

## ENCOUNTERING GOD'S BEAUTY: HOW HEGELIAN AESTHETICS HELPS THE THEOLOGIAN

JORDAN RYAN GOINGS\*

**ABSTRACT.** This essay sets out to establish a warrant for elevating theological aesthetics from a place of trivial enjoyment, and to a place equal with reason and justice within the Christian paradigm. Through this promotion, theological aesthetics will be argued as a valid means of interacting with God, and offering the perceiver with a more whole understanding of Him and His beauty. This proposal does not demerit other avenues, but simply outlines theological aesthetics as a self contained tool for engaging God through certain mediums in life that would otherwise seem improbable for such a task. In it, I will suggest that Georg W. F. Hegel's theory of aesthetics is beneficial for aiding the Christian in this development. This will be completed by first establishing what theological aesthetics is, both in scripture and in theory. Secondly, I will survey Georg W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, specifically focusing on his assessment of *Spirit* and his master/slave dialectic, so as to explicate his aesthetics. This argument will conclude with a proposal for using a hybrid between Hegel's theory and other Christians' as a vehicle for theological aesthetics. By analyzing how Hegel's system can more fully engraft aesthetics into the Christian life, I propose that a cautious use of his paradigm will help ground the uncertainty that many Christians find when engaging such an abstract concept such as the *beautiful*.

**KEY WORDS:** Aesthetics, Georg W. F. Hegel, beauty, semiotics, theology, philosophy

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, the Church has wrestled with the relevance of theological aesthetics. Whether protected under the umbrella of iconography, or dissected within the realm of iconoclasm, the concept of the *beautiful* inevitably makes its way into theological conversations. However, after the success of certain philosophical paradigms, such as rationalism, the scientific revolution, and modernism, enquiries into the metaphysical realm seem to occur less often (Stumpf, 2002: 422).<sup>1</sup> This in turn has hindered the benefit

\* JORDAN RYAN GOINGS (ThM) is Dean of Academics at Sayers Classical Academy. He is also the school's senior thesis director, as well as Latin teacher. His main research interests cover theological aesthetics and philosophy, with a concentration in continental theorists, German Idealism, and Russian Existentialism. E-mail: goings.jordan@gmail.com.

1 Samuel Stumpf's assessment of the analytic tradition communicates that this paradigm does not consider conceptual theorizing (*e.g.* What is humanity?) something to be grasped. This then limits their work to analyzing already established facts. Stumpf explains that this work is more so already being accomplished by the scientists, leaving very little for the analytic philosophy to create.

of having a full understanding of what many theologians and philosophers have analyzed for centuries: What *is* beauty? This is meant to contrast, as Wolterstorff delineates, the philosophy of art, which limits the thinker to a “reflection on the *arts*” and not necessarily on the *beautiful* (Wolterstorff, 1999: 30); the former being the focus of the medium, whereas the latter studies its content.<sup>2</sup> If this distinction is not comprehended, then the wealth of theological profundity, which I argue is available in the beautiful, ambiguously attributes to a canvas, sculpture, or tree that which belongs to God.

### Thesis

Instead of assessing an exhaustive history of the Church’s interaction with aesthetics, it would be more beneficial for the sake of this single proposal to limit the discussion to one aspect that is often overlooked by theologians: Hegelian aesthetics. This essay will focus on explaining the relevance and benefit of Georg W. F. Hegel’s aesthetics for the Christian concept of theological aesthetics. In doing so, I will first establish why theological aesthetics the warrant and validity of aesthetics for theologians. This will qualify the context for this philosophical venue, interact with the context of the Church’s biblical allowance for aesthetics, and briefly look at two problems facing the Christian aesthetician. This first section will conclude with a brief engagement with Umberto Eco’s use of semiotics as an aid for distinguishing between how aesthetics are and are not to be applied. Secondly, I will then extrapolate Hegel’s major themes from his philosophical paradigm to deduce how he intended aesthetics to be used by the reader. This section and analysis will briefly outline some of his major themes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, then offer a summary of where aesthetics is stationed in his system, and will conclude with a discussion of how his master/slave dialectic is relevant for the aesthetician. This will then bring in the third and final section, which will argue to what extent Hegel’s perspective is valuable for the Christian aesthetic paradigm, while also warning the reader of the errors that Hegel’s paradigm can at times bring to Christian theology. This will primarily be accomplished by engaging John Navone’s concept of *contemplation*, and arguing it as the synthesizing medium for theological and Hegelian aesthetics. In recognizing this balance, the Christian aesthetician will find a helpful tool in Hegel’s offer, while simultaneously being informed where to draw the line between the Church’s theological truths and Hegel’s erro-

2 In an interview with Chuck Fromm, Nicholas Wolterstorff makes the distinction between philosophy of art, with that of aesthetics. The implications Wolterstorff makes indicates the need to recognize that the former solely appraises the medium that carries in it the latter: the essence. This then communicates that the study of aesthetics conveys the attention for the ontology of beauty, and not simply its representation at a given moment.

neous tendencies. In turn, this essay will give the reader a clear understanding of how beneficial a more metaphysical aesthetic can be.

### **Why Theological Aesthetics**

Beauty is not a foreign concept to the Church. From early Christian thinkers such as Irenaeus, Augustine, and Aquinas, to modern theologians like Luther, Edwards, and Kierkegaard, notions of the sublime, the perfect, and the transcendent all seem to be rooted in a divine beauty. In his *Soliloquies*, Augustine attributes all the perceivable beauty to come solely from God (Augustine, 2005: 30). Jonathan Edwards carries this concept a bit further in his *Images of Shadows of Divine Things* by attributing the tangibly accessible world as being beautiful because of its “resemblance of spiritual beauties” (Edwards, 2005: 171). More recently, John Navone devotes his book *Enjoying God's Beauty* to aesthetic value by developing the notion that perceiving beauty does offer some enjoyment, but contemplating beauty in how it relates to God makes the enjoyment most complete (Navone, 1999). Furthermore, in *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe* Gene Edward Veith, Jr. not only proposes the theoretical value of theological aesthetics, but argues that God's desire for an intentional aesthetic is an indication that this is not simply a superfluous aspect of Christianity (Veith, Jr., 1991: 106). Even though these are only four voices on the matter, they represent a larger conversation that continues to implement aesthetics into preexisting theological systems.

### **Terminology, Biblical Context, and Problems**

Before explaining the biblical and theoretical warrants for theological aesthetics, it is important to first establish what the study of aesthetics is. Dabney Townsend defines it as “the discipline within philosophy that deals with art, beauty, and the feelings and emotions associated with them” (Townsend, 1997: 223). So not only is it a matrix for deciphering, qualifying, and categorizing the beautiful, but it is a system within the greater paradigm of philosophy proper. As philosophy is the study of wisdom, which is often expressed as an internal activity with little manifested tangibility, it would be logically coherent to claim, from Townsend's placement of it, that aesthetics is rooted in the theoretical. This would then give credence to Frank Church Brown's deduction that “since aesthetics is primarily theoretical, Christian aesthetics would necessarily be a task for Christian theorizing, which at its most distinctive and systematic level is undertaken by theological proper” (Brown, 1989: 16). However, this only categorizes the epistemology thus far; the next task is to move past the category, and establish what aesthetics has for its subject.

In short, the focus of aesthetics is on the beautiful. However, the *beautiful* is a vague metaphysical concept, thus creating relative stances and perspectives, which at times are simply used for the dichotomous dissension that they can create.<sup>3</sup> Mary Mothersill indicates that “Few would deny [aesthetic’s] importance, and yet the mere suggestion that it be defined drives intelligent people to witless babble” (Mothersill, 1995: 14). Thomas Dubay argues that each person is inevitably captivated and enticed by beauty (Dubay, 1999: 11). Although these definitions are not that explicit, they give context to the value of Jonathan Edwards’ claim that

[beauty] engages the attention of the mind... The beauty and sweetness of objects draws on the faculties, and draws forth their exercise; so that reason itself is under far greater advantages for its proper and free exercises, and to attain its proper end, free of darkness and delusion” (Edwards, 1993:14).

Veith simply calls it “the perception of beauty in all its forms” (Veith, 1991: 29). Whether people want to have it defined or not, beauty is that which draws man to the object where it is found. For the purpose of the discussion here, *beauty* will simply be defined as the specific quality of an object that draws the perceiver in due to its goodness, excellence, and enlightening properties. Now that there is a basic understanding of what aesthetic is and what it engages, it is important to consider how the Church is called to engage it. Implying the problem facing the Church, Patrick Sherry writes:

The lack of a theology of beauty, both of beauty in general and of divine beauty in particular, follows in part from a fear and suspicion of the question, expressed in pejorative terms like “aestheticism” and “elitism”. At best, beauty has often been treated as a Cinderella, compared with the attention paid by theologians to her two sisters, truth and goodness, an attention manifested in theology’s predominant concern with doctrine and ethics, and resulting in the intellectualization of religion in recent centuries (Sherry, 2002: 19).

In order to elevate beauty from a place of trivia to a place of importance equal to that of reason and ethics, it is necessary to begin with a biblical understanding of its use. Unpacking Veith’s argument for a moment, the reader can see in Ezekiel 35 that Bezalel was given his artistic vocation by God. This work entailed an indwelling of the Holy Spirit that in turn could be argued as subsequently having equipped him with the intelligence,

3 Veith highlights this issue by surveying the works of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andrés Serrano, implying that their medium is one intended to unsettle and be countercultural. The ramifications of this is an aesthetic that derives its purpose by being a means of waking the observer by how unharmonious their pieces can be.

knowledge, and craftsmanship mentioned.<sup>4</sup> Whether that progression is sound or not is beside the point, as the case at hand is whether there is biblical warrant for a need for theological aesthetics. Carrying on from Veith's proposal, the three attributes Bezalel possessed—despite how he acquired them—argues for a theological evaluation of beauty, and that these virtues are necessary for such an appraisal. Using Bezalel as a representative for theological aestheticians, Veith states:

Whereas intelligence involves the faculties of the mind, knowledge refers to what is in the mind... Besides knowing his materials, he had to know his subjects—both the natural (the structure of the almonds, flowers, and pomegranates) and the supernatural (the appearance of the cherubim and the meaning and function of the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant)" (Veith, Jr., 1991: 110).

The implication of Veith's argument suggests that mankind has been given these faculties and capabilities, and thus has been called to engage in a conversation where these traits aid the person in a much more beneficial way if he or she is conscientious of that fact. As Veith implies, when the viewer perceived the decorations in the tabernacle, for example, they would see everyday items like pomegranates, almond blossoms, and lilies. If that viewer did not take time to consider the value that those items represented, then he would simply have an occurrence with them like he would as if he saw them growing in nature.

However, this is not how they were represented, as they were stationed in a holy place, thus giving them a different context completely than a field in nature would. Furthermore, the interaction with divine beauty is by no means limited to the tabernacle, as the good, perfect, and beautiful is exemplified in very clear and tangible ways at times through nature in scripture. While almost in contrast, the beauty of God is nearly incomprehensible in Ezekiel's and Isaiah's testimonies. This is meant in part to address two issues facing the Christian aesthetician: contextualization within semiotics, and the fear of relative hermeneutics. Given that these issues are too large to fully exhaust for the discussion here, suffice it to stand that a brief outline and articulation of their pertinence be given.

The aesthetician must be cautious of having their immediate observations limited by an unnecessarily narrow perspective; instead, they must maintain a patient attitude when engaging the object at hand. When the observer first comes to the object, there is a brief moment of consideration:

4 This is meant to imply a biblical theology that would support the progression of humanly attributes and faculties being made more full or attuned through the work of God's providence. For example, the statement "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom..." indicates that the etiology of wisdom is God.

should he apply his previously gained understanding of the object when he comes across it at the present moment, or should he disregard those prior experiences, and begin learning the object anew in an *a posteriori* manner. This is an example of where the study of semiotics is beneficial. As mentioned above, to fully cover what semiotics is and is not in would be too large of a task for this essay.

Nevertheless, Umberto Eco offers a concise description when assessing the validity of words by stating, “Words do not designate things or states of the world, but concepts of the mind” (Eco, 1987: 552). For simplicity’s sake, I propose exchanging his use of the term “word” for the term “sign”. Semiotics is the study of signs and the content that they convey. As for the dilemma just mentioned, this is in fact a false dichotomy, as the two routes of thinking are not mutually exclusive. Albeit, this is an all too common polarity that many people find themselves within, assuming to have to choose one or the other. I use Eco here to argue that through his semiotics, the interpreter does not have to put on the cultural dogmas that force his or her reading to only be *x*. Alternatively, this proposal allows him or her to use their connotations to infer and interpret the object in a more complete sense.

Eco does not leave the reader at some vague horizon of interpretation. Instead he claims that

texts explicitly provide us with much that we will never cast doubt on, but also, unlike the real world, they flag with supreme authority what we are to take as important in them, and what we must *not* take as a point of departure for free-wheeling interpretations (Eco, 2005: 5).

The aim of Eco’s approach to semiotics and narrative is to remain outside of a categorical hermeneutic, and therein have the interpreter approach the given object with an undeniable subjective freedom, believing the object to be sufficient for guiding him or her to an intended destination. Subsequently, walking away from a paradigm has had its errors, too (*e.g.* Mapplethorpe and Serrano). This error: walking directly into another, more confining paradigm.

### **Eco’s Literary Theory as Semiotic Template**

Throughout his writings, Eco shows the need to balance two popular interpretive styles, *reader response* and *authorial intent*, alongside one another, instead of keeping them at odds.<sup>5</sup> This implies that neither one is self-

<sup>5</sup> In his book *On Literature* Eco has many essays directly focused on this dichotomy and proposed synthesis.

sufficient, but both offer crucial truths for better engaging literature. For example, again from his essay "On Some Functions of Literature", Eco claims that

Literary works encourage freedom of interpretation, because they offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life. But in order to play this game, which allows every generation to read literary works in a different way, we must be moved by a profound respect from what I have called elsewhere the intention of the text (Eco, 2005: 4-5).

This expresses his idea that the two notions are not at irreconcilable odds, but on the contrary, are able to coexist. He is arguing that there is a liberty for interpretation, but that it is to be paired with the author's intention so as to extract the most that the author intended to convey from the text. This notion reestablishes the communication of semiotics; the object is made from one person, typically with a distinct need to communicate something, from a certain location in a specific point of time, only then to be received by another, in and with their own contextual presuppositions.

The object and what it conveys is far from being left open into a sea of endless waves of interpretations, but is simultaneously unrestricted, so as to free it from solely the communicator's context. It cannot stay there alone, as it undeniably falls into the hands or eyes of a recipient at some point. The sign or object is handed over in that transaction with a distinct purpose, yet, the recipient brings his own unique conditions to it. This combination is inevitable, yet both of the aforementioned hermeneutical paradigms argue for the other to be done away. This might seem unhelpfully vague. Albeit, that is not the case. Eco's overall implications leave the reader to infer that each theory on their own examines how each causes their own pendulum to swing too far.

In regards to one side, a post-structural, postmodernist reading, Eco points out that "it is possible to distinguish between the free interpretive choices elicited by a purposeful strategy of openness and the freedom taken by a reader with a text assumed as a mere stimulus" (Eco, 1979: 40). Conversely, though, he goes further on the matter by addressing how the "uncommitted stimulus" approach is a means "for a personal hallucinatory experience, cutting out levels of meaning, placing upon the expression 'aberrant' codes" (Eco, 1979: 40). He gives an example of this by claiming that through this style one could read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and assume it demonstrates that Kant "was a polymorphous pervert and a latent homosexual, or that the idea of transcendental *a priori* forms conceals and disguises an unconscious necrophilia" (Eco, 1981: 36). Of course, these are outlandish accusations that are not common in the interpretive traditions of

Kant.<sup>6</sup> However, their randomness serves the point at hand; the pendulum of the reader's response should not swing too far, lest it land so far away from the author's desired reception that an entire new writing be created.

Furthermore, Eco states that "this does not mean that a text is a crystal-clear structure interpretable in a single way; on the contrary, a text is a lazy machinery which forces its possible readers to do a part of its textual work..." (Eco, 1981: 36). There is a contingency of the content's being interpreted rightly to the form handed over to the reader, but that does not mean there needs to be a blind dependency on it. There is an ambiguity with signs that can often cause a misunderstanding as to the purpose of an author's choices, resulting in a misinterpretation.

For example, Eco, using an example from Jurij Lotman, addresses that if a play has a scene with a rifle in the background, it does not have to go off, or even be used, to convey a message (Eco, 2005: 13). Albeit, there are some who would view such a scene to then demand an answer be given as to the prop's purpose.<sup>7</sup> The gun does not have to play an active role in the narrative, but only play a semiotic role for the reader. It can simply be used as a tag to identify something, and promote the reader's imagination in a healthy way that allows free interpretation without breaking the intention of the text. Nevertheless, there are occurrences in readings where that balance is not had, and observers stumble on certain signs and symbols, like "rifles in the background", confining them to "having to know why". The pendulum swings too far when the aesthete demands for a full explanation of all things before they can move forward. He or she then ceases to use his imagination and inferencing, and instead, limits himself or herself to a narrow perspective, not finding in the wealth of beauty offered to him.

If we allow for aesthetics to be the study of beauty, allow for semiotics to be defined as the study of signs and the content they communicate, and recognize that mankind is an experiential being—either learning through experience, or sharpening what he already knows via that experience—then it would be valid to suggest that a clear platform for theological aesthetics rests in engaging the beauty of God through the different signs experienced by man during his life. The goal is to balance the pendulum evenly during these experiences, and abstain from too narrow of reactions and perspectives until fully assessed.

6 Eco goes on to address that he is merely "inventing crazy forms of textual deconstruction but there are people doing similar things rather seriously" (see Eco, 1981: 36).

7 I am implying here the intentions of authors such as Anton Chekhov who would almost make it a requirement to explain the purpose of any object mentioned in a story.



The aesthetician then needs to recognize two truths: the first, a divine beauty has perceivably been communicated to us by God about Himself in many ways; the second, man will be tempted to either think himself too incapable, or he communicated beauty too lofty a concept for comprehension. The difficulty with this last truth appears in acknowledging the dichotomy that mankind is a finite being, and the objects of our perceptions arguably have an ontological connotation rooted in the divinity of God. However, this does not mean that mankind is left in open waters of aesthetic interpretation.

### Hegel's Offer

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is arguably one of the most profound scholars in the history of philosophy. With the aspirations of carrying on Kant's legacy of Idealism, Hegel not only established himself as one of the prominent German Idealists of his time, but also as a timeless thinker. Recognizing both the value and shortcomings of his predecessors, he sought to formulate a complete and exhaustive system to life. As Frederick Copleston ascribes, "he presented mankind with one of the most grandiose and impressive pictures of the Universe..." (Copleston, 1994: 162). Whether it was psychology, ethics, or government, one synthesizing component continued to bring commonality and purpose to all aspects of his paradigm: the *Absolute Spirit*.<sup>8</sup>

Hegel's reputation is, however, due in part to the ambiguity of his ideas and terms. His concept of the *Spirit*, or *Geist*—as anchoring as it is—continues dividing scholars and interpretations.<sup>9</sup> This ambiguity is not solely contingent upon his word choice nor syntax, but on the complexity of ushering in a new system altogether. In his preface to *G. W. F. Hegel*, Howard P. Kainz argues that the first obstacle facing a reader approaching Hegel is in determining how to categorize his system (Kainz, 1998). This is not only meant to affirm that his legacy was one of complex language and ideas, but that it was one without a home. It does not simply fit within an Aristotelian logic, nor does it fully correspond with Kantian paradigms; it is its own class. Thus, in an attempt to anchor all avenues of his thought to one central location, the reader must comprehend his understanding of *Spirit*. However, to efficiently do this, I will first establish the basic foundations of his major paradigm: *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

8 For the remainder of this essay, I will simply refer to this as *Spirit*.

9 In the opening chapter of *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide* Dietmar H. Heidemann, referencing Deiter Henrich assessment thirty years prior to his, claims "Hegel's intentions are still more or less obscure" (Heidemann, 2008: 1). The proposal in this work goes on to encourage a counter hermeneutic to Hegel's works, as opposed to what Dietmar argues was a common reading of the previous decades.

### **The Phenomenology of Spirit and the Absolute Spirit**

Living within a religiously saturated culture such as Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, his context was familiar with Christian theology and pedagogy. Following behind scholars such as Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, however, he was in an academic conversation that began to interpret spiritual metaphysics differently from the Church. Still recognizing that there is an absolute essence, which Christianity calls God, Hegel's ontological assessment of said essence veers away from the confessional vein, and redefines it as the *Spirit*. Although he attributes it as the fullness and completion of all that is true, he all but equates its essence, problematically, with that of man's.<sup>10</sup> John Burbidge likens the attempt to find a consensus amongst scholars regarding Hegel's theology to a courtroom full of eye-witnesses of a singular man, yet each testimony is vividly different (Burbidge, 1992: 93). However, much of the confusion found in this theology rests in the fact that he was in fact not a theologian, nor did he fully devote an entire work toward theological ontology.<sup>11</sup> Despite discussing it several times, even the notes and lectures compiled for his three volume work *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* are not fully devoted to an complete analysis of the nature of God, nor *Spirit* for that matter, like the systematic works that theologians are used to.

Thus, it should be assumed for the purposes here that his works do not necessarily lend themselves to the Church in the same ways that the theologian's would. His content should be carefully appraised, not in the hopes of finding the rare gem that explicitly tells the reader what he should do, nor what God is like, but with an awareness that his system calls the thinker to wholly look at how any given moment relates to *Spirit*. As this section will incorporate, aesthetics is no different, in that Hegel considers it a necessary medium for thinking through *Spirit*. It is because of this intentionality toward metaphysics that Hegel still has much to offer the Christian thinker. This is the setting and context of his *magnum opus*: *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

10 This is meant to reference Hegel's analysis on consciousness. Throughout his works, though none more direct than *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel ascribes man's consciousness as having the potential to arrive at a place of absolute truth, if but for only a moment in the temporary act of cognition.

11 This is not a dismissal or omission of his early works of theology and religion, as a compilation of such works works has been made. I simply mean to assert that his major works are of ethics, history, and the *science* of life. Theological principles and suggestions are all through his writings, though he never devoted a major, non-compiled work strictly to exhausting the logic and argument of this.

*The Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>12</sup> is an attempt to both redefine the term *science* as the systematizing of *all*, as well as to then apply it by *scientifically* systematizing all that man encounters. Quentin Lauer, S.J. succinctly explains that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel attempts to explain what the mind does “when it knows” (Lauer, 1993: 11). Alexandre Kojève unpacks this further, implying that what the *Phenomenology* achieves is an assessment of the human desire. He writes, “Human Desire... produces a free and historical individual, conscious of his individuality, his freedom, his history, and finally, his historicity” (Kojève, 1980: 6).

In his argument entitled “*Substance, subject, system: the justification of science in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*” Dietmar H. Heidemann carries this train of thought further still by examining Hegel's phrase “*Being as Thought*”. He states that *Being as Thought* is “not as static subsistence but as a mediated process constituted by conceptual development in three stages from self-identity to difference and back to self-identity” (Heidemann, 2008: 8). Subsequently, Hegel does not seem to extend his all encompassing science to a true systematizing of all that is, in the sense of an Aristotelian matrix. Instead, *all* for Hegel is in the notion that complete fullness and wholeness of Being rests in the phenomena of the consciousness of the self and its process of knowing something. Nevertheless, this paradigm is still more than able to articulate the use of theological aesthetics.

If the goal of theological aesthetics is to use the sign or object to engage the beauty of the divine, then before moving on, it is relevant to look a further into how the *Phenomenology* depicts man encountering *Spirit*. In the spirit of Eco, Kathleen Dow Magnus' answer to this question balances two extremes. She writes, “Spirit, for Hegel, is reducible neither to human finitude nor to metaphysical abstraction. It does not let the finite be ‘swallowed up’ in the infinite, nor does it reduce the infinite to the finite” (Magnus, 2001: 33). In summation, if the thinker takes the notion of *Spirit* to only be a disconnected essence that sits outside of the perceivable and finite world, then it would be incapable of interacting with the finite without losing it in itself.

The largest issue in working through this is similar to the same problem facing the reversal of the two objects. How could the finite object be placed in a paradigm made for the infinite without losing the qualities that make it finite, and vice versa? Hegel's consciousness is the solution. In paragraph 554 of his *Phenomenology* he claims that “the ground of knowledge is the *conscious* universal, and in its truth is absolute *Spirit* which, in abstract pure consciousness, or in thought as such, is merely absolute *Being*...” (Hegel, 1977: 337). Alan Olson articulates this a bit more clearly by proposing that

12 For the remainder of this essay, I will simply refer to this work as the *Phenomenology*.

the Hegelian *Spirit* is nothing more than the progression of thought through the concept (Olson, 1992: 3). As the person thinks, their thought, in that it can theoretically be considered as an endless avenue of metaphysic interaction, aids the finite self with a means of engaging the infinite. It does not change his entire make-up, nor call him to a context without finite laws, as the dilemma assumed, but instead posits the act of thinking, or consciousness, as a manner of intersecting with the infinite. It is in this intersection, or through this *phenomena*, rather, that the infinite *Spirit* is engaged and then learned. As offers a basic appropriation of the Hegelian notion of *Spirit*, it is now pertinent to consider what checks and balances are offered by Hegel's *Phenomenology* for the theological aesthete.

### **Bringing Beauty and Spirit into Dialogue**

Arguably the most popular section of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is the master/slave dialectic, which has its grounding in the *self*. Like much of his *science*, his assessment of the *self* is rooted in a social paradigm contingent upon otherness and negation. Yet, he does not imply that the *self's* ontology is necessarily dependent upon another's presence adjacent to it, but instead indicates that the social construct of differing thoughts offers a clearer look, albeit at times metaphorical, into that ontology. Since Hegel's entire system is rooted in the notion of the *thought* and the pursuit of encountering truth, or *Spirit*, the study of man and his *self* is no different. Therefore, the question at hand for the reader is to determine how man's thought is pertinent to theological aesthetics.

Hegel claims that there is a struggle within the *self*, which is rooted in recognition. This is the conflict of thought. As man works through any given thought, there will inevitably be repeats to the proposal originally posited. As reason ensues as to determine which claim is correct (*e.g.* the proposal or the repeats), one will naturally become dominant. He likens this to the establishment of master and slave identities within the thoughts. As the victorious thought proceeds, it is the master, while the other is the slave. However, the "dialogue" carries on through what he calls the "reversal" (Hegel, 1977: 337). At this point there is a recognition of the other's state: the master soon realizes his dependence on the slave's service to him; therein the slave realizes he is not completely powerless. This juxtaposition appears to be the nucleus within Hegelian philosophy, as it is the cornerstone to a system that propagates a dialectic of negation in most things (*e.g.* self and *Spirit*, historical progression, ethics, etc.). The brilliance of this matrix is, as Hegel set out to show in his other works, that these identities are not solely bound to thoughts, but identities as well.

In an essay, Andrew W. Haas attempts to "turn the history of mastery on its head" through aesthetic appropriation (Haas, 2011: 380). He suggests

identifying the artist as the master to his created work, thus giving an inanimate, unthinking object the role of slave, and momentarily, therefore, momentarily a role that the artist becomes dependent upon. Considering once more that the major theme in Hegelian philosophy is in fact *thought*, Haas' suggestion is viable, as the artist—or *master*—is a thinking consciousness. Haas' argument draws out Hegel's *for-itself* language, implying that the master of the inanimate object is not solely in the relationship with the art for himself, as he cannot be as long as he serves the art by working for it until its creation. This places a level of servitude and dependence on the artist. Though helpful and insightful, Haas' example is confined to this relationship. Therefore, I would like to take this one step further, and consider what this would mean to an established piece of art, setting of nature, or any other symbol of beauty.

Before moving forward, it is important to first recognize Hegel's positioning of aesthetics. Where he would have the state and *others* as means for communicating *Spirit*, his primary attention is on the *forms Spirit* takes. Charles Taylor explains this in declaring that "Absolute spirit is thus higher than Spirit's realization in objective reality which has not yet come to full self-consciousness" (Taylor, 1978: 466). He makes this distinction after explaining how the state is one of the clearest means of "*Spirit's* realization", but given that this is solely an example of representation, Hegel sought to move toward an absolute exemplification. Though he has three variables in this absolute category (art, religion, and philosophy), oddly enough he is said to have a hierarchy of adequacy between these (Taylor, 1978: 466). In short, for Hegel, aesthetics offers grounds for the finite man to engage the infinite absolute *Spirit*.

Not only does Hegelian aesthetics place beauty as a means of communicating *Spirit*, but it allows for the object to be employed as a participant to be engaged by the perceiver. Bringing the infinite abstract to the finite, Robert Wicks claims that "beauty, according to Hegel, is the perceptual presentation of what the metaphysical theory affirms to the unconditional or absolute..." (Wicks, 1993: 349-350). Allen Speight takes this manifestation a step further by arguing that through this aesthetic, art, and I would add beauty, become autonomous from nature (Speight, 2008: 379-380). What these arguments suggest is that the metaphysical realm of the *Spirit* has limited means of translating to nature and mankind, yet through the conveyance of beauty through the object, the perceiver has an avenue for not only considering the reality of the metaphysical's presence, but engaging it, as another person. This last statement is meant to highlight the event happening by the object's communication. I argue that the beauty being conveyed is from the consciousness of God, though for Hegel, *Spirit*, and despite resting on an object, that object can serve as an indicator, or symbol, directing the per-

ceiver's attention back to the consciousness of God, and therein find engagement.

### **Finding the Balance**

It is not uncommon to hear verses like "The grass wither, the flower fades: but the word of our God shall stand for ever" (Isaiah 40:8), used more to encourage a focus on the decrees and statutes of God, and discourage an appreciation of His temporal creation. This is not necessarily a completely erroneous message, as the priorities are clear and, to some degree, biblical. Notwithstanding, this hermeneutic can disconnect the perceiver from a viable medium for understanding the very theological nature commended. In fact, verses such as John 1:3, Psalm 19:1, and Genesis 1 clearly communicate that not only has God orchestrated all that has been created, but has allowed it to be seen both as good and as a declaration of him. As a declaration the communication of some content, then simply put, God created all things with the possibility of conveying His beauty.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly to how theological aesthetics has been disregarded, so too has the theological contemplation within aesthetics. This can seem to be the same idea, but where the former is simply the engagement and assessment of beauty, the latter is more so a reflection on it. This helps distinguish between the temptation to come across a work of art, nature, or any other symbol, and have certain presuppositions triggered, to then result with the perceiver believing that he is fully conscientious of *all* that he encountered. This is not always the case.

Theologian John Navone depicts this dichotomy by examining what he calls the "look of love" (Navone, 1999: vii). He devotes a chapter of his book *Enjoying God's Beauty* to the role that contemplation plays after the perceiver has seen the symbol communicating the alluring beauty. He ascribes Jesus as being the "paradigm of the dynamic" between what we have already assessed as the divine's infiniteness and man's finiteness. In using the idea of *seeing* to connote experiential encounters, Navone proceeds to argue that "Jesus' seeing underscores the intrapersonal aspect of his divine and human contemplation" (Navone, 1999: 43). In other words, Jesus is an example for balancing the sense-immediacy that finiteness necessarily encounters with the the rich profundity that comes through eternal truths and ideas like

13 It should be noted that this is not intended to be a qualifier arguing that all symbols and sights are equally valuable and proper for the Christian to engage, and that those images would in turn easily depict the nature and beauty of God. This essay only looks at the value of theological aesthetics, but is not an exhaustive proposal for what to then use and not use for engaging said beauty. For information on this subsequent issue, Veith's *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe* offers valuable insight for deciphering how to approach more sensitive art, artists, art mediums.

beauty. Before moving on, it should be noted that this is not some *Fichtian* or *Feuerbachian* idealism, which can lead to an overuse of the subjective interpretation. Instead, this is in the vein of aesthetic semiotics, as mentioned earlier, implying that there is a direct message being conveyed to a specific context. Furthermore, it should be noted that Navone nowhere explicitly claims Christ to be the example that the reader can completely aspire to in this regard, but does insinuate the relation to his balancing within a Christian, Spirit-based contemplation. According to the whole of Navone's work, there is a level of contemplation that draws the thinker out of his finiteness to then encounter the divinity of God through reflecting on His beauty.

If this interpretation of Navone is correct, then his assessment of Christ's contemplation is very similar to the call given to Hegel's reader. Through consciousness man is capable of engaging the *Spirit* in thought. However, Navone strengthens this proposal in offering a very similar epistemology, while still grounding it in the concreteness of scripture, which is something that Hegel did not do. For example, if the aesthetician takes on the model/slave hermeneutic and engages the object with anticipation of the reversal, then he is aware of some humility. However, there is still a level of autonomy that is not completely helpful for theological aesthetics. If the Hegelian reversal is on the one hand a means of liberating the suppressed, while on the other hand an offer of balance, which in turn perpetuates some level of humility in the players, then the idea of maintaining this humility through such autonomous freedom should be addressed. In other words, if autonomous *mastership* is the aim, what would keep the one person who has attained it from becoming independent from *otherness*, which would include God?

Navone answers this in the beginning of his book by claiming that the purpose is in the "joy of seeing the beauty of God" (Navone, 1999: vii). His thesis behind the *look of love* is that man, once saved, can see the beauty of God in objects and occurrences, whereas prior to this enlightenment he was unable—similar to Christ giving sight to the blind. Once in this enlightened state, the Christian is capable of having the "eye" (*i.e.* faith), to then see beauty, and from that perception, can also "look" at (*i.e.* contemplate) said beauty. To have the *look of love* is to have an active consideration for God's beauty. So this addition to Hegel's system then humbles the man, whether artist or observer, in a way similar to Hass' proposal. If man encounters some symbol of beauty, there is content being communicated, which desires to be known. This is what is at stake: the infinite God is communicating Himself to finite man through aesthetic means, and if not listened to, it is thus ignored.

### Conclusions

Whether people want to have it defined or not, beauty is an undeniable means in drawing man to the metaphysical. If the observer is patient, the allure of the beautiful can call him to contemplate its source, and in this, renders the object as superfluous. In this process, the ideal that the object represents becomes the focus. Appropriating this to a theological aesthetic, God is the source of all beauty, and uses objects as semiotic identifiers for communicating His supremacy. Considering this theological framework, I argue that Hegel's master/slave dialectic and Navone's *look of love* are both beneficial for identifying the theological connotations behind the object, as well as teaching the perceiver how to properly engage the source, which I propose is God, and not the Hegelian *Spirit*.

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