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BEAUTY LIVED TOWARDS SHALOM: THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS AESTHETIC- ETHICAL EXISTENCE

ABSTRACT

The apparent irrelevance of beauty to questions of justice reflects a problematic schism between aesthetic and ethical existence. While a theological aesthetics focused on the transcendent nature of beauty offers an important contribution, such an understanding of the place of beauty in human existence is incomplete without a complementary understanding of it as this-worldly: beauty as lived, as a relational category impelled by visceral desire and fuelled by the embodied imagination. By rightly ordering the appreciation and cultivation of beauty in everyday life, its relationship to works of justice is immediately apparent, as both modes of relating mutually serve as fitting shalom. In this light, fittingness becomes a measure of not only aesthetic but also ethical excellence, the two modes of existence being inextricably intertwined. Cultivating beauty-and-justice, as an expression of shalom, is a following after Christ's being-for-the-other. It is a relational commitment, a life of discipleship that founds beauty in love.



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1. INTRODUCTION

For many, it seems somewhat curious to bring beauty and justice into dialogue with one another.¹ This is perhaps especially true in the current South African context, where one may well ask: *What on earth* does beauty have to do with the pressing issues of justice facing our society today? This is, in fact, exactly the right question, since I would suggest that it is precisely our *earthly* appreciation and cultivation of beauty that is directly related to the practice of justice. That the relationship between beauty and justice is not patently clear to all at present is an indication of how far we have come in separating aesthetic life from ethical life in this-worldly existence.² While the past few decades have seen an encouraging recovery of theological thinking on beauty and the aesthetic, such theological aesthetics all too often prioritises the other-worldly significance of embracing beauty: it is a gateway to the divine, an imaginative window to that which lies beyond ratiocentric modes of being Christian. I do not wish to dismiss this reality; it is indeed vital that we recover the aesthetic, towards a more holistic understanding of being human, and the consequent multidimensional apprehension of Reality. However, solely emphasising the value of the aesthetic for engaging the other-worldly reflects neither an accurate understanding of the role that aesthetics plays in being human and becoming Christian, nor is it an effective means for recovering the fundamental relationship of aesthetic to ethical life. Rather, my argument is that both beauty and justice are expressions of shalom, fundamentally connected as *fitting* elements of the way things ought to be in a relationally flourishing world.³ Fittingness is a term most often associated with aesthetics; yet my suggestion is that

1 Scarry (2008:58) captures a standard objection: "Beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements. It makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just."

2 While there have been many attempts to systematically delineate the relationship between aesthetics and ethics (and epistemology), notably by Kant and Maritain in the modern era, it is the nature of the aesthetic to elude reduction to rational abstraction. As O'Connor (2008:415) rightly points out, we need to find ways of working with the tensions rather than attempting to comprehensively resolve them. A theology of beauty and justice needs to offer guidelines for navigating this tension, acknowledging "a certain non-accidental convergence of what is morally good and what is beautiful, whilst admitting divergence and some clear counter-examples".

3 I am working with Wolterstorff's (2017:164) definition of shalom: "Shalom is flourishing in all one's relationships: to God, one's fellow [human beings], to oneself, to the natural world, to society and culture. It has both a normative component, being rightly related, and an affective component, finding joy in being so related." Elsewhere, Wolterstorff (2011:110) emphasises this affective component in resonance with an Augustinian "enjoyment" of God: "Shalom at its highest is *enjoyment* in one's relationships ... To dwell in shalom is to *enjoy* living before God, to *enjoy* living in one's physical surroundings, to *enjoy* living with one's fellows, to *enjoy* life with oneself".

it is an appropriate way of evaluating aesthetic-ethical-religious life as Christian this-worldliness. It is the inextricably intertwined nature of the aesthetic, ethical and religious in this-worldly life that is a key point here, which is why the lens of fittingness is particularly helpful, as it prioritises the contextual and relational, thereby probing beauty and justice as relational categories.

My focus will be on beauty and aesthetics (although not beauty *per se*, but rather the way in which one relates to beauty) rather than justice, since it is beauty that has become unhinged, losing its tethering to the constellation of relationships that constitute shalom. By rightly ordering the appreciation and cultivation of beauty in everyday life, its relationship to works of justice is immediately apparent, as both of these modes of relating mutually serve as *fitting* shalom. The Christian life is one of following after Christ, of collectively manifesting the body of Christ in this world. Cultivating beauty-and-justice, as an expression of shalom, is a following after Christ's being-for-the-other, thereby offering a paradigmatic perspective of Christological reality. It is a relational commitment, a life of discipleship that founds beauty in love, rather than self-serving sensationalism or individualist sentimentality, recognising that orientation to beauty is a function of imaginaries, individual and social.

A scene from the Oscar award-winning film, *The lives of others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*) (2006), helps vividly capture the question we will be exploring regarding the lived interrelationship of ethics and aesthetics. The film is set amidst the political intrigue of East Berlin in 1984. Captain Gerd Wiesler, from the tyrannical State Security Service (or *Stasi*), is given the assignment of monitoring playwright, Georg Dreyman. Wiesler installs surveillance equipment, listening in on Dreyman's conversations from the attic above, and monitoring his every move. Wiesler represents the cold dehumanisation of an unjust regime; all that is ethically problematic, encountering the aesthetically saturated existence of Dreyman. While Dreyman is found to be ethically upright, it is the fullness of his humanity, aesthetically expressed, which confronts and challenges Wiesler's personal existential journey. Wiesler's humanity is exposed. His longing for Dreyman's life of love and romance is palpable on his earphone-clad face as he listens in on Dreyman's existence. Wiesler steals a volume of Brecht's poetry from Dreyman's apartment and devours it. The pivotal scene occurs when Dreyman hears news of a friend's suicide (suicide being an all too common occurrence in the oppressive and fearful climate of the time). Dreyman's friend, Albert Jerska, a blacklisted theatrical director, had recently given Dreyman a birthday present – sheet music for “Sonata for a good man”. Upon hearing of Jerska's suicide, Dreyman collapses at

his piano and begins to play “Sonata for a good man”. Wiesler listens in the attic above, the beautiful music clearly causing an aesthetic-ethical confrontation within him, the poignant aesthetic goodness of the moment intertwined with the ethical angst with which Wiesler silently wrestles.

In the next scene, Wiesler finds himself in an elevator with a young boy. “Are you really with the *Stasi*?” the boy asks. “Do you even know what the *Stasi* is?” comes the abrupt reply. “Yes”, the boy innocently responds, “They’re bad men who put people in prison, says my dad.” Wiesler cuts back, “I see. What’s the name of your ...?” He catches himself and stops short, ushering in a turning point in Wiesler’s life, and the film as a whole.

The film is a work of fiction, but it captures a lived reality, the scene in question inspired by a quote, referenced by Dreyman, from Vladimir Lenin in 1918. In his *Days with Lenin*, Maxim Gorky records Lenin’s haunting words:

I know nothing that is greater than [Beethoven’s] *Appassionata*. I would like to listen to it every day. [It is] marvellous, superhuman music ... But I can’t listen to music too often; it affects your nerves. One wants to say stupid nice things and stroke on the head the people who can create such beauty while living in this vile hell. And now you must not stroke anyone on the head: you’ll have your hands beaten off. You have to hit them on the head without mercy ... (as quoted in Beardsley 1978:11).

How can encounters with beauty challenge unjust practice, as Lenin seems to be suggesting here? The first point that I would like to make in response is that this is the wrong question. Treating beauty and justice as two separate and distinct entities may well be valid in theoretical abstraction, but in life as lived, as is so well illustrated in the film, the aesthetic and the ethical are intertwined in relational dynamics that constitute a cohesive web of meaning. Wiesler is not merely transformed by his encounter with beauty in isolation, but beauty as lived in “the lives of others”. The first task before us, then, is to rightly locate beauty within this relational dynamic.

Secondly, I will argue that it is not simply an experience of beauty that challenges injustice; it is too narrow to put it in these terms. Rather, it is the experience of beauty in the context of a broader perceptual and relational constellation, a way of seeing or imagining the world, an imaginary – collectively, a social imaginary – which is confronted; beauty is simply an affective and evocative catalyst for perceiving this new paradigm. In other words, beauty and justice, aesthetics and ethics coalesce in offering a cohesive vision of shalom, an expression of right relationship in the way things ought to be. An encounter with beauty can potentially, therefore, be an encounter with shalom.

2. THE UNTETHERING OF BEAUTY FROM EARTHLY CHRISTIAN LIFE

The task of rightly locating beauty in the relational dynamics of everyday life requires navigating between two common approaches to beauty: on the one hand, the overemphasis on the other-worldly significance of beauty and, on the other, an exclusive focus on this-worldly experience. A brief description of these alternatives is, therefore, required.

2.1 Beauty as other-worldly

Traditionally, the esteemed position given to beauty, as a universal absolute, stems from the platonic understanding of beauty as a transcendental, in company with goodness and truth. Beauty is an ultimate form, our earthly experiences described as beautiful when they *fit* the form, variously described, whether this be the Pythagorean golden ratio, or some other means of assessing aesthetic harmony, balance and proportion. The proposal has had theological traction over the centuries, with Aquinas (as articulated in *Summa Theologica* 1.5.4) being a common reference point for such a universal conception of beauty.

Despite the necessary post-modern critique of this absolute perspective, rightly, it continues to play a dominant role in the realm of theological aesthetics. Arguably, the leading figure in this respect is Hans Urs von Balthasar. Von Balthasar's work has proven seminal in recovering an understanding of beauty as located in the glory of God. Along with other voices of the *Nouvelle Théologie* movement, Von Balthasar sought a *ressourcement* that fuelled his platonic response to the modern understanding of beauty, thus reaffirming and integrating the transcendental ideals of beauty, goodness and truth (in that order). There is no doubt that Von Balthasar made an extremely valuable contribution to the field, his focus on the transcendent value of beauty representing a common paradigm in recent theological aesthetics. Nevertheless, even though it would be inaccurate to describe Von Balthasar as a dualist, the nature of his orientation emphasises the value of the aesthetic in the transcendent, as opposed to a life of faith lived in this world.⁴

However, the problem here is neither Von Balthasar (or David Bentley Hart for that matter, or any other theologian recently arguing for the transcendent nature of beauty),⁵ nor the classical understanding of

4 As Ward (2005:205) notes: "Von Balthasar's work breathes in a certain rarefied atmosphere, a post-resurrection perspective, as if the work was composed on the frosted heights of Thomas Mann's magic mountain".

5 For his analogical understanding of beauty, see Hart (2003:18).

beauty, but the way this is appropriated in the late modern context.⁶ It is only following the enlightenment that a transcendental perspective of beauty has been severed from everyday action, by emphasising the nature of beauty not only as transcendental, but also as socially other. As Wolterstorff (2015a:5-82) shows, in the modern “grand narrative” of aesthetics, through associating beauty with disinterested contemplation, not only is true beauty other-worldly, but it is also thereby severed from the social dynamics of everyday life.

Wolterstorff (2015a:32) argues that the Romantics were the first critics of modern fragmentation brought about by “the spread of causal instrumental rationality”. They posited hope amidst the dehumanisation that ensued, via unity to be found in beauty, as captured in the other-worldly creation and contemplation of art. As Karl Moritz, a friend of Goethe, put it in 1785:

While the beautiful draws our attention exclusively to itself ... we seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object; and precisely this loss, this forgetfulness of self, is the highest degree of pure and disinterested pleasure that beauty grants us. In that moment we sacrifice our individual confined being to a kind of higher being ... Beauty in a work of art is not pure ... until I contemplate it as something brought forth entirely for its own sake, in order that it should be something complete in itself (as quoted in Wolterstorff 2015a:34).

Shortly thereafter, Wilhelm Wackenroder suggested that art galleries “ought to be temples”; works of art like prayer; music allowing us to

forget all the croaking of human beings, where no chattering of words and languages ... makes us dizzy but, instead, all the anxiety of our hearts is suddenly healed (Wolterstorff 2015a:35).

Beauty thus becomes both elevated and quarantined, as a salvific force within the realm of art for art’s sake, severing it from the utility of everyday life, freed to express pure unity.⁷ Heinrich Heine said that Goethe’s devotees regarded

6 Begbie (2018) offers a helpful exposition on the problematic nature of the post-modern tendency to disconnect this-worldly, incarnational reality from transcendence.

7 Weber (1991:342) insightfully pointed out why this narrative ultimately causes friction between faith and modern aesthetics: “For [in this modern narrative], art becomes a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right. Art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation, no matter how this may be interpreted. It provides a salvation from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism. With this claim to a redemptory function, art begins to compete directly with salvation religion”.

art as an independent second world which they rank so highly that all activities of human beings – their religion, their morality – course along below it (Wolterstorff 2015a:32).

Largely, the intention was not to separate ethics from aesthetics, but, as Herbert Marcuse puts it, to criticise established reality via “the invocation of the beautiful image” by allowing art to “transcend its social determination”, while still maintaining an “overwhelming presence” (Wolterstorff 2015a:33). However, in practice, the severance of beauty from everyday this-worldliness ultimately neutered its social power, particularly as art moved beyond an association with beauty in the ensuing centuries. Wolterstorff’s larger project in aesthetics has endeavoured to show that art has become problematically disconnected from action and social practice (Wolterstorff 1980; 2015a). While his focus is on art rather than beauty, my contention is that beauty has suffered a similar fate, largely as a result of the early Romantic alliance of beauty and art, and the consequent prevalence of rational modes of knowing over the embodied and aesthetic.

2.2 Beauty as this-worldly

If the other-worldly emphasis focuses on the absolute nature of beauty, then a this-worldly understanding prioritises the individualist and social modes of cultivating subjective perceptions of beauty. Those from the classical school, described earlier, would name this subjective aspect “taste”, which simply needs to be aligned to the absolute and objective reality of beauty. But, if beauty as an absolute is rejected, this-worldly appeal to the senses needs to be treated in isolation, leaving it intimately connected to the visceral nature of being human. If the emphasis on absolute form is Apollonian, a this-worldly approach is Dionysian, with a lack of ordered form and the celebration of earthly desire, as Nietzsche argued. Consequently, there are a plethora of this-worldly descriptions and approaches to “beauty”. For our purposes, there are two points to note. First, in terms of rightly locating beauty within the Christian life, it is vital not only to value beauty as a link to the transcendent, but also to acknowledge the fundamental connections between beauty, desire and embodiment.⁸ Secondly, much of the popular appeal of “beauty” is an attraction to faux beauty, severed from the sacred, as an appeasement of aesthetic desire in various manifestations, such as sentimentality, glamour, or sensationalism.

8 This is precisely where the power of beauty lies, uniting the aesthetic with action via desire, as Hart (2003:15) points out: “The Christian infinite ... is ‘ethical’ only because it is first ‘aesthetic’; it opens up being and beings – to knowledge or love – only within the free orderings of its beauty, inviting a desire that is moral only because it is *not* disinterested”.

On the former, a this-worldly account rightly acknowledges the cultural constructs that filter our perception of beauty. This is why Ward (2003:35) is right to begin his essay on “The beauty of God”, by noting that

[e]verything we do, we create, we imagine, we interpret, and we compose is implicated in complex cultural operations, multifarious social dynamics.

The link between beauty, the imagination and the cultural construction of meaning is what we need to note here. More recently, Ward (2018:161) offered a comprehensive account of the formative nature of the imagination, wherein he notes the profound and multilayered impact of an encounter with beauty:

Sensing (*aesthesis*) opens into aesthetics, and immediately the effect is a transformation not just of perspective but also of the way existence is experienced: gusto, ravishment, wonder, delight are the affective registers of beauty.

Underlying Ward’s analysis is the visceral connection between beauty and desire, which mutually interact with the imagination and the formation of ways of seeing.⁹ Consequently, such imaginaries embed in everyday life as social practices, proving normative, as argued by MacIntyre (2007:187). Ultimately, therefore, even our rationality and consequent understanding of justice is built upon these contextual ways of seeing (MacIntyre 1988). Beauty, then, in its this-worldly interrelationships with desire and the imagination, plays a paradigmatic role, not only in our perception of the transcendent (which, again, it certainly does), but also in our approach to everyday life.¹⁰

In light of this, the latter point – that faux “beauty” unhinged from the transcendent can devolve into this-worldly, desire-driven glamour or mere sensationalism – takes on greater significance. Amidst the abundance of

9 Elsewhere Ward (2004:144) summarises: “We exist ... individually and collectively within streams of presentations that are somatic as well as psychic and so also inseparable from affects, intentions, drives and desires. Individually and collectively we create and transform our worlds out of the operations of this imaginary”. Ward is, of course, not alone in pointing this out. He draws on the work of Benedict Anderson, Cornelius Castoriades, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, among others, to show that the imagination is foundational, not only to individual formation, but also to common societal understanding and practices through a social imaginary (Ward 2004:119-164; 2018:153-233).

10 Smith’s (2009; 2013; 2017) “Cultural liturgies” project maps the relationship between desire, the imagination and worldview and the ultimate implications for political life and the common good. As with our ultimate trajectory here, his argument is based on understanding human beings as fundamentally loving and, therefore, worshipping beings.

sensory stimuli vying for our attention in a media-saturated world, that which glitters the brightest or titillates most effectively is noticed. At the very least, then, a true sense of beauty is easily lost, replaced by a placebo such as glamour – ever entrancing, but always out of reach (O’Donohue 2004:15). As Hart (2003:16) notes, the modern disenchantment with beauty stems largely from this reality; severed from its transcendent mooring,

‘beauty’ *indicates* nothing: neither exactly a quality, nor a property, nor a function, not even really a subjective reaction to an object or occurrence.

From such a nihilistic perspective, beauty may understandably seem an irrelevant, self-gratifying sideshow, a mode of escapism, which at its most noble may be

conceived as a gracious stillness artificially imposed upon the surface of the primordial ontological tumult ... [mocking] the desire for justice (Hart 2003:16).¹¹

However, at its most destructive, such an understanding of faux beauty, while parading as insignificant and merely ornamental, remains active in the shaping of imaginaries and the cultivation of myths and meaning-making. If driven by narcissistic desire, this-worldly aesthetics becomes a form of everyday aestheticism – the tragic irony of the aesthetic once more becoming absolute, but, in this instance, as idol, rather than image of God. It is for this reason that Saward (1997:35-36) rails against the “pseudo-beauty of falsehood and evil”, going as far as to suggest that “[a]ll diabolical wickedness has at its root a perverted aesthetic”. Evil seductively exploits the charm of beauty. Rather than beauty being a gateway to the Other, it loses its transparency and itself becomes the object of desire. In this disordered mode, we “delight in the artistry of the image but are blind to the sanctity of the person imaged” (Saward 1997:36). While such false beauty surrounds us constantly, affirming the mythologies of consumerism, individualism and naturalism, for example, one of the most potent reminders of the paradigmatic power of the aesthetic remains its alliance with the rise of Nazism in Germany. In 1940, the German cultural critic, Theodor Haecker, known for his opposition to the Nazi regime, wrote:

11 I earlier noted Scarry’s dismissal of an objection to the alliance of beauty and justice – that beauty is simply a distraction, which preoccupies our attention, diverting our gaze from that which requires engagement. While this is indeed an invalid objection to beauty rightly understood, it stems precisely from this common misappropriation of faux “beauty”, when it is treated solely as this-worldly gratification of aesthetic desire.

There is no demonic truth, there is no demonic goodness, but there really does seem to be a demonic beauty (Saward 1997:36).

We dismiss this-worldly beauty as insignificant at our peril.

2.3 “Beauty from below” as a relational category

Locating beauty rightly must necessarily take its this-worldliness seriously. This is not at the expense of acknowledging the other-worldliness of beauty; to the contrary, my suggestion is that a rightly ordered, this-worldly understanding of beauty is precisely oriented toward the Other, *both* in its this-worldly and other-worldly sense.¹² Saward (1997:36) notes that the antidote to narcissistic pseudo-beauty is the “self-emptying Son of God”, which is exactly right. Theological aesthetics should always be grounded in Christology, in the marriage of both the human and divine beauty of Christ. By focusing on the divine and neglecting the human, we fail to appreciate both the visceral impetus of beauty in the formation of this-worldly apperception, and the connection to embodied action (the social impact of such understanding).¹³

Taking the this-worldly nature of beauty seriously, therefore, means the rejection of beauty as socially other, as put forward in the modern narrative. In other words, as O’Connell (2012:13-17) encourages us, we need to discover a “beauty from below”.¹⁴ We need to reject the notion of beauty and art for beauty and art’s sake, embracing instead beauty

12 Arguably, a phenomenological, this-worldly transcendence bears an important relation to absolute transcendence. In his last essay, “The visible and the invisible,” Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that he is dealing with the “invisible of *this* world,’ underscoring the immanence of his project”. Using the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien and Dominique Janicaud, Ward (2016:226-233) questions whether there are indeed grounds for Merleau-Ponty to make a distinction between this-worldly “intentional transcendence” and divine “absolute transcendence”.

13 Yeo (2015:404-405), for example, shows the significance of a this-worldly, aesthetic understanding of Christ for connecting to particular times and cultures, wherein the unity of full humanity and divinity functions as an “aesthetic-relational category”, providing fullness of being human in the divinity of Christ.

14 O’Connell (2012:13-17) offers a helpful articulation of “beauty from below”. Beauty from below draws from the typical characteristics of any systematic theology “from below”. It includes an “emphasis on the organic and dynamic rather than the authoritative and immutable”, highlighting the formative significance of concrete contexts and their living relationship to the transcendental. “It emphasizes social encounters with God in horizontal relationships in salvation history and in contemporary reality, not merely in privately vertical relationships that long for personal salvation”. O’Connell explores beauty “from below” as manifest in community murals, which she suggests, “illuminate the relationship between aesthetics and ethics through praxis; beauty and the good are no longer abstract concepts but rather lived practices that support justice and living in right relationship with others”.

“for ‘life’s sake’”, which not only understands beauty through relational lenses, but also evaluates beauty in light of its fitting role in the relational flourishing of shalom (O’Connell 2011:125). In this sense, beauty is not simply a property or an attribute, but a mode of existence, a way of being, a relational category.¹⁵ The remainder of our task is to delineate such a mode of this-worldly Christian existence.

3. AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL EXISTENCE IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

It may seem curious to turn to Kierkegaard, since Von Balthasar (1993:38) accused him of contributing to the wedge driven between aesthetics and ethics.¹⁶ A superficial reading does indeed suggest that Kierkegaard is arguing for linear stages of existence as one matures in the Christian life, leaving the previous stage behind as one progresses from aesthetic existence, to ethical existence and finally culminating in religious existence. However, a close reading shows that Kierkegaard is rejecting the alliance of two contextual concerns as immature aesthetic existence: the philosophical aestheticism of Romanticism and the everyday aestheticism of comfortable Danish Christendom.

On the former, for Kierkegaard, there is no substance that ultimately holds together the romantic ideal in a sense of wholeness. While it claims pursuit of the beautiful ideal, “every ideal is instantly nothing but an allegory hiding a higher ideal within itself, and so on into infinity” (Kierkegaard 1992:306). It is, therefore, the vacuity of this illusory, romantic self-creation that Kierkegaard wishes to confront. While there are aspects to the romantic mantra of living poetically that Kierkegaard wishes to recover, he rejects aestheticism, as the absolutisation of the aesthetic and consequent disconnect from actuality, which lies at the heart of the romantic version of living poetically.

Kierkegaard’s aesthetic critique was, however, not merely directed at romantic philosophers; his concern was with *existence*, lived reality, and the flourishing of aestheticism in the everyday. The manner in which

15 Bigell (2018:188) also uses the idea of “beauty as a relational category” – a middle way between the individualist and universalist approaches – in order to capture the shared or social nature of beauty, as lived in the human and natural environment, arguing for a sense of everyday transcendence – new ways of being and seeing – which it can cultivate.

16 Von Balthasar (1989:95-96) recounts the story of Kierkegaard appearing before the queen for commendation, the queen misnaming his work *Either/Or* as “Either and Or”, a title which Von Balthasar suggests ironically highlights the problematic disjunction in Kierkegaard’s work.

these ideas affected Danish culture and the church, mutually coalescing in Christendom, particularly provoked his ire. On the one hand, Kierkegaard is offering a critique of everyday bourgeois Danish aestheticism, as expressed in the spectacle of the Theatre Royal and, ultimately, the amusement park, Tivoli Gardens.¹⁷ On the other, he is deeply troubled by the everyday apathy of the Danish church. In his estimation, these two existential realities overlap in the “*haute bourgeois* aestheticism” of leading clerical figures such as Bishop Jacob Peter Mynster, who bore the brunt of his attack on Christendom (Kirmmse 1998:27). In fact, Kierkegaard (2009:249) goes as far as equating Danish church leaders with the entertainers of Tivoli, their empty baptisms and confirmations being compared to “picnics” and “family delights”, “beautiful, glorious festivities ... with just a little religion added”. Kierkegaard aligns the faux “beauty” of these “beautiful, glorious festivities” with an immaturity of aesthetic existence, where the primary concern is sensory immediacy, living purely in the moment. Such aesthetic existence is incongruous with the Christian life, the faux beauty of sensory immediacy along with idealistic creation of self-gratifying systems of identity and meaning (even as manifest in Christendom) needing to be rejected in truly ethical-religious existence.

However, it would not be accurate to say that Kierkegaard rejects aesthetic existence *per se* in the Christian life.¹⁸ The aesthetic, in relationship to passion and desire, continues to play a formative role in ethical-religious existence; Christian existence is itself a mode of poetic living.¹⁹ While Kierkegaard rejects the poetic self-creation of romanticism, he suggests a co-poeticising with Christ in the formation of human existence, an aesthetic sensitivity, which is the attunement of the senses to the beauty of Christ as manifest in the world. Becoming Christian by “completing the good work” of God requires “artistic earnestness”,

17 As Pattison (1999:2) explains, Tivoli Gardens was not only an amusement park, but a cultural spectacle. It “opened, with nice irony, in the year that saw the publication of *Either/Or* (1843). Tivoli was not simply an empirical fact: it was a cultural product”. Both the name and concept of Tivoli was taken “from pleasure gardens of the same name in Paris, ‘Tivolis’”. In its first year, “it attracted 372,237 visitors – over three times the population of Copenhagen itself”. It contained “a range of attractions”, including “a steam roundabout, a roller-coaster ... music ... theatre ... fireworks”, and so on, “which created another world in which, for an afternoon or an evening, visitors could slip off their everyday identity and become tourists in some vaguely defined land ... promenading up and down the *allées*, seeing and being seen”.

18 In *Either/Or II*, for example, depicting the ethical stage, Kierkegaard’s Judge William sets out to show that one can “preserve the aesthetic even in everyday life” (Kierkegaard 1987:9). Two long letters from that work vividly point toward this end: “The esthetic validity of marriage” and “The balance between the esthetic and the ethical in the development of the personality”.

19 As comprehensively argued by Walsh (1994).

working “harmoniously” with God in the process of formation, as an act of existential co-poeticisation with Christ (Kierkegaard 1992:280). In the imitation of Christ, existence is truly poetic and formative, since Christ is the “criterion”, the prototypical human being (Kierkegaard 2013:113-114). Beauty ultimately lies in this Christ-relationship.

Kierkegaard frequently waxes lyrical about the beauty of the created world, describing a moonlit night, or the starry sky, and he does appear to genuinely value the objective nature of beauty as a manifestation of the Creator (Torrance 2019). But, in responding to his context, he is more concerned with drawing attention to the way in which such moments of ideal beauty can be co-opted to serve romantic, escapist visions of reality. For instance, he questions whether being entranced by “indescribably beautiful” creation is really “looking at the world from a Christian point of view”, if it does not ultimately point toward the Creator, and humankind as being the image of that Creator. Too often, it is simply viewed as a “splendid world, where [humankind] ... essentially lives to eat, drink, accumulate money” and forget anything further (Kierkegaard 1975:597). In other words, in the Christian life, the beautiful is only rightly oriented for Kierkegaard when portraying right relationship, with the consequent ordering of desires.²⁰

The embrace of beauty is not merely the eradication of apparent ugliness (along with romantic escapism to idealistic visions of beauty), but the assessment of desire in light of being Christian. Kierkegaard explores this understanding of beauty as a relational category in *Works of love*: “What then is meant by the beautiful? The beautiful is the immediate and direct object of immediate love” (Kierkegaard 1998:373). The beloved is thus naturally beautiful. But loving one’s neighbour demands moving beyond the “immediately” beautiful. One’s neighbour may initially appear ugly, but “true love is love for the neighbor ... [thus finding] the un-lovable object lovable” (Kierkegaard 1998:373-374). The pivotal point is Kierkegaard’s affirmation that loving God offers a reorientation of existence, as one emulates Christ in being-for-others.²¹ A Christological alignment of desire reframes the beautiful.²² Perceiving the beautiful requires an aesthetic

20 Kierkegaard’s Judge William suggests that ethical-religious existence reorients the aesthetic; it “does not want to destroy the esthetic but transfigure it”. This is the “true art of living”, and a genuine life of beauty (Kierkegaard 1987:226, 256, 271).

21 “Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being” (Kierkegaard 1998:58).

22 In Christian existence, immediate inclinations and desires are not to be left behind or destroyed, but to be “dethroned” and “transformed” as they are subsumed into Christian living (Kierkegaard 1998:45, 61-62, 139).

attunement to right relationship as *lived* existence (shalom), not merely in the other-worldly romantic sense.

4. ATTUNEMENT TO THE AESTHETIC-ETHICAL FITTINGNESS OF SHALOM

The Christian perception of beauty is not only to be found in an other-worldly ideal, or in flourishing lands and the lavish lives of the upper class, but to be discovered and nurtured in the apparently most ugly of spaces, in broken contexts, amidst oppression, tyranny, and even war. Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls for a recovery of Kierkegaard's aesthetic existence in Christian life from one of the most ugly contexts imaginable.²³ Writing from a prison cell, amidst the atrocities of Nazism and World War II, while awaiting ultimate execution for a failed assassination attempt on Hitler, Bonhoeffer (2010:268) suggests that, at such times, only the church can celebrate aesthetic existence. His argument is Christological, founded in the incarnation: Christian life is to embrace the sensory, the aesthetic, as an aspect of being fully human, as Christ became human; it is in such "this-worldliness" that the Christian is to follow after Christ (Bonhoeffer 2010:486). The life of the world matters, because there is simply no dichotomy between the reality of God and the reality of the world, which come together in the reality of Christ; thus Bonhoeffer's comment, for example, that the best "Christological" interpretation of the Song of Solomon is to "read it as a song about earthly love" (Bonhoeffer 2010:410). However, Bonhoeffer's call to this-worldly Christianity is also a call for aesthetic-ethical discernment.²⁴ Echoing Kierkegaard's distinction between an immature and mature embrace of aesthetic existence, Bonhoeffer (2010:485) distinguishes between a "shallow ... comfortable ... lascivious" this-worldliness and a mature this-worldliness practised in light of "the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection". This mature mode of this-worldliness follows after Christ in the everyday, as a relational orientation of "being-for-others" (Bonhoeffer 2010:501).

Bonhoeffer's musical metaphor of polyphony helpfully captures the need for aesthetic-ethical attunement to Christ-reality in the Christian life. Assessing right relationship to the beautiful is complex. It requires

23 Bonhoeffer's own life speaks to the aesthetic playing a fundamental role in the maturation of being Christian. One could argue that, rather than progressing from aesthetic, to ethical, then religious existence, in a sense, Bonhoeffer's own life inverts this progression, moving from a focus on the religious, to the ethical, and finally the aesthetic (De Gruchy 2001:147-168).

24 "The question of the good becomes the question of participating in God's reality revealed in Christ" (Bonhoeffer 2005:50).

more than a ratiocentric approach to discernment, since it deals with the dynamic web of the interrelationship between embodiment and the senses, the imagination and desire in this-worldly existence, which often operate prior to and beneath cognition.²⁵ Bonhoeffer thus suggests a more holistic approach. In response to considering the right ordering of desire for one's beloved (the beautiful, as Kierkegaard described it), he suggests that the Christian life can be understood as a performance of polyphonic music, wherein multiple melodies cohere in an expression of relational fullness, or shalom (Bonhoeffer 2010:394). However, there obviously needs to be resonance between these melodies, resounding in counterpoint to the base melody, or *cantus firmus*. Bonhoeffer suggests that the *cantus firmus* is loving God with all our heart. As long as "the *cantus firmus* is clear and distinct, a counterpoint can develop as mightily as it wants", earthly love not diminished, but free to flourish (Bonhoeffer 2010:394).²⁶

Bonhoeffer is expressing the fact that disciplined attunement of perception, based in, and oriented by wholehearted love for God, recognises a fittingness, which orders this-worldly, aesthetic-ethical life in resonance with the way things ought to be, or shalom. Fittingness is typically understood to be an aesthetic category. In the romantic sense, certain visual or auditory elements simply *fit* better together toward beauty, the elusive whole. This stems, of course, from the classical understanding of beauty as the unity of proportion, symmetry, harmony, and so on. There is indeed validity to this understanding, but it would be erroneous to relegate fittingness solely to aesthetic evaluation, particularly as typically understood in the modern context, as socially other. In a thorough analysis of fittingness, Wolterstorff (1980:96-121; 2015a:138-140) argues not only for its normativity, but also for the everyday nature of its relationship to action and social practice. Fittingness should, therefore, be understood not only in an aesthetic sense, but also as a measure of appropriate aesthetic-ethical-religious action. Cupit (1999:2) argues that fittingness is a valid mode of evaluating justice, since "an unjust act is an unfitting act; it is an act which fails to accord with the status of the person treated". In other words, fittingness is also a means of ethical discernment.²⁷ An ethic

25 Ward (2014:11; 2018) offers a comprehensive and compelling exploration of "what lies beneath" – that which "is prior to interpretation and the impact it has on the way we think and behave".

26 It is worth noting that Bonhoeffer (2010:331, 494-495) considers his understanding of earthly beauty to be neither Apollonian nor Dionysian, calling for a different aesthetic articulation that moves beyond "Nietzsche's primitive alternatives".

27 Much has been written on approaching ethics through fittingness, a conversation revived in recent years. The contemporary philosophical dialogue on "fitting attitude theories of value" is one such example. See, for instance, (as part of an ongoing dialogue in *Ethics*), "Fittingness first" (McHugh & Way 2016). For an overview of the state of the debate, see "Fittingness" (Howard 2018). From

informed by fittingness brings to the fore life as lived, understanding it as a relational category.²⁸ The implication is an enhancement of Wolterstorff's ethic of care, including creation-care, founded in love, articulated by Wolterstorff (2015b:75-160) as "care-agapism".

Evaluating such fittingness is not merely a subjective exercise, but aesthetic-ethical fittingness assessed in light of shalom, where the connection between aesthetic joy and just action are united (Wolterstorff 2013:221). Wolterstorff suggests that justice and beauty are united in their mutual acknowledgement of excellence or worth. As noted, treating a person justly is to treat a person as befits a person's worth or excellence (Wolterstorff 2013:223). Likewise, following Aquinas, Wolterstorff posits that to encounter beauty is to encounter excellence. Embracing beauty and acting justly, then, are both means of acknowledging worth and excellence. Beauty and justice thus come concretely together in the embodied form of Jesus Christ, the most excellent, prototypical human being.²⁹

In other words, the aesthetic-ethical commitment to shalom is not simply a theoretical affirmation, but a mode of Christian life, a holistic following after Christ, or this-worldly attunement to a life of discipleship.³⁰ "Fittingness requires right thinking, desiring, and doing alike, involving all the disciple's faculties: cognitive, affective, and dispositional" (Vanhoozer 2014:147). Rather than the illusory whole after which the Romantics strived, "the whole into which everything" fits is Jesus Christ.

Fittingness with what God has said and done must be the disciple's supreme criterion for discerning truth, goodness and beauty alike inasmuch as these are functions of *what is in Christ* (Vanhoozer 2014:147).

a theological perspective, Richard Niebuhr, and then Gustafson, building on Niebuhr, provide a foundation for ethics deemed to be appropriate or fitting human action (Gustafson 1983; Keiser 1996).

- 28 Fittingness is fundamentally about relational sensitivity, with ethical implications on multiple fronts. In the words of the Niebuhr scholar, Charles S. McCoy: "In one sense fittingness underscores the importance of particularity – responding to particular persons, situations and issues. In a larger sense, fittingness requires taking account of the encompassing context of the social and natural environment, so that what is done fits with everything else that is happening and avoids causing more problems than it solves" (as quoted in Hessel 2009:288).
- 29 For a thorough account of fittingness as a Christological category, see King (2018).
- 30 Ward (2012:51, 63) argues that embodied fittingness or attunement is an entryway "into a deeper form of the ethical, which [he calls] 'ethical life'". Fundamentally, this is so because prayerful attunement exposes Christological reality for what it is – our participation and "the immersion of the world in Christ ... Attunement is both the source and goal of discipleship".

Such fittingness, as a mode of Christian existence, is the embodiment of wisdom, right perception, integrating “the true, the good, and the beautiful ... the connecting link between aesthetics and ethics” (Vanhoozer 2006:115).

In sum, romantic notions of beauty cannot save the world. Wolterstorff (2015a:196-200) is right to critique Scarry’s (2001) attempt to unite justice and beauty as mutually manifesting symmetry and equivalence. While there is validity to Scarry’s observation, such fittingness in itself is insufficient. As Wolterstorff (2015a:200) candidly puts it:

We have all known people who were intensely attentive to beauty
but cared not a fig for justice ... who live in large elegant houses,
work in elegant offices, have extensive art collections

(and to bring it home to the South African context) watched silently, even numbly as a multitude of social injustices have been and continue to be committed. Despite Lenin’s comments, following his encounter with the beauty of Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, he continued to act unjustly. But beauty is not for disinterested contemplation. It is not to be severed from the warp and woof of everyday life, from a longing for shalom and a call to follow after Christ in this-worldly being-for-others. In the film, it is not an experience of beauty *per se* that transforms Wiesler, but beauty as lived, relationally encountered in “the lives of others”. Beauty, particularly in its alliance with the sublime, does indeed lead to moments of awe, wonder and reverence for the divine. This is to be treasured and affirmed. But beauty as lived, as a relational orientation, attuned to the fittingness of following after Christ incarnate is both aesthetic *and* ethical existence. It is participation in this-worldly humanisation. It is the vision to view both beloved and neighbour as beautiful, working towards a concrete manifestation of beauty-towards-shalom in living and working spaces. It is the commitment to creatively cultivate fitting individual and social imaginaries of beauty, which celebrate otherness, rather than perpetuate self-seeking mythologies of injustice and prejudice such as racism and xenophobia. In short, it is a faithfully following after Christ incarnate, as prototypical lived beauty and justice.

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