimes called "the aesthetic attitude"). Not at all. Rather, I am suggesting that doing philosophy in the flesh calls to our attention the way we are affected by art and nature, how certain experiences lead to or correspond with or even generate ideas and beliefs, and that the process by which this takes place is worth considering.

For it seems to me that we also do apologetics 'in the flesh'. Firstly, we use our brains. But we also use the rest of our bodies—our voices, our eyes and hands. It also seems very *Christian* to do apologetics 'in the flesh', since we are to be "doers of the

word", exercising "faith with works", and sometimes, as the wives of non-Christian husbands are encouraged in 1 Peter 3, this goes even so far as winning people to Christ *without* words. Here is a strange, but biblical, notion—to do apologetic work without words. There is some way in which it is possible to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34). That is, there is some sort of aesthetic dimension to religious understanding.

What possible connection is there between aesthetics and apologetics? The answer can be expressed fairly simply: a person's beliefs, values and thoughts can be affected by what they see, hear, touch, taste and perhaps even smell. But a more interesting connection needs to be developed.

## What does attractive apologetics look like?

There's a great line in the U2 song 'Beautiful Day', a line about epistemology:

What you don't have, you don't need it now  
What you don't know you can feel somehow.

It's a line that really troubles me. I immediately rejected it on first hearing. As someone who believes in reason, believes in a kind of propositional revelation, and is always dubious about truth claims that bypass the mind, I thought it was a throw-away line in a song. However, I'm still pondering it. There is an aesthetic—a felt—dimension to knowledge. The Reformed epistemologists, especially William Alston, are reaching for

this kind of concept. Alston has mounted an argument for the epistemic value of religious experience, where God comes in ways other than propositions.<sup>1</sup> I'm very nervous about it, but there may be something there. Michael Polanyi's 1950s concept of 'tacit knowledge' also seems relevant.<sup>2</sup>

I remember reading a good paper that argued for God's existence based on flavour and colour.<sup>3</sup> It said that it is so difficult to sustain the materialist interpretation of phenomenal *qualia*—that is, that thing which is the experience of red or the taste of sugar—that a theological interpretation becomes the less desperate expedient. This is along the lines of Locke's claim (which Adams repeats) that:

[T]he production of Sensation in us of Colours and Sounds, etc. by impulse and motion...being such, wherein we can discover no natural connexion with any *Ideas* we have, we cannot but ascribe them to the arbitrary Will and good Pleasure of the Wise Architect.<sup>4</sup>



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There is something in such experience that is at least *suggestive* of God. Or makes the God hypothesis more believable. Or leads one to at least consider some of the truth claims for Christianity. I'd like to call the encouragement of this kind of activity, 'attractive apologetics'.

My family recently engaged in attractive apologetics with my two oldest children, by taking them to see *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* stage production. They know the story, and already had imaginative concepts of Aslan. They know he dies to fulfil the Deep Magic and that it has something to do with Edmund being forgiven for his acts of betrayal. It's not an analogy of the Christian gospel of substitutionary atonement, but it is an experience of something like it. And seeing the remarkable giant Aslan 'puppet' nuzzling the children in Narnia before scaring the wits out of them with his resurrection roar gave some kind of felt dimension to ideas we talk about with them concerning the simultaneous sternness and kindness of God.

A clever instance of attractive apologetics takes place in a book of literary theory by Valentine Cunningham, called *In the Reading Gaol*. This book is an attack on deconstruction, but it is a very skilfully written one. It adopts the tone and style of much deconstructionist writing, variously punning, making bilingual jokes, parsing words to strange effect and being intellectually playful. Cunningham then sides with certain cultural materialists against the deconstructionists to claim that there is a scandal of referentiality that deconstructionists refuse to accept. All of these rhetorical moves by Cunningham clear ground on which a Christian case can be built. By *attracting* his readers who, presumably are somewhat impressed by some philosophy behind deconstruction, he gains a hearing for a different viewpoint. It is the aesthetics of Cunningham's book (its literary style, its tone) which does the ground-clearing. And I think it is fair to say that Cunningham is engaged in a specific kind of apologetics here.<sup>5</sup>

These are some incidences of what I'm trying to describe as the connection between aesthetics and apologetics. It is not an area in which a great deal of work has been done, although that is changing (see reading list).

A related area in which more work has

been done is aesthetics and ethics or values.

Aesthetics and values are connected in various ways, and there is a philosophical line that can be drawn from Aristotle through Kant and Hegel to aesthetic theorists of the mechanical age, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, delineating issues of values and judgement surrounding representation and reproduction. I want to discuss just one area: the question of whether experiences of an artistic kind can shift values such that a person is more inclined to believe a Christian doctrine. Can viewing the film *Pulp Fiction* shift a person's values towards Christianity? Here is one suggestion as to how that might work:



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The intimacy of viewing violence reduces the moral distance between the knowledge of an event and the sense of responsibility for the event. Movies bring us there, to the point where the bad thing happened. Close up, we feel some responsibility to act. So, for instance, when the teenager accidentally has his head blown off in the car, we are compelled to ask: Do we care? Can such a thing be a meaningless accident? Does anyone want to live in a world where no one is distraught about such an act except for the fact that they had to clean the car upholstery? Do we laugh because of the implausibility of that moral position?

Without the experience of seeing and hearing the accidental murder, none of these thoughts arises so strongly. The aesthetic heightens the ethical, and moves the viewer

towards making moral and even theological judgements. Of course, such a pathway might not be taken unassisted; very few people have the capacity to lead themselves in this direction. I am suggesting that the aesthetic event (seeing *Pulp Fiction*) provides the apologetic opportunity for someone who has the know-how to use it. If you feel dubious about this, replace *Pulp Fiction* with *The Passion of the Christ* and see if you feel differently.

### **Propaganda**

There would be a point at which what I am suggesting moved over into propaganda: the aesthetic in slavery to the apologetic. This is a problem. Fortunately, most enduring art

has its own integrity and resists being enslaved in this fashion. It is as if the imagination has to create its own works in its own world before those works have much to achieve in the world of other people. There is, however, plenty of misuse of the power of aesthetics. It is sometimes seen in the use of music at large events, whereby the music is so powerful as to manipulate rather than simply move people. The propaganda question is a live one for understanding the use of aesthetics in apologetics, but it ought simply to move us to be responsible rather than head-in-the-sand about aesthetic power.

## Making changes

What changes to apologetics might take place in order to pay more attention to aesthetics? The whole ‘attractive apologetics’ notion sounds vague, so what actual impact would such a change have?

The rest of this article is addressed to those who are apologists. I’ve been working on a few areas, in which I would appreciate your feedback.



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*At present, some of the strongest political apologetics are presented in the form of rap. There are lessons here for Christians, who sometimes seem to surrender the diverse power of words for the sake of ‘simple communication’.*

## Non-traditional subjects for apologetics

We need a willingness to think apologetically about areas outside the traditional concerns of apologetics. We ought to encourage and assist the movement from areas of worldly knowledge and experience towards an aspect of Christian theology, in order to demonstrate the attractiveness of that theology. We would aim to impress people (there’s the aesthetic bit) with the robustness and comprehensiveness of Christian thinking such that it can offer satisfactory analysis of whatever topic is being considered. For example, an apologetic approach to literature might consider in what ways modernist novels depict in narrative forms arguments with Christian eschatology (just to mention my own area of research interest!). This could demonstrate the explanatory power of Christian theology, how it makes sense of a

character’s desire, its richness in terms of imagery, and its grasp of time and narrative.

I think this is a harder task than traditional apologetics, because of the diverse skills involved in making the connections between theology and the world. However, I suspect the work of ‘defending the faith’ can be done very fruitfully this way, because it does not involve a ‘crisis of understanding’ on behalf of the listener. Rather, it shows how sensible Christian theology can be and how it explains an aspect of life differently. It doesn’t seek to reconstrue Christian theology on the world’s terms, but to explain and explore the world using that theology. This thinking is behind some of CASE’s initiatives.

## Aesthetic coherence

Emphasis on aesthetics can further a holistic approach to apologetics, that is, the construction of a coherent worldview. This is perhaps a modernist point, but so be it. The eighteenth century German philosopher Schiller argued in the political realm that this kind of integration of perspectives was a

necessary counter to the atomised approach to modern thought. He argued that the realm of aesthetics offered the best way to achieve this integration.<sup>6</sup> A symphony, for instance, can hold together order and chaos, progression and rest, desire and resolution, in a manner that cannot be communicated otherwise. A painting or photo could suggest the need for justice, the dignity of humanity, and the grandeur of nature such that all of these thoughts can be had at a glance. It doesn’t divide ideas; it brings them together. I noticed this happening in people’s reactions to the photos of prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Where political views on the war differ, the unified reaction to seeing those images of torture was one of disgust and a sense of wrong. Not everyone has the same theories of right and wrong, but there was some shared

ground in our reaction to the photos.

I think something similar can hold for apologetics. The magic of aesthetics is that it can integrate ideas in space and time in an experiential ‘package’. So, the answer to a question about whether human beings are innocent might be met with the painting of Christ carrying his cross surrounded by accusers (as in Hieronymus Bosch’s famous painting). There is a “for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see” aspect to the success of such a strategy, but no more so than with rational argument.

## Building blocks of aesthetic response

Consider more seriously some basic aesthetic elements which some people find ‘persuasive’ and ‘moving’ and bring them consciously to mainstream apologetics:

- Poetry, especially rhyme and rhythm. People are moved or even convicted by well-chosen words in a certain order. At present, some of the strongest political apologetics are presented in the form of rap. There are lessons here for Christians, who sometimes seem to surrender the diverse power of words for the sake of ‘simple communication’.
- Consider music’s ability to represent emotional states almost universally. A tune may be considered ‘sad’ by most people who hear it, across time and cultures. When Tim Winton published his novel, *Dirt Music*, it was accompanied by a CD as a ‘soundtrack’ to the novel. How about music to accompany apologetic arguments? After all, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony ends with the ‘Ode to Joy’, declaring that a “loving father” must dwell above the canopy of stars. In rock music, the band U2 probably goes closest to performing ‘attractive apologetics’, as they sing about hunger for God, peace on earth and all the eternal things that you “can’t leave behind”.
- The ‘shock and awe’ capacity of the fine arts. e.g. beauty, horror, vastness, loneliness. These experiences are too great not to have any meaning beyond themselves. Sometimes Christians focus only on the beautiful without realising the apologetic potential of the bad or ugly. For some people, I think, it is in truly understanding how terrible bad experiences can be that they come to a belief in the doctrine of sin, and a desire for the good and true. The ugly, the good and the true can go together.

## Some ongoing theoretical problems in theology and aesthetics

### Analogy

The most developed theological understanding of aesthetics has focused on the concept of analogy. We are affected by the world in a way analogous with the God who created it. We see beauty, because the object of beauty is in some sort of analogous relationship with the quality of beauty that is in God. Things resemble God to varying degrees, and our response to them is also our response to the God who made them. In this way, and only this way, can the cross of Christ become a beautiful and moving event, for it reveals to us the heart of God. That's it in a nutshell, but Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote five volumes looking at the subject in his *The Glory of the Lord: a theological aesthetics*. "Every experience of beauty points to infinity" said von Balthasar. Is this the best way to think theologically about aesthetics?

### The complexities of aesthetic response

Assessing the aesthetic impact of an object can be complex. For example, to one viewer a perfectly proportioned cathedral nave may elevate them with a sense of the glory of God; to another it may affect coldness and impenetrability. There are also deficiencies to be considered. For example, I am red-green colour blind and am never going to experience the beauty of the orange trumpet vine in our back garden such that I might think of God as generous. It just doesn't have the impact on me. And yet there do seem to be objective measures of beauty. How much control can be exerted over the aesthetic impact, and when would such control step over into manipulation and propaganda?

Incidentally, I've noticed that more people agree on beauty in nature than on beauty in art. Have you ever met someone who doesn't think a rose is beautiful? But have you ever met someone who doesn't think a postmodern building is beautiful?

### An apologetics of the future

Finally, there is an argument that art is eschatological in nature. By this is meant that art captures, encapsulates, expresses and interacts with the human desires for the ultimate future. Art "proceeds from the longing for that perfect existence which is not yet, but which man, despite all disappointments, thinks must come to be when the existent has reached its full truth and reality has been subordinated to actual entities".<sup>7</sup> Our experience of art and nature is shaped by our expectations for the future.

This seems to me a very fruitful place to try to work on a Christian aesthetics, since we believe that Christianity is eschatological if it is anything. It's about our future in Christ. If art is about those future desires, then there ought to be a powerful Christian apologetic that explains those desires, that responds to those desires. If, for example, a person feels enraged with sorrow and a sense of injustice after seeing an exhibition of photographs of survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima, this response can be met with a discussion of how the notion of final judgement of the world by Christ, its saviour, will provide the stage for all wrongs to be righted. And I suggest this is the kind of thing Paul was doing in the Areopagus when he saw the statue to the Unknown God (Acts 17). He was providing an

apologetic for belief, but with a new eschatological horizon: "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you...he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world...". That seems to me a very attractive apologetic, since it builds on human desire but breaks in with the unique and startling truth, beauty and power of the gospel of Christ. ©

### READING LIST

- Hilary Brand & Adrienne Chaplin • *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts* (Piquant, Solway, 2001).
- Edmund Clowney, "Living Art: Christian Experience and the Arts" in D. Carson & J. Woodbridge • *God and Culture*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993).
- David Cunningham • *Reading Is Believing: the Christian faith through literature and film* (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2002).
- Thomas Dubay • *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (Ignatius Press, 1999)
- Terry Eagleton • *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwell, 1990).
- C. Kilby • *Christianity and Aesthetics* (IVP, 1961).
- Hans Kung • *Art and the Question of Meaning* (SCM, 1980).
- Nicholas Wolterstorff • *Art in Action* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996).

### ENDNOTES

- 1 William Alston argues that mystical experience of God can sometimes provide justification for certain beliefs about God. See Alston, *Perceiving God: the epistemology of religious experience* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1991) and *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993). I am suggesting something less controversial and less specific—that our aesthetic experiences tend to contribute to our belief formation.
- 2 E.g. "The affirmation of a great scientific theory is in part an expression of delight. The theory has an inarticulate component acclaiming its beauty, and this is essential to the belief that the theory is true. No animal can appreciate the intellectual beauties of science." Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a post-Critical Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958, pp.133.
- 3 "Flavors, Colors and God" in Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987.
- 4 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, pp.559-60 (Book IV, Chapter III, §29).
- 5 This observation is not original to me, but comes from an article by David Barratt called "Literary Apologetics and Christian Poetics: A Case Study". Retrieved from <http://www.freenetpages.co.uk/hp/clsg/page4.html>.
- 6 Schiller's (*Letters upon the aesthetic education of man*, 1794) notion that aesthetics could bring unity to a people was demonstrated during the Nazi era, with disastrous moral consequences. Here, I only want to pick up the idea that art has an ability to focus and shape a person's reactions to ideas and events, and that this need not always lead to or spring out of totalitarianism.
- 7 Romano Guardini, quoted in Hans Kung, *Art and the Question of Meaning*, SCM, London, 1981, pp.51-52.

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A former Iraqi prisoner, wearing a mask to prevent recognition, walks out of Abu Ghraib Prison.