

# Omni-beauty as a divine attribute

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Abstract: the claim that God is perfectly beautiful has played a key role within the history of a number of religious traditions. However, this view has received surprisingly little attention from philosophers of religion in recent decades. In this paper I aim to remedy this neglect by addressing some key philosophical issues surrounding the doctrine of divine beauty. I begin by considering how best to explicate the claim the God is perfectly beautiful before moving on to ask what consequences accepting this claim will have for our broader theorising in philosophy.

## *The Beauty of God*

Apparent attributions of beauty to God abound in various theistic traditions. To focus – as I will in this paper – only on the Christian religion, we seem to find God’s beauty praised at length by a variety of sources. Scripture describes God as ‘the King in His Beauty’ (Isaiah 33: 17) and the Psalmist expresses the desire to ‘behold the beauty of the LORD’.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the tradition is replete with what appear to be descriptions of God’s beauty. Augustine describes him as ‘the most beautiful of all beings’ (Augustine 1961: 49), Aquinas proclaims that he ‘is goodness and beauty itself’ (1273 / 2006: 2441), and Jonathan Edwards praises ‘the infinite

beauty and excellency of his nature' (1959: 257). Similarly, God's beauty is frequently exalted in a plethora of hymns, songs, and liturgies. It is notable, however, that there has been very little effort in contemporary philosophy of religion to proffer a precise analysis of such claims.<sup>2</sup>

What are we to make of this? One possible explanation is that philosophers of religion have been inclined to dismiss such language as mere puffery.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the faithful, keen to praise God in the most exuberant terms available, have merely heaped every available positive appellation upon him without any real consideration as to whether such epithets are really applicable to a divine being.<sup>4</sup> Such an explanation would, perhaps, account for some of the claims made in folk religious discourse and popular worship songs, but it hardly explains the careful and in-depth discussions of God's beauty found in the writings of various philosophers and theologians within the tradition.<sup>5</sup> It seems, then, that there is (at least *prima facie*) good reason to treat these claims as a genuine part of Christian doctrine, something which makes their recent neglect even more puzzling.<sup>6</sup> My primary aim in this paper will be to begin to remedy this neglect.

Once we have accepted talk of God's beauty as a genuine part of the tradition, this raises the further question of how best to account for such talk. One suggestion is that it is, in some respect, metaphorical. Ascriptions of God's beauty, on this view, are no more to be taken literally than descriptions of his outstretched arm or the shelter of his wings.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, we might accept that the Christian tradition literally numbers beauty amongst the divine attributes but argue that the tradition errs in this respect. For the purposes of this paper, I will have very little to say about the plausibility, or otherwise, of these approaches. Rather, I will assume that we should take talk of God's beauty at face value – both in terms of its content and its truth – and ask what implications this will have. I begin by considering how best to

analyse the relevant attribute of divine beauty (which I term 'omni-beauty'). I then survey some implications which attributing omni-beauty to God has for some important debates within aesthetics. Finally, I consider the relationship between omni-beauty and other divine attributes.

### *Defining Omni-beauty*

It is clear from the examples above that there is a prominent tradition which is, if taken at face value, committed to the claim that beauty is a divine attribute. Yet, it might reasonably be queried what precisely is meant by 'beauty' here given the numerous competing accounts of the nature of beauty. I will not, however, commit to any particular analysis of beauty here for three reasons. First, defending any account of beauty in general would require a lengthy diversion from the main topic of the paper. Second, offering such an account strikes me as unnecessary for my, rather modest, purposes here. While a complete account of God's beauty would, most likely, require a detailed understanding of beauty in general, such an understanding is not required for a mere preliminary foray into reinvigorating this topic. (Consider, by way of comparison, how rarely discussions of omniscience come packaged with complete analyses of the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge.) Finally, committing to any one account would require my taking sides regarding various issues on which I intend to remain neutral for the purposes of this paper. These issues concern, for example, whether there can be beauties which aren't perceptible by means of the senses and the extent to which judgements of beauty are objective. I will argue below that accepting certain claims about God's beauty commits us to particular views on such issues but will take no stance as to whether this is a reason to accept the latter or to reject the former.

Rather than offering a detailed definition of beauty, then, I will instead merely start from an ordinary 'folk' understanding of the concept (again, paralleling many discussions of other divine attributes). Of course, it may well turn out that, as I will discuss at length below, such a quotidian understanding of beauty is inadequate when it comes to understanding the nature of divine beauty. Regardless, though, it will still provide us with a useful starting point.

Whatever stance we take concerning beauty in general, though, it is clear that those throughout the Christian tradition who have praised the beauty of God are not merely suggesting that God is one beautiful object amongst many. As with his other perfections, it would not do for God to be surpassed (or equalled) in terms of beauty by any other being. Further, it seems that we should maintain – in keeping with the tradition of perfect being theology – that God's beauty exceeds not only that of any other actual being but of any other *possible* being. An obvious initial suggestion, then, might be that a being is *omni-beautiful* iff it is more beautiful than any other possible being (or collection of such beings).<sup>8</sup> This rough account of *omni-beauty* is, however, rather uninformative. As with other divine attributes – omnipotence, omniscience, and so forth – merely asserting that God possesses the highest possible degree of some perfection hardly serves as an analysis of the relevant property. Further, there are (as I will discuss further below) reasons to doubt whether this account really captures the relevant notion of God's all-surpassing beauty found in the tradition.

*Maximal Beauty*

Dealing first with the issue of how best to flesh out this account, it is important to observe that some initially appealing attempts to further analyse God's role as the most beautiful of all possible beings quickly prove untenable. It cannot, for example, be that God is omni-beautiful in virtue of straightforwardly instantiating all possible beauties. There are, first, certain ways of being beautiful – such as the beauty instantiated by the vibrant mix of colours within a painting – which it seems can only be possessed by physical objects and which, as such, could not be instantiated by a transcendent immaterial deity.<sup>9</sup> Just as Geach (1977: 131) argues that, perfect goodness notwithstanding, there are certain putative virtues (such as chastity and temperance) which God – owing to his immaterial nature – could not possess.

Second, instantiating certain kinds of beauty is incompatible with instantiating others. Some objects are beautiful in virtue of their complexity, others in virtue of their simplicity. Likewise, some objects are beautiful because of their serenity and others because of their frantic energy. Clearly, though, no one object can possess all of these varied beauties. Or, rather, no object *considered as a whole* can possess them in any straightforward sense. It is, of course, possible for a single object to have parts which instantiate each of these features. However (even setting aside concerns relating to divine simplicity) it is clear that this qualification won't dispense with the underlying problem here. There are certain ways in which an object as a whole can be beautiful which depend on the inter-relations between all of its different parts and, again, some of these ways of being beautiful are incompatible with others. Consider, for example, the contrast between an object that it is beautiful because of the harmonious homogeneity of its parts and one that is beautiful because of the wonderfully unexpected contrasts between its various parts.

Finally, there are certain kinds of putative beauty that appear to be unworthy of a perfect being. We often talk, for example, of finding beauty in an object because of its fragility or ephemerality. Such beauty would, however, clearly be incompatible with God's omnipotence and eternity. Again, we can draw comparisons with Geach's (1977) discussion of the virtues and his claim that God cannot, qua omnipotent being, exhibit virtues such as courage (since nothing could ever pose even an apparent threat to him) or prudence (since there are no limits to the resources available to him). It seems, then, that attempts to flesh out omni-beauty in terms of the straightforward possession of all possible beauties fail. Can we do better?

One possibility is to maintain that God's omni-beauty consists in his uniquely instantiating the greatest compossible set of beauties. That is, that he alone instantiates a set of beauties which – in terms of either the range of beauties instantiated, the extent of their beautifulness, or both – exceeds the beauty of any other possible set. Of course, much more would need to be said concerning how to spell out the details of this account. What, for example, is the nature of this set of beauties? Why should we believe that there is only one such set? And why is it that God alone is able to instantiate it? There is, however, a deeper worry for accounts of this kind.

To understand this worry, it will be useful to return to the relationship between omni-beauty and perfect being theology. As noted above, it cannot be the case that any being – whether actual or merely possible – is God's peer in terms of beauty. Even this doesn't go far enough though. While it is not, strictly speaking, incompatible with the letter of perfect being theology to allow that some other being comes a close second to God in terms of any of his

perfections, it is surely incompatible with the spirit of this doctrine. The idea, for example, that any created being has a level of power which provides a close rival to God's (such that God would have to struggle to overcome it) belongs more to a Manichean worldview than an orthodoxly Christian one. Similarly, to allow that any other being is God's rival, even an ultimately unsuccessful rival, in terms of beauty would be anathema to most within the perfect being tradition. As such, merely appealing to God's uniquely possessing the greatest compossible set of beauties isn't going to do the work required from an account of omni-beauty.

An obvious response at this stage would be to maintain that, for whatever reason, the relevant set of beauties which God instantiates is significantly greater than the next greatest compossible set. Again, we would be faced with a number of questions concerning the exact details of how this should be spelled out but, even if we were able to answer these, this position still doesn't seem to capture everything which those who praise God's beauty would wish to say. First, the view as stated seems entirely consistent with treating the kinds of beauty which do not fall within the relevant set as being completely absent from God's purview. A view which, for reasons I will discuss further below, many in the tradition would hold to be completely unacceptable. Second, many theists will be inclined to maintain, paralleling moves already made with respect to other divine attributes, that it would be preferable to explain the differences between the beauty of God and the beauty of created things in terms which aren't merely quantitative. One common motivation for this is the thought that it somehow denigrates God not to allow that there is some difference in kind, and not merely in degree, between the perfections he possesses and the corresponding attributes possessed by his creations.<sup>10</sup> So, how might the proponent of the omni-beauty view address these concerns?

### *God as Source of Beauty*

One possibility for answering this challenge is to maintain that God is not merely the unique possessor of (by far) the greatest compossible set of beauties but also, in some sense, the source of all beauties other than his own. Indeed, as I will explore further below, there is already an influential view within the tradition according to which God is, to use Pseudo-Dionysius's (1987: 77) phrase, 'the superabundant [...] source of the beauty of every beautiful thing'.<sup>11</sup> How should we explicate this claim though?

If the suggestion is merely that God created and sustains every beautiful thing (besides himself) then this is certainly a view which many orthodox theists will be inclined to accept. After all, God is typically taken – with some occasional exceptions I will discuss in later sections – to bear these relations to *all* other objects. Yet, this merely causal story doesn't seem to capture what the omni-beauty account requires. First, the causal story doesn't capture any special relation which God bears to beauty, or to beautiful things, rather than to created things more generally. Second, there is no general reason to hold that the creator of a beautiful object needs to be its superior, or even equal, in terms of beauty (many great artists weren't much to look at). Of course, God's superior beauty would already be guaranteed by the claim that he instantiates the greatest compossible set of beauties. The underlying worry, though, is that merely claiming that God is the creator and sustainer of all beautiful things – while no doubt important in various respects concerning his power, sovereignty, and so forth – does nothing to bolster the claim that his superiority in terms of beauty isn't a merely quantitative one. There is, however, an alternative interpretation of the 'source of beauty' claim available.



I noted above that it seems to be a complete non-starter to claim that God *straightforwardly* instantiates the full range of possible beauties. There is, however, an influential view within the tradition according to which God possess all of these beauties in a less direct manner since all other beauties are, in some sense, a reflection of (or a sharing in) God's beauty.<sup>12</sup> This idea is, again, found in Pseudo-Dionysius who claims that from God's 'beauty comes the existence of everything, each being exhibiting its own way of beauty' (1987: 77). Similarly, Edwards (1959: 257) describes the beauty of created beings as 'being a communication of the divine nature and beauty'. Further, the reflection view also appears well-equipped to deal with the worries introduced above. Postulating that all other beauties are somehow a reflection of God's beauty allows us to introduce a difference between the beauty of God and the beauty of created things which is not merely quantitative. Similarly, it allows us to maintain a strong link between God and those beauties which he cannot straightforwardly instantiate, since these will still be a reflection of some superior beauty which God *does* possess. Finally, it allows us to say something to differentiate between God's relationship to beautiful objects and his relationship to ugly (or merely non-beautiful) objects. Beautiful objects reflect, or participate in, God's beauty but ugly objects do not reflect God's ugliness since there is no divine ugliness to be reflected.<sup>13</sup>

Still, this is far from establishing that the theist *should* accept that all worldly beauty is merely a reflection of, or participation in, God's beauty. Indeed, on the face of things at least, this position seems to encounter worries precisely paralleling those which beset the claim that God literally instantiates all beauties. How, for example, could the fragile beauty of a snowflake qualify as a reflection of the beauty of an *a se* and eternal being? Or how could two incompatible kinds of beauty both be participations in the beauty of a single object? (I do not

mean to suggest here that no answer could be given to such questions but merely that more work needs to be done to develop a fully satisfactory participation account of God's beauty.)

Of course, any problem which does arise here will likely not be one which is peculiar to omni-beauty. It is commonplace for theists to maintain that, as Aquinas (1273 / 2006: 21) puts it, '[a]ll created perfections are in God' but also to recognise that there are various reasons why this cannot be so in a straightforward or literal sense. For example, there are, as Aquinas himself (Ibid.) discusses, worries that certain kinds of creaturely perfection are unworthy of God, that some physical perfections could not be instantiated by an immaterial God and that certain kinds of perfection are not capable of being co-instantiated (worries which closely parallel those concerning different kinds of creaturely beauty discussed above). Famously, Aquinas' own solution to this difficulty is to propose that the various perfections of created things exist 'in a more eminent degree' (Ibid.) in God than in created beings. So, on the Thomist view, all beauties (as with all other perfections) are, in some sense, present in God but not in the same manner in which they are present in ordinary objects.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the beauty of these ordinary objects is a reflection of some distinct kind of beauty which God exhibits in a pre-eminent manner. Influential though such a view of God's perfections is, it is also rather opaque, and it is difficult to see precisely (or even approximately) what this kind of reflection amounts to.

To some extent this difficulty is to be expected since it is also a key part of this influential Thomist view that we cannot fully understand the way in which God exhibits such perfections pre-eminently. There have, however, been some attempts to elucidate this claim. Timothy Chappell (2006: 423), for example, asks us to imagine what it would be like if there were a

race of aliens vastly superior to humans in intelligence and goodness, we would of course struggle to understand those aliens. But we would not, I think, struggle with the idea that our terms ‘intelligent’ and ‘good’ might be pre-eminently applicable to those aliens—more applicable to them than to anything that we had invented the terms to apply to. Nor would we struggle with the idea that these hyper-intelligent and ultra-virtuous aliens might themselves propose to us that we extend or revise our use of such terms in ways that we, for our part, would be quite unable to make full sense of, even where we dimly grasped their point.

Such analogies are, in some respects, useful illustrations of the pre-eminence view but they don’t really help us with the particular difficulties at hand. For example, it is clearly not the case that the beauty of God which is reflected in the snowflake holds its pre-eminence by virtue of being vastly *more* fragile or *more* delicate than the snowflake. Similarly, we could not extend this thought experiment to imagine, even dimly, an object which was (considered as a whole) aesthetically superior to any Earthly object in terms of both its serenity and its frantic energy. Again, I do not mean to suggest that such difficulties are insurmountable – some sympathetic presentations of Thomist aesthetics can be found in, e.g., Maurice (1957), Jordan (1989) and Sevier (2015) – but merely that the position it presents us with is a subtle and complex one which does not enable us to provide an easy explication of omni-beauty (or any other divine attribute).

### *The State of Play*

We are left, then, in a rather difficult position when it comes to efforts to explicate the nature of God’s perfect beauty. Accounts which define omni-beauty merely in terms of God’s

possessing the maximal possible level of beauty seem – even bracketing difficulties concerning how best to spell out such a view – to be inadequate to the task. On the other hand, accounts of omni-beauty in terms of notions such as reflection or participation appear to quickly commit us to views which are rather opaque and which are, at the very least, in need of a great deal of careful explication before they can provide us with a fully adequate account of the nature of divine beauty.

There is, of course, much more which could be said here concerning these different attempts to define omni-beauty (and merely surveying extant attempts to outline and defend the reflection view concerning God's perfections would be a monumental task). Further, even once these metaphysical questions concerning the nature of God's beauty are settled, other pressing issues are likely to arise. We would need to consider, for example, the ways in which we might come to experience or apprehend the nature of God as well as the ways in which the aesthetic character of God relates to various aspects of religious praxis. My intention here is not, however, to arrive at any definitive account of the nature of omni-beauty but merely to demonstrate that – as with the other divine perfections – the nature of God's perfect beauty is not as easy to explicate as it may initially appear. As such, there is good reason for those philosophers who regard omni-beauty as a genuine divine attribute to dedicate renewed efforts to better understanding it. Provided, of course, that we take there to be something philosophically significant about achieving such understanding. After all, if we were to hold that omni-beauty is a genuine divine attribute but that it has no important consequences for any matters of philosophical significance, then this would seem to justify its relative neglect by contemporary philosophers of religion. So, why think that omni-beauty is theoretically significant?

There will, of course, be those who judge (correctly in my view) that a greater understanding of omni-beauty will be philosophically rewarding for its own sake. For those inclined to question this, though, I will argue below that accepting the omni-beauty view has important implications for a range of other philosophical issues. Naturally, determining precisely what significance the omni-beauty view has would necessitate developing a precise account of the omni-beauty doctrine itself. We can, however, get some way towards exploring these consequences even without such an account. In what follows I will focus on surveying the consequences of two key (if rather underspecified) aspects of omni-beauty. First, that God is maximally beautiful by virtue of possessing (by far) the greatest compossible set of beauties. Second, that God is in some sense (perhaps only causally) the source of all other beauties. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that even these rather minimal claims have important philosophical implications for, *inter alia*, debates within aesthetics and the philosophy of religion.

### *Realism and Anti-realism*

One immediate suggestion is that attributions of beauty to God straightforwardly entail aesthetic realism and, therefore, the rejection of various non-realist views in aesthetics such as error theory and expressivism. If God *really* is beautiful, indeed omni-beautiful, then clearly there must *really* be such a property as beauty and, as such, we are committed to a realist meta-aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> This argument would, however, be rather too quick.

Taking error theory first, it is certainly the case that accepting the claim that God is omni-beautiful would commit us to rejecting error theory with respect to one kind of aesthetic

property; beauty.<sup>16</sup> Whether this would commit us to rejecting aesthetic error theory across the board is, however, a more complex matter. Someone who maintains that beauty is a genuine property but that all other putative aesthetic properties – ugliness, gaudiness, gracefulness etc. – are not would not be saying anything flatly *inconsistent*, but their position would certainly be a difficult one to motivate.<sup>17</sup> As such, I will assume that such an account is not a live option. There does not, however, seem to be any reason why someone who accepts omni-beauty as a genuine aesthetic property couldn't adopt an error theory with respect to *some* traditional aesthetic properties, just as many contemporary moral realists may incline towards an error theory with respect to some putative thick moral properties such as chastity.

The implications for non-cognitivism are even less clear. Certainly, the kinds of claim which orthodox theists want to make regarding the beauty of God are incompatible with a crude emotivism concerning aesthetic judgements. The claim that God is omni-beautiful is clearly not treated within the tradition as merely a straightforward expression of approval but, rather, as revealing some important feature of God himself. Yet, when it comes to more sophisticated forms of non-cognitivism – such as those defended by Simon Blackburn (1993) and Alan Gibbard (1990) – things are much less clear. Expressivists in various domains (such as Dreier (2004) and Blackburn (1998: 294-298)) have argued at length that they can allow that certain claims made within these domains are true, that they are objective and mind-independent, that they relate to genuine properties of their objects, and much more besides.<sup>18</sup> Of course the success (or otherwise) of this expressivist project – in aesthetics and elsewhere – is very much open to dispute. Whatever view we ultimately adopt with respect to this project, though, its failure certainly isn't an immediate consequence of the claim that God is omni-beautiful. An expressivist analysis of omni-beauty would, it seems, stand or fall for

reasons exactly paralleling those offered for and against aesthetic expressivism more generally. As such, while accepting the claim that God is omni-beautiful may narrow our range of meta-aesthetic options a little, it doesn't commit us to accepting aesthetic realism.

### *The Scope of the Aesthetic*

There have been numerous debates within aesthetics concerning precisely which objects are capable of genuinely instantiating aesthetic properties. At one extreme there are views according to which aesthetic properties, and the objects which bear them, must be straightforwardly perceptible by means of our everyday senses.<sup>19</sup> This is not to deny that in certain cases perceiving such properties may require special discernment, knowledge and so forth (just as in more quotidian cases it may, to use Susanna Siegel's (2006) famous example, require some training before we are able to perceptual represent the difference between pine trees and trees of other kinds). Monroe Beardsley (1981: 46), for example, maintains that '[t]he aesthetic object is a perceptual object' (that is, an 'object some of whose qualities, at least, are open to direct sensory awareness' (Ibid. 31)). Opposed to such views are those who allow that some objects which are not straightforwardly perceptible – people's characters (Novitz 1991), abstracta such as mathematical theories (Breitenbach 2013), and even philosophical arguments (Warner 2016) – are capable of instantiating aesthetic properties. Accepting God's omni-beauty would clearly resolve these debates in a manner broadly favouring the latter camp since if God is, as classical theism would have it, a transcendent immaterial being then his beauty will not be straightforwardly perceptible by means of our ordinary senses.

Again, though, it is important not to overstate the case here. First, merely denying that God is perceivable by ordinary sensorial means does not entail that he is not perceivable *simpliciter*. Indeed, a number of philosophers (most comprehensively Alston (1991)) have presented sustained arguments for the claim that we can have genuine perceptual experiences of God. And, once again, claims of this kind have played a prominent role within the tradition. While it is clearly theistic orthodoxy that God (along with his power, beauty, and so forth) cannot be perceived by ordinary sensory means, there is a long history – as discussed in e.g. Gellman (2001) and Alston (1991: 9-66) – of positing various means by which some manner of mystical perception (or at least perception-like apprehension) of God may be achieved. Further, even leaving such complications aside, the omni-beauty view does not tell us much about precisely which objects fall under the scope of the aesthetic. It is, for example, perfectly consistent for someone who accepts the view that God is omni-beautiful to deny that various other non-perceptual objects can literally be beautiful.

Still, accepting that God is omni-beautiful will make certain controversial aesthetic attributions considerably more palatable. Allowing that God really is beautiful will entail either that non-perceptible objects can instantiate aesthetic properties or, at the very least, that such properties can be instantiated by entities which are only perceivable by means beyond mundane sensory perception. The former concession will obviously be a boon to those who claim that abstracta etc. can literally be beautiful but the latter may also render their view considerably more appealing. After all, some philosophers have (as discussed in, e.g., Maddy (1980)) argued for positions concerning our acquaintance with mathematical objects which appeal to some mode of quasi-perceptual access. A mode of access which looks, in certain key respects, to be analogous to the kind of religious perception proposed by Alston et al. Nor is



this the only way in which the omni-beauty view might be of help to defenders of a wider conception of the aesthetic. The claim that certain mathematical entities are genuinely beautiful may, for example, be made more appealing if we combine the omni-beauty view with the claim that abstracta are somehow part of God's nature.

Nor are such arguments restricted to the mathematical case. Consider, for example, the claim that a particular individual has a beautiful character. There is – as discussed in Kidd (forthcoming) and Sherry (2007: 9-10) – a strong tradition of linking claims about the beautiful characters of certain religious exemplars with the beauty of God. As such, we might find it at least *prima facie* plausible that we could extend some version of whatever account we give of the beauty of God to explain the beauty of the character of such religious exemplars.

### *Faultless Disagreement*

Various philosophers have recently argued that there are certain instances within aesthetics – as well as in other areas such as discussions concerning so called 'predicates of personal taste' – where there can be disagreements which are faultless *in every sense*.<sup>20</sup> For disagreements of this kind to exist it would be required not only that 'both subjects have exhausted their epistemic responsibilities towards their respective beliefs' (Baker and Robson (2017: 434)) but also that the apparently conflicting propositions which each party believes are both true (or, at a minimum, both not false).<sup>21</sup> As such, someone can reason perfectly, on the basis of the evidence available to her, but still arrive at a judgement which is not faultless in this sense. Those who accept this phenomenon as genuine will allow that there can be instances where, say, *a* truly (or, at least, not falsely) asserts 'Beethoven's music is superior to Mozart's' while

*b* truly (or, at least, not falsely) asserts 'Mozart's music is superior to Beethoven's'. How best to account for this phenomenon – and, indeed, whether the phenomenon itself is genuine – has proven extremely controversial but I will focus here on what consequences accepting the omni-beauty view has for such debates.

It is clearly a consequence of the classical theistic view of God's beauty that there cannot be such faultless disagreements regarding whether God is beautiful or regarding the relative beauties of God and any other object. Anyone who believed that God was not beautiful, or that some other object was more (or as) beautiful as God, would simply be mistaken. This is not to deny that it might be possible for such beliefs to be faultless in *some* sense. Perhaps someone could reason flawlessly from the evidence available to her to the belief that God is not beautiful, or that some other object is more beautiful than God (I take no stance on this issue here). However, the point remains that any such belief would – given our commitment to the claim that God instantiates the greatest compossible set of beauties – be false.

Again, though, it is important not to overstate the significance of this result. In particular, the claim that God is omni-beautiful does not entail that there is never any faultless disagreement in the stronger sense. Accepting God's omni-beauty is, for example, perfectly consistent with the disagreement concerning Beethoven and Mozart (outlined above) being faultless. The omni-beauty view does, however, necessitate that there are some limits to this phenomenon. This will, of course, be a welcome result for those who deny that there can *ever* be faultless disagreement in this sense. It need not, however, be seen as particularly bad news for advocates of the faultlessness intuition. Some of those who have discussed faultless disagreement seem to presuppose that the phenomenon, if genuine, is a perfectly general

one.<sup>22</sup> That is, that for any aesthetic claim there will be the possibility of a case of faultless disagreement arising. Yet, a more moderate view – according to which some but, not all, aesthetic judgements can be the subject of such faultless disagreements – is perfectly consistent. Indeed, there are some independently compelling reasons for finding such a view attractive. For example, while there is a widespread intuition that the disagreement concerning Beethoven and Mozart discussed above may be faultless, it seems at least as intuitive to claim that there could be no faultless disagreement with respect to the claim that the oeuvres of both are superior to that of Bananarama.

As the discussion above hopefully illustrates, the claim that God is omni-beautiful has a range of wide-reaching, and underexplored, consequences for our aesthetic theorising. What's more, there's no reason to think that the aesthetic consequences of omni-beauty are limited to those that I have surveyed above. Indeed, there are a range of other areas – such as the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, the semantics of aesthetic judgements, and the nature of the aesthetic attitude – where I believe the claim that God is omni-beautiful will have important implications. For now, though, I will turn to consider some consequences of this view which more straightforwardly fall within the purview of the philosophy of religion. In particular, I will ask what consequences the omni-beauty view has for our understanding of other divine attributes.

*Omni-beauty and Other Divine Attributes*

There is much to be learned – as shown in, e.g., Stump & Kretzmann (1981) and Rowe (2002) – from considering the ways in which the various putative divine attributes relate to each other. Omni-beauty is no exception here. I have already mentioned above that there is, on certain views of the aesthetic, a tension between God’s being immaterial and his being beautiful. I will not, however, pursue such a line of thought here and will continue to assume that we adopt a view of the aesthetic according to which objects which are not (straightforwardly) perceptual can literally be beautiful.<sup>23</sup>

On a more positive note, there are other divine attributes which appear to fit very well indeed with omni-beauty. Consider, for example, claims concerning God’s perfect (moral) goodness. Over the last century some philosophers have sought to revive traditional claims to the effect that there are fundamental links between aesthetic and moral values. Wittgenstein (1922 / 1999: 105), for example, famously claimed that ‘ethics and aesthetics are one’ and, rather more conservatively, Berys Gaut (1998: 1999) has argued that there are a number of ways in which ‘the aesthetic and the ethical are intertwined’.<sup>24</sup> There are, of course, a variety of ways in which this connection could be spelled out but, regardless of such complications, the point remains that it would be very difficult for someone sympathetic to such views to endorse claims concerning God’s surpassing moral goodness without also endorsing parallel claims with respect to his beauty. Indeed, someone sympathetic to the Wittgensteinian view would likely take this combination to be straightforwardly incoherent.

I cannot, however, hope to do justice to the full range of possible connections between omni-beauty and other divine attributes here. As such, I will focus on considering the relationship between omni-beauty and two other divine attributes; omniscience and divine sovereignty.

### *Omni-beauty and Omniscience*

To begin to see the possible tension between omni-beauty and omniscience it will be useful to consider one of the few contemporary discussions of divine beauty by Mark Ian Thomas Robson (2011). Robson argues that God's being perfectly beautiful is incompatible with a certain kind of ersatz realism concerning possible worlds: one according to which possible worlds exist as something like ideas in the divine mind.<sup>25</sup> To demonstrate this point Robson asks us to consider the horrific contents of some of the possible worlds which would exist in God's mind. For example, there would be worlds where the Nazis were victorious in the Second World War and go on to 'establish a galactic empire that takes never-ending, sadistic delight in killing the innocent' (Ibid. 481). He then goes on to argue that there is an inconsistency between the claim that God's mind contains intricately detailed representations of such horrors and the view that God is perfectly beautiful. As such, Robson maintains, we must – given that perfect beauty is a non-negotiable divine attribute – reject such 'divine ersatz' views concerning possible worlds (Ibid. 489).

Robson's argument is, of course, controversial in several respects (as I will discuss further below) but the crucial point for my purposes is that it will, if sound, have rather broader implications than Robson himself suggests. Consider that, as I have already argued elsewhere (in Robson (2012)) God's mind would need to incorporate representations of some truly unspeakable ugliness regardless of the stance we take with respect to divine ersatzism. After all, the actual world contains its own share of horrors – the atrocities committed by the actual world's Nazi party, the transatlantic slave trade, and the disastrous consequences of Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' to name but a few – and God, qua omniscient being, would need

to have perfectly detailed representations of each of these in his mind. The theist cannot, after all, accept Aristotle's (1907 / 2007: 284) dictum that for God it would be 'better not to see some things than to see them' or his corresponding belief that there will be some matters about which God remains ignorant. Rather, God will possess excruciatingly detailed representations of these horrors regardless of the view we adopt with respect to divine ersatzism. As such, it seems that, if Robson's line of reasoning with respect to possible worlds is cogent, there will be a clear tension between the claim that God is omniscient and the claim that he is perfectly beautiful.<sup>26</sup>

One solution here is to treat this as a reductio of Robson's original claim that God's possessing representations of, a certain kind of, unspeakable ugliness entails that he is not himself perfectly beautiful. And there seem (as I discussed in Robson (2012)) to be various reasons why someone might reject this claim. First, it could be argued that God's being perfectly beautiful is compatible with his having some parts which are not beautiful (and, indeed, with his having some which are horrifically ugly).<sup>27</sup> It is, after all, common for an object as a whole to be made more beautiful by virtue of some aspect which would, considered in isolation, be very ugly. Consider, for example, the way in which the Easter narrative is made more beautiful by the inclusion of some of its darker aspects. Second, it might be objected that there is an important distinction between a representations's being *of* something with a particular aesthetic character and the representation itself possessing that character.<sup>28</sup> Van Gogh's *Pair of Shoes* has, for example, attracted a great deal of interest for providing a very beautiful representation of an aesthetically unremarkable object.<sup>29</sup> That said, it is important to note that both of these responses to Robson's argument rely on controversial claims regarding the aesthetic which Robson himself argues in a later paper (Robson 2014) we

should reject. I will not, however, attempt to evaluate Robson's responses here since my primary concern is not with whether we should endorse Robson's claims regarding ersatz possible worlds but, rather, with what implications his arguments have for our understanding of omni-beauty and omniscience.

Importantly, it seems that anyone who wants to accept that God instantiates both attributes must also accept at least one of the claims discussed in the previous paragraph.<sup>30</sup> That is, they must either allow that God's being perfectly beautiful is compatible with his having some parts which would, if considered in isolation, be ugly or that a representation of even a horrifically ugly event need not itself be ugly. And either of these would tell us something important concerning the nature of beauty. Further, such conclusions will also have important consequences concerning our understanding of the divine nature. Consider, for example, that if we accept that God has beliefs which by themselves would be ugly but which, as a part of the divine nature, contribute to the greater beauty of the whole then this would itself tell us a great deal about the nature of God's beauty. In particular, it would entail that he is not, as Robson (2014: 205) maintains 'wholly and completely beautiful' in the sense that 'there can be no 'part' of God that is not (so to speak) crammed full of beauty'. Rather, his surpassing beauty would arise (as I tentatively suggest elsewhere) from 'placing something which is, in and of itself, very ugly in certain relations to a greater whole' in order to 'give rise to a strange kind of beauty, a beauty that is often wonderfully exquisite' (Robson 2012: 521). Beyond that, it would also seem to generate a conflict with another putative divine attribute; simplicity. Many theists will resist the idea that God (qua perfectly simple being) has any parts at all but this account appears committed to the claim that he has genuinely distinct parts of varying aesthetic character. Of course, it is open to the defender of such a view to argue that

this commitment is merely superficial and that the spirit of these claims can be rephrased in a way which avoids commitment to God's genuinely having parts. If, however, such paraphrase strategies prove unsuccessful, then this would generate a tension between the doctrine of divine simplicity and the claim that God is perfectly beautiful.

Turning to the second claim, if we attempt to avoid the potential conflict here by allowing that representations of horrific ugliness, of certain kinds, can themselves be non-ugly (and perhaps even beautiful) then this tells us something important about the kinds of representation which exist in the divine mind. Specifically, it tells us that God's beliefs (along with his other representational mental states) must be of one of these kinds rather than of some other kind which does not allow for such an aesthetic disconnect between representation and represented. Some will likely also regard this claim as an additional motivation for adopting the traditional Thomist view according to which all of God's beliefs are, in some sense, about himself. That is, as Aquinas (1273 / 2006: 180) puts things, that God only *directly* knows his own nature but that 'by understanding Himself, understands every creature'. If this is right, then God wouldn't have beliefs which are straightforwardly about the various (horrifically ugly) atrocities discussed above but, rather, beliefs about his own (perfectly beautiful) nature which somehow allow him to be cognisant, albeit indirectly, of these other matters as well.<sup>31</sup> As it stands, though, such a view is little more than a placeholder solution and we would need to hear much more about why it is that, say, a direct belief concerning a historical genocide would of necessity be ugly whereas a belief which arises via divine self-contemplation need not be. Providing any answer to such questions would, however, require far too lengthy a diversion into the intricacies of Thomist philosophy.<sup>32</sup> Whatever we ultimately say about such matters, though, it is clear that exploring the relationship between



omniscience and omni-beauty will have important consequences for our understanding of the divine nature.

### *Omni-beauty and Sovereignty*

The claim that God is perfectly beautiful also has some important consequences for our understanding of divine sovereignty. I argued above that a view according to which God is merely the causal source of all beauties (distinct from himself) isn't sufficient to explicate the popular notion that he is the wellspring of all beauty. Yet, even this limited claim may prove problematic. As mentioned above, God is standardly taken to be the creator of all objects – beautiful or otherwise – distinct from himself, but this claim has been questioned of late. A number of contemporary philosophers (such as Wolterstorff (1971) and van Inwagen (2009)) have argued that there are certain abstract objects which are distinct from God and yet not dependent on God for either their existence or nature. However, such philosophers standardly aim to retain the traditional claim that God is sovereign creator of all things by understanding this claim as 'containing a tacitly restricted quantifier [...] to objects that can enter into causal relations' such that 'God is the creator of all things (besides himself) that can in some sense be either causes or effects' (van Inwagen 2009: 19).

A problem arises, though, when we try to combine this view with the claim that God is the causal source of all beauty, since it appears to be the case that, as already discussed above, we frequently attribute beauty (and other aesthetic properties) to abstracta. And, if taken at face value, these attributions would seem to highlight a tension between restricted understandings of divine sovereignty and omni-beauty. After all, if abstracta, and their

aesthetic properties, really are outside the control of God then he cannot even be the causal source of their beauty. Further, the worry here seems to be particularly pressing with respect to omni-beauty since equivalent problems are not faced by parallel accounts concerning, for example, God's omnipotence, omniscience or omnibenevolence. We could, after all, accept the restricted sovereignty view while still allowing that God is the source of all power, knowledge, moral goodness, and so forth since abstracta are typically taken to be incapable of instantiating such properties.<sup>33</sup>

An obvious response here would be to claim that these cases actually *are* analogous and that abstracta aren't genuinely capable of instantiating aesthetic properties.<sup>34</sup> One popular motivation for adopting this view is that abstract objects are not straightforwardly perceivable by means of the senses but, of course, this response is not available to advocates of the omni-beauty view since they are already committed to rejecting such general limitations on the scope of the aesthetic. Still, there are other reasons – besides such a general prohibition – why we may not wish to take such apparent aesthetic attributions at face value. In particular, some philosophers have recently argued that claims which apparently attribute aesthetic properties to abstracta should merely be taken as a shorthand for some non-aesthetic claim(s). J.W. McAllister (2005), for instance, argues that talk of 'beauty' in mathematics is reducible to claims concerning simplicity.<sup>35</sup>

Assuming that we do accept that some abstracta have genuine aesthetic features, though, a range of options are still open to advocates of the omni-beauty view. First, they could accept the restricted sovereignty account and apply a similar restricted quantification strategy to the claim that God is the source of all beauties other than his own (maintaining that God is e.g. the source of beauty in all beautiful objects besides himself which can be either

causes or effects). However, restrictions of this kind will likely be met with suspicion by many of those who have stressed the importance of God's role as the source of beauty. Alternatively, they could adopt any one of a range of other accounts of God's relationship to abstract objects, all of which avoid such difficulties.<sup>36</sup> Maintaining, for example, that abstracts are either not distinct from God (perhaps because they are as, e.g., Plantinga (1980) suggests, part of God's nature) or else not outside of the scope of divine control (as suggested by theistic activists such as Morris and Menzel (1986)). The point remains, though, that while there is no straightforward conflict between divine sovereignty and the claim that God is the source of all beauty, the latter will have important consequences for our understanding of the former.

#### *Where to Now?*

This paper has been an attempt to reignite discussion of how best to analyse the neglected claim that God is perfectly beautiful as well as an exploratory foray into considering the wider implications of such a view for a range of contemporary debates. I have assumed throughout this paper that we should take the apparent attributes of perfect beauty to God found within scripture and tradition at face value, and that we should endorse such attributions. That is, I have assumed that omni-beauty is a genuine divine attribute. This claim is, however, likely to prove controversial (even amongst theists) and there may well be some significant costs to adopting such a view. Indeed, many will likely regard some of the consequences I have highlighted above as prohibitively costly.

For the purposes of this paper, though, I take no stance with respect to such debates. While, for the record, my own view is that omni-beauty *is* a genuine divine attribute, I have

not attempted to argue for this claim here. Instead, my aim has been to establish two rather more modest claims. First, that the project of defining what precisely it means for God to be perfectly beautiful is not as straightforward as it might initially appear (with a number of *prima facie* promising strategies for doing so quickly encountering difficulties). Second, that claims concerning God's omni-beauty have important and wide-reaching consequences for, *inter alia*, key debates within aesthetics and the philosophy of religion. My hope is that, by highlighting these two facts, I will have gone some way towards demonstrating that claims regarding God's perfect beauty have been unduly neglected by contemporary philosophers of religion.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from the New American Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Something which has already been noted in e.g. Robson (2011: 489). It is true that there has recently been a resurgence of interest with respect to aesthetic issues within the philosophy of religion. However, such work has tended to focus on concerns such as the aesthetic character of religious art (Harries 1993), expressions of God's beauty in the natural world (Wynn 1997), aesthetic arguments for existence of God (de Cruz & de Smedt 2015), or the beauty of religious exemplars (Kidd 2017) rather than specifically on the beauty of God.

<sup>3</sup> A related, purely exegetical, response denies that some of these sources genuinely attribute beauty to God. It is, after all, a controversial matter whether 'beauty' is the best translation of the relevant terms in the Hebrew texts quoted above and similar concerns apply with respect to the appropriate translations of a number of works within the tradition. Such a response would, however, be rather

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limited since it is clear (modulo certain concerns addressed below) that many writers within the tradition *do* make such attributions.

<sup>4</sup> Explanations of this kind are not without precedent. Peter Geach (1973: 7), for example, argues that Hobbes and McTaggart adopted positions of this kind with respect to God's putative omnipotence.

<sup>5</sup> For some extended discussions of accounts of God's beauty within the tradition see, e.g., von Balthasar (1982), Eco (1998), Delattre (1968), and Sherry (2007).

<sup>6</sup> One (partial) explanation may be that the neglect of this topic is part of a wider neglect of beauty in much recent aesthetic theorising (see, e.g., Mothersill (1984)).

<sup>7</sup> Of course the division here between literal and metaphorical interpretations is by no means exhaustive. One could, for example, interpret the relevant talk as analogical or as an imperative to adopt some particular attitude towards God. I will, however, ignore such complications in what follows since my interest will be in how best to interpret these claims when taken as straightforwardly literal attributions of beauty to God.

<sup>8</sup> It is, after all, consistent to claim that something is more beautiful than any other individual object but less beautiful than some collection of such objects. I will omit explicit reference to this complication in what follows.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, some have argued that it is *only* physical objects that are genuinely capable of instantiating aesthetic properties such as beauty. However, the theist who attributes omni-beauty to God will – as I discuss further below – already be committed to rejecting such a restricted view of the scope of the aesthetic.

<sup>10</sup> This is, for example, a key motivation behind Geach's (1973) account of God's power.

<sup>11</sup> And parallel moves have been made with respect to God's other perfections (see e.g. Pseudo-Dionysius (1987: 73) on God's wisdom and Geach (1973) on his power).

<sup>12</sup> A view which has pre-Christian precursors in, for example, the writings of Plato and Plotinus.

<sup>13</sup> Such a view would, of course, fit particularly well with an influential family of views which treats ugliness as merely a privation of (divine) beauty.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the Thomist view here see Wippel (1984) and Alston (1993). For discussion of some alternative accounts see Tweedale (1963).

<sup>15</sup> Though it is much more controversial whether this also commits us to the existence of some object (a universal say) which is identical with that property. I take no stance on that issue here.

<sup>16</sup> Someone who adopted a version of error theory combined with some form of fictionalism could incorporate the claim that God is omni-beautiful into her fiction (a move, no doubt, made even easier if she also accepts some form of fictionalism regarding religious matters). I will, however, presuppose within this paper that claims regarding the beauty of God are not made within any kind of fictionalist or instrumentalist framework.

<sup>17</sup> A more defensible (though I believe mistaken) position, advocated by, e.g., Zangwill (2002: 111), is that beauty and ugliness are the only genuine aesthetic properties and that other putative aesthetic properties '[d]aintiness, dumpiness, elegance, balance, and delicacy are all ways of being beautiful or ugly.'

<sup>18</sup> Mind independence (or at least independence from human minds) is crucial here since, I assume, no orthodox theist will be willing to allow that God's beauty is constitutively dependent on the reactions of human observers.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, some versions of the view are even narrower than this. Roger Scruton (1979: 114), for example, argues that the so called 'lower senses' (such as smell and taste) aren't genuinely aesthetic. Aquinas might be seen as advocating an even more restricted view given his famous claim that the beautiful is that which gives pleasure when seen. However, I side with those (such as Maritain (1930: 23)) who interpret this use of 'seen' not to refer exclusively to visual perception but, rather, to include also (and perhaps primarily) various kinds of intellectual insight.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the nature and consequences of such views see, e.g., Kölbel (2009), Baker (2014) and Palmira (2015).

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<sup>21</sup> Robson and Baker (2017) propose a view of faultless disagreement in aesthetics according to which both parties believe claims which are, strictly speaking, neither true nor false.

<sup>22</sup> Most prominently Max Kölbel (2005; 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Nor will I pursue the putative tension between divine simplicity and the beauty of God discussed in Baddorf (forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion of such views see, e.g., Collinson (1985), Tanner (2003) and the essays in Levinson (1998).

<sup>25</sup> There are, of course, a number of different variations of this view (as discussed in, e.g., Adams (2015), Leftow (2012) and Kraay (2010)) but I will not consider how best to spell out the details of such a view here.

<sup>26</sup> In Robson's original paper (2011: 487-8) he argues against attempts to expand the scope of his claims in this way. However, I argue (Robson 2012: 525-529) that his arguments to this effect are unsuccessful.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, many theists will (for reasons I discuss further below) be inclined to resist the claim that God literally has parts.

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting discussion of this phenomena see Fields (2007).

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of this case see Sassen (2001).

<sup>30</sup> Another option would be to deny that anything in the world is genuinely ugly but this view is (in contrast with the influential Leibnizian view according to which the ugliness of these parts contributes to the greater beauty of the world as a whole) implausible in the extreme.

<sup>31</sup> There are, of course, difficulties (as described in, e.g., Alston (1986) and Zagzebski (1991: 85-91)) with ascribing God beliefs of any kind given this Thomist view. I will, however, ignore such complications here.

<sup>32</sup> An easier response here might be to claim that the relevant representations aren't beautiful but, rather, that (contra Robson) they simply aren't appropriate objects for aesthetic evaluations (and so are neither beautiful nor ugly). I thank an anonymous referee from the journal for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>33</sup> Though there are (as discussed in, e.g., Craig 2011 and 2016) other worries concerning the restricted sovereignty view.

<sup>34</sup> And, of course, there is always the option of resolving this conflict by denying (as, e.g. Craig (2011) and (2016) has) that such abstract objects even exist.

<sup>35</sup> For what it's worth, my own view on this issue is that (for reasons highlighted in, e.g., Breitenbach (2015)) such paraphrases strategies are unconvincing and that we ought to take these apparently aesthetic attributions at face value. I will not, however, attempt to resolve such debates here.

<sup>36</sup> Which is not, of course, to suggest that they encounter no difficulties of their own (see the papers in Gould (2014) for discussion of a range of views concerning the relationship between God and abstract objects).

<sup>37</sup> I would like to thank audiences at the University of Leeds and the University of Nottingham, as well as an anonymous referee for the journal, for their useful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Special thanks to Danielle Adams, Sarah Adams, Ian Kidd, Emily Paul, and Mark Wynn for their very helpful feedback.