Theo-Dramatic Ethics: A Balthasarian Approach to Moral Formation

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THEO-DRAMATIC ETHICS: A BALTHASARIAN APPROACH
TO MORAL FORMATION

by

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ABSTRACT
THEO-DRAMATIC ETHICS: A BALTHASARIAN APPROACH TO MORAL FORMATION

Andrew J. Kuzma, B.A., M.A.R.
Marquette University, 2016

What role does beauty play in our moral formation? What difference does the perception of beauty make to the way we live our lives? In order to answer these questions, I look to the twentieth-century Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Relatively little has been written about Balthasar’s ethics. He is, perhaps, best known for his retrieval of beauty as a transcendental property of being. Balthasar, though, never set down an extended account of his ethics or moral theology. While he had no explicit ethic, he certainly thought that his theology could be lived. The Theo-Drama, for instance, discusses the implications that the perception of beauty has for Christian life.

I do not intend to present “Balthasar’s ethics.” Instead I will offer a “Balthasarian ethic.” Drawing from his theological aesthetics and dramatics, I will outline the morality implicit in his theology: a Balthasarian theo-dramatic ethics. We can see this kind of ethic at work, I contend, in some of Balthasar’s lesser-known works on Christian life. I will then go beyond Balthasar to consider how we might put this moral formation into practice in the possibility of living out Christian pacifism in the nation-state and in our treatment of non-human animals.

This dissertation points to the convergence of method and performance. The method of theo-dramatic ethics can never be distilled to a set of abstract rules or terms. We can do so artificially in order to better express what makes performances of the good beautiful. But it is the performance, not the method, of theo-dramatic ethics that we find enrapturing. Being formed by performances of beauty better enables us to recognize and express new forms of beauty. My thesis is that recognizing beauty as the foundation of moral formation affirms the formational power of the Christian tradition as well as that of new experiences and practices because in both cases we are responding to beauty.
Writing a dissertation is a lonely task. After spending years taking classes with other people, one suddenly finds oneself isolated, researching and writing alone for hours upon hours, day after day. Even for the introverted, this solitude is difficult; loneliness is wearing. I am familiar with loneliness. For that reason, I also know that loneliness distorts our perception of things. Loneliness looms larger than it should. Yes, writing a dissertation can be a lonely task, and I spent a lot of time feeling lonely during the writing of this dissertation. But I am not alone. I was never alone. I had help.

I would like to thank my director, D. Stephen Long, who read and responded to my work faster than I thought humanly possible. Maddeningly given the rapidity, his comments were also some of the most substantive and helpful feedback that I have ever received. I do not know if I could have finished without his encouragement, patience, generosity, and kindness. Thanks go to the rest of my board as well. Danielle Nussberger introduced me to Balthasar, and was always willing to talk me through the difficulties I had understanding him. Wanda Zemler-Cizewski assisted me in figuring out—for myself and hopefully for the reader—just why I think Bonaventure is useful today. I am grateful to William Cavanaugh for his willingness to serve on my board. I would also like to thank the faculty of the theology department for forming me into the theologian that I am today, in particular, Michael Duffey, Mark Johnson, Therese Lysaught, and Jame Schaefer.
I must also express gratitude to my fellow students for making Marquette not just a school but also a loving community. To name just a few: Rick Barry, Christopher and Rachel Brenna, Anne Carpenter, Darin Fawley, Kirsten Guidero, Christopher Hadley, Kate and Ryan Hemmer, Erin Kidd, Lisa and Nathan Lunsford, Kellen Plaxco, Samantha Miller, Jakob Rinderknecht, and Steven and Lisa Zittergruen. We have supported and challenged one another in our scholarly pursuits, and we have also shared meals, celebrated holidays and births, and occasionally weathered troubles. I am thankful for the dissertation support groups that I was part of. I know they helped me, I hope that they also helped Christopher, Kirsten, Nathan, and Rick. If not for the help of Steven Zittergruen, I would have labored for hours attempting to penetrate the mysteries of Microsoft Word formatting styles. Special thanks also goes to Samantha Miller, who in an act of truly sacrificial love, proofread the entirety of this dissertation.

Life does not stop for a dissertation. During the writing of this dissertation I was unfortunate enough to face a loss that I thought threatened my entire world. At least it felt like the world had ended and I had been left alone in the desolation. But I was not alone. I had help. I cannot overstate the beautiful and gracious love shown to me by Steven and Lisa (and Soren) Zittergruen, Rick Barry, Darin Fawley and Kirsten Guidero, and Christopher and Rachel (and Zoe and Elias) Brenna. They nourished me with food, drink, friendship, and most of all with hope. There would be no dissertation without them. My ability to express my thanks to them falls short, so with apologies to the reader, I adapt the words of a better pen than mine: Thanks to you my life is once again peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy. You each hold a sanctuary in my heart, and when, if my daughter
one day asks to hear the story, I will speak your names with a tender and a faltering voice.

Everything that I have accomplished I owe to my parents, John and Ann Kuzma. It is thanks to their love and financial support that I have been able to pursue this education.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Madeleine. Her love is the greatest beauty that I have ever known.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................. i

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................................... 1

I. Beauty and Ethics ....................................................................................................................... 1

II. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Ethics ......................................................................................... 2
   a. Minor Works ...................................................................................................................... 3
   b. Christopher Steck, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* ............................... 5

III. What Sort of “Ethic”? ............................................................................................................. 14

IV. Overview of the Dissertation ................................................................................................. 20

CHAPTER I: THE SYMPHONY: A BALTHASARIAN ETHIC .................................................. 25

I. Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 25

II. Theological Aesthetics: Beauty as the Horizon of Moral Formation ...................................... 28
   a. The Need for Beauty .......................................................................................................... 28
   b. The Subjective Evidence: Beauty is Formational ............................................................... 41
   c. The Objective Evidence: Beauty is Moral .......................................................................... 48

III. Theological Dramatics: Freedom and the Polyphony of Response ..................................... 57
   a. Christian Life as a Drama .................................................................................................... 58
   b. Freedom .............................................................................................................................. 73
   c. Mission: Responding to Freedom ...................................................................................... 81
   d. Action: Transethical Missions in the World .................................................................... 94
   e. Learning to Act “Transethically” ..................................................................................... 99
a. Cavanaugh’s Critique: The Nation-State as an Idol .......................... 225

b. Political Idolatry: Letting the Nation-State Define Our Vision of Politics ................................................................. 233

c. Christian Politics without Beauty: David Bentley Hart’s Critique of Pacifism ................................................................. 236

d. Conclusion ............................................................................. 239

IV. Performing *visio pacis* .................................................................................................................. 240

a. Beside the Nation-State: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon ......................... 241

b. Within/For the Nation-State: Martin Luther King, Jr. ...................... 244

c. Against the Nation-State: Liberation Theology .............................. 248

V. Conclusion ............................................................................. 250

CHAPTER IV: PERFORMING RECEPTIVITY TO CREATION ............................................. 252

I. Introduction ............................................................................... 252

II. Formed by Bonaventure: Receptivity to Christ is Receptivity to Creation... 252

a. Bonaventure as an Archetype ...................................................... 252

b. Balthasar Finds Beauty in Bonaventure ........................................ 254

c. Receptivity to Creation in Bonaventure ........................................ 260

III. Circumstances of Modern Christian Receptivity: Factory Farming ........ 285

a. Factory Farms: History and Practices .......................................... 286

b. Factory Farms: Lacking in All Receptivity .................................... 290

IV. Receptivity to Creation in Action ............................................... 293

a. Modern Animal Studies ............................................................ 293

b. Alternative Farming Methods .................................................... 298

c. Individual and Community Actions ............................................. 300

d. Converging in Theo-Dramatic Ethics ......................................... 304

V. Conclusion ............................................................................. 307
CONCLUSION......................................................................................................................................................... 308
BIBLIOGRAPHY...................................................................................................................................................... 313
INTRODUCTION

“But I feel pity for the jackals, Judas, my brother, and for the sparrows, and the grass.”

“Ha! Ha!” jeered the redbeard. “And for the ants?”

“Yes, for the ants too. Everything is God’s. When I bend over the ant, inside his black, shiny eye I see the face of God.”

“And if you bend over my face, son of the Carpenter?”

“There too, very deep down, I see the face of God.” —Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*

I. Beauty and Ethics

From the shiny eye and skittering gait of the ant to the rolling clouds of nebulae, we see beauty. We hear it in the thunder of waterfalls and in the strains of melodies. We feel it in the kindness of a smile or a touch. There is no corner of existence from which beauty is absent. To consider how we perceive beauty and how this perception shapes our lives, therefore, is the necessary first step of any account of ethics. It is a step we never move beyond. Beauty is good, good beauty, —that is the start of what we need to know.

What role does beauty play in our moral formation? What difference does the perception of beauty make to the way we live our lives? I draw specifically from the theological aesthetics and dramatics of Hans Urs von Balthasar in order to answer this question, and thus when I say “beauty,” I refer to beauty as a transcendental property of being. I do not intend to present “Balthasar’s ethics.” Balthasar does not have an explicit “ethics.” ¹ His theology does, however, explain the implications that the perception of beauty has for Christian life. So instead of an account of “Balthasar’s ethics, I will offer a

“Balthasarian ethic.” Having defined this Balthasarian theo-dramatic ethics, I will then go beyond Balthasar to consider how we might put this moral formation into practice. My thesis is that recognizing beauty as the foundation of moral formation affirms the formational power of the Christian tradition as well as that of new experiences and practices because in both cases we are responding to beauty.

II. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Ethics

Relatively little has been written about Balthasar’s ethics, but this lack of discussion is not a surprising omission. If anything, those of us who write about Balthasar’s ethics need to explain our questionable decision to put these topics together. Balthasar wrote only one small article on ethics. He once declared: “Ich habe keine Ethik.” He even personally dissuaded Edward Oakes from writing a dissertation on the ethical implications of the Theo-Drama because “such a project was bound to be failure from the outset.” Do those of us who pursue this topic see something in Balthasar that is not really there? I think, rather, that we are responding to the undeniable fact that his theology has implications for Christian life. Balthasar always appreciates the need for praxis. Even if Balthasar had no ethic, he certainly thought that his theology could be lived. The second part of the trilogy, Theo-Drama is a five-volume discussion of Christian action. Oakes, accordingly, never accepted Balthasar’s insistence that he had nothing to say about ethics. A theology that has so much to say about life and action must have relevance for ethics.

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4 “I remain deeply convinced of the relevance of his theology to the whole question of ethics,” Oakes, “Ethics and the Search for God’s Will in the Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” 410;
a. Minor Works

Prior to the publication of Christopher Steck’s *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* in 2001, the biggest continuous block of text dedicated to Balthasar’s ethics was a 1990 “Discussion” in *Communio*. Marc Ouellet and Edward Oakes both offer essays exploring the topic, to which Russell Hittinger and Angelo Scola respond respectively. All four provide valuable insights into the ethical significance of Balthasar’s theology. None, however, go into great detail. In “The Foundations of Christian Ethics According to Hans Urs von Balthasar,” Ouellet comments on Balthasar’s single essay on ethics, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics” in light of the rest of his theology. He emphasizes how Balthasar’s “trinitarian Christocentrism” opposes the anthropocentrism that characterizes modern ethics. This “theodramatic ethic,” in upholding Christ as the supreme ethical norm and promoting “mission” as form of Christian life, integrates both the “historical” and “eschatological” aspects of ethics and thus represents a “remedy against rationalism.” Russell Hittinger responds to Ouellet by noting that Balthasar’s “mission” has a great deal of consonance with Thomas Aquinas’s natural law. Unlike modern, more anthropocentric visions of natural law, Thomas’s natural law “de-centers” human beings in much the same way as Balthasar’s divinely-given mission. Oakes then argues that Balthasar’s ethics, especially by connecting personhood with mission, resolves the “sheer interminability” of non-teleological modern ethics that Alasdair

“Interestingly, Oakes responded [to Balthasar’s claim that he had no ethic]: ‘But Christopher Steck has proven him wrong,’” Nathe, “The Form Love Takes in the World,” 4n14.


6 Ibid., 376–378.

MacIntyre identifies in *After Virtue*. Scola’s brief response to Oakes delves into a few of the questions that Oakes raises. The common thread running through all four authors is the assumption that Balthasar offers something qualitatively different than “modern” ethics (specifically, rationalist ethics). Not quite something new, but as Ouellet says, a “remedy” to the problems endemic to modern ethics.

Most other comments on Balthasar’s ethics are scattered asides or supporting points. Some identify the connection between beauty and ethics; others discuss the practical implications of Balthasar’s theology (e.g. Balthasar’s political theology or the role of the secular institutes in his thought). Like the four authors above, these works

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9 Angelo Scola, “Response to Professor Oakes,” *Communio* 17 (Fall 1990): 432.
assume that Balthasar’s theology has value for morality if not outright moral implications. Of particular importance for contextualizing the absence of explicit discussions of Balthasar’s ethics is an observation from D. Stephen Long:

Balthasar’s *Theo-Drama* displays the relationship between Christ and most of the practical and theoretical concerns that are concerned with ethics…It is, however, not “ethics” per se. For Balthasar, no such thing exists within Christianity; his theodramatic approach is “transethical”…It is….Jesus’ nonresistant, surrendering obedience that forms of the heart of a theodramatic “ethics.”

Many recognize those “practical and theoretical concerns.” They promote (or castigate) Balthasar’s position on topics that would elsewhere be considered “ethical issues.” Moreover, their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing may even be founded on ethical grounds. Few, however, have engaged the ethical theory that may (or may not) lie behind his positions.

*b. Christopher Steck, The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*

Christopher Steck’s *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* was the first major English work on Balthasar and ethics. Steck argues that we can read Balthasar’s theology as a Catholic-friendly version of divine command theory. *Ethical Thought* identifies some of the problems with examining “Balthasar’s ethics,” the most obvious problem being that Balthasar has no ethic. “Since von Balthasar provides no systematic treatment of ethics,” Steck writes, “we must attempt to assemble a coherent theory of ethics out of his approaches to related concepts.”

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artificiality of this goal: “The theory I present below is indicated in his writing, though never made explicit.”\textsuperscript{15} He also admits that his construct—like all constructs of “Balthasar’s ethics”—has limits: “Given the richness and depth of von Balthasar’s ideas and their unsystematic presentation, however, there probably can be no definitive interpretation of his ethics.”\textsuperscript{16} Steck puts his finger on the problem facing any attempt to “assemble” Balthasar’s ethics: Balthasar’s “depth” and “unsystematic presentation.” Compared to other theologians, Balthasar is “less structurally indebted to one particular theological system.”\textsuperscript{17} It is this openness, this lack of any clear category with which to pigeonhole Balthasar, that leads Steck to divine command ethics.

For Steck, divine command ethics best explains the response to beauty described by Balthasar in \textit{The Glory of the Lord} and \textit{Theo-Drama}. Balthasar, like Rahner and Barth, sounds “the note of theological voluntarism.”\textsuperscript{18} His theological aesthetics revolves around the idea that “God’s glory appears” independent of human control.\textsuperscript{19} Our obedient response to this uncontrollable appearance is personalizing and fulfilling. Any account of Balthasar’s ethics must account for these two aspects. Steck chooses divine command ethics, specifically “an ‘Ignatian reconfiguration’ of divine command ethics,” because it unites the obedience that God demands with the freedom that this obedience provides.\textsuperscript{20}

Divine command ethics preserves the “centrality” of God’s address evident in Balthasar’s thought.\textsuperscript{21} In perceiving the Christ-form, “we find our response pulled forth in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 2. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 1. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 152. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 59.
\end{flushright}
the very seeing of the object.” But Steck does not think that a “gift/response” scheme adequately explains this interaction. In having our response pulled forth, he says, we interpret our lives in light of a trinitarian horizon, namely, the relationship between the Father and the Son. The key Ignatian element that Balthasar adds is the “mission” that each Christian receives. We “obey” insofar as Christ’s narrative, like a masterpiece, draws us beyond ourselves. Obedience to God’s commanding appearance is not just submission, “but also a participation in Christ’s receptivity to the Father’s will.” We become “attuned” over time by learning to see the world Christologically and in becoming attuned we craft actions more in line with the Christ-form.

In the conclusion of Ethical Thought, Steck acknowledges that his interpretation “lacks the ordered tidiness associated with good theories.” This lack of order does not constitute sloppiness but an honest appraisal of revelation: “Christian perception does not bring the God who irradiates our moral horizon into sharp ‘focus’…ethics too must put aside the goal of gaining a mastery of God’s glory and approach the revealed mystery humbly and on bended knee.” Steck thinks that divine command ethics reflects Balthasar’s refusal to confine thoughts and perceptions to a human measure. It puts the emphasis on the divine instead of on the human.

Still does not the language of “command,” constrain our thought? Even Steck notes, regarding the concept of mission, that Balthasar “rarely uses Barth’s favored term,
‘command,’ preferring instead terms such as ‘call,’ ‘will,’ and ‘address,’” which have less punctualistic and occasionalistic connotations.”31 Steck also excludes Balthasar’s single essay on ethics, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” from consideration on the basis that it does not accurately reflect the morality offered by the trilogy. Yet in this essay, Balthasar writes, “all Christian action is a privilege, not an obligation.”32 On the one hand, Steck’s Ignatian reconfiguration of divine command ethics would seem to agree with this statement; obedience is more participation than submission. On the other hand, the language of command connotes “obligation” more than it does “privilege.” Then again, Steck never claims that his interpretation answers every question. He admits that one can say many of the same things that he does using virtue ethics, which is the path chosen by the second major English work on Balthasar’s ethics.33

c. Melanie Barrett, Love’s Beauty at the Heart of the Christian Moral Life

Melanie Barrett describes Balthasar’s ethics as a form of virtue ethics. Specifically, she calls it “an aesthetic form of virtue ethics, with love as the primary virtue.”34 Like Steck, Barrett begins by explaining the moral significance of beauty. This point may seem obvious, yet it is significant that both begin Balthasar’s ethics the same way that Balthasar begins his trilogy: with beauty. Both identify Balthasar’s retrieval of beauty as the foundation of his ethics. For Barrett, the circuminception of transcendentals indicates that “beauty influences both moral perception and moral motivation,” which

31 Ibid., 60.
33 Steck, The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs Von Balthasar, 153.
also means that “a person’s aesthetic capacities shape their ethical capacities.” Christ provides Christians with an “objective standard” by which to refine these capacities. Barrett uses a twofold scheme to explain the ethical import of Balthasar’s theology: theological perception and ethical response. In theological perception, Barrett argues that Balthasar’s aesthetic contemplation of Christ (focusing on his harmony and uniqueness) provides us with “objective certainty” of the truth—and so goodness—of Christ’s form. The effect that this perception has on the Christian is the ethical response: “Christ’s form in-forms the perceiver’s form, transforming them spiritually from the inside out.” In this ongoing process of “attunement” to God “one develops a taste for God and an understanding of God’s own taste.” Barrett says that attunement leads to “an enhanced capacity for correct ethical discernment.”

Barrett uses virtue ethics to put these insights into a coherent form. What Balthasar offers, she explains, is “a trajectory toward a moral theory, rather than a self-standing theory.” If we want to “systematize” Balthasar, then we need to “draw on some external theory.” Virtue ethics, for Barrett, is the most natural choice. Virtue ethics forms moral agents towards a specific telos. Balthasar’s theology fits this mold in that virtue “is attained by externally following Christ and internally becoming like Christ.” Christ, of course, is the telos, the “ultimate model” that provides moral

35 Ibid., 74.
36 Ibid., 76.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 132.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 191.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 195.
motivation and moral discernment. The effect of perceiving beauty is ongoing and best described in terms of virtue because virtue attends to formation as a process rather than as a single event. Love, consequently, is the primary virtue of Balthasar’s aesthetic virtue ethics.

While Barrett is critical of Steck, she does not regard her approach as inherently at odds with his divine command interpretation. Barrett writes that “certain aspects of Balthasar’s thought are neglected” by Steck’s model. She also worries that his theory’s attempt to balance obedience and freedom “makes it inattentive to questions of moral formation and unable to do justice to the central place of love in Balthasar’s overall theology.” She offers her virtue ethics in part to “correct” the “deficiency” of Steck’s interpretation. Barrett wants to uphold the beneficial parts of Steck. In the introduction to Love’s Beauty, she notes: “I offer my own interpretation not as a rejection of Steck’s, but rather as a constructive attempt to affirm Steck’s insights while better accounting for the utterly foundational role played by love.” Barrett confesses that if Steck falls short because his focus is “necessarily partial,” then she is open to the same criticism. Rather than attempt to best Steck, Barrett chooses a more collaborative approach. She sees herself and Steck as part of a longer-term goal: to formulate a comprehensive vision of Balthasar’s ethics. Though they each emphasize different parts of Balthasar:

A comprehensive treatment of Balthasar’s ethics ought to consider both aspects of his thought and then show how they interrelate...Each of us...elucidates an important trajectory of Balthasar’s ethics that helps to illuminate his overall thought.

44 Ibid., 257.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 194.
48 Ibid., 6.
49 Ibid., 194.
50 Ibid.
Like Steck, Barrett welcomes other interpretations of Balthasar’s ethics. Indeed, in her last chapter she extrapolates a list of “moral principles,” from Balthasar that she describes as “Balthasarian” rather than as “Balthasar’s.” Barrett thinks that Balthasar’s ethical insights should be applied to Christian life, but the term “Balthasarian” recognizes the inherent artificiality of “systematizing” Balthasar’s unsystematic thoughts on ethics.


The most recent major English work on Balthasar’s ethics, Tobias Nathe’s 2012 dissertation, “The Form Love Takes in the World: On Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Contribution to Ethics,” chooses a different line of attack. Nathe sets himself apart from both Steck and Barrett by insisting that Balthasar should not be systematized. Rather than fitting Balthasar’s theology into a preexisting ethical theory, Nathe uses Balthasar’s own framework to articulate his ethics. The result is something that looks less like a traditional ethical theory but that is, from Nathe’s perspective, more true to Balthasar.

Steck and Barrett attempt to systematize something that should not be systematized. Both, Nathe says (using Barrett’s own description), apply “‘some external theory’ to Balthasar’s ethical thought to help systematize it.” We can appreciate and on a certain level endorse this impulse. Balthasar’s thought is so broad and his style so meandering that we must set some limits on our undertakings. But, Nathe writes, “Balthasar cannot be put into a box.” Applying an external theory does just this:

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51 Ibid., 262.
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 21.
As soon as one attempts to draw out a particular item of Balthasar’s thought and systematize it in order to show its applicability to something of interest, one simultaneously risks missing how he perceives it in the first place. Only the indivisible whole will allow the reader the advantage of understanding what Balthasar has to contribute to ethics (or any other segment of thought).  

Nathe praises Steck and Barrett for their many valuable insights on Balthasar’s ethics. Still, he claims that their models “do not adequately convey” the “metaphysical import” or the “capacity to discern” moral issues offered by Balthasar’s theology. When we apply an external theory we lose sight of the fact that “Balthasar’s method is aesthetic, and this is purposeful” and we consequently lose sight of “Balthasar’s perspective.”

In order to preserve this perspective, Nathe says we must strive to be more holistic and less systematic in our interpretation of Balthasar. The basic failure of Steck and Barrett is that they “do not speak directly to the integrative whole, source, or norm of Balthasar’s ethics.” Instead of thinking that there is a gap in Balthasar, we accept Balthasar as we find him. In Nathe’s view, Balthasar does not offer anything “typical” or “traditional” when it comes to ethics. We must attend, subsequently, to the whole of his theology in order to grasp his “contribution” to ethics. Unlike Steck and Barrett, Nathe makes “no attempt to present a systematic ethical treatise.” That is not to say that Nathe thinks Balthasar offers nothing substantive. He identifies numerous “characteristics” of Balthasar’s thought that have implications for ethics; he simply thinks that they “are not meant to be systematized.” Rather, we should regard them as a rough framework, a

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 21; 45.
57 Ibid., 39.
58 Ibid., 3–4.
59 Ibid., 39.
60 Ibid., 42.
61 Ibid., 8.
“nexus of love” that “orients a particular (Catholic) moral perspective.” Nathe calls this perspective an “all-encompassing Christological framework or norm.”

Nathe also treks into new territory by applying Balthasar’s ethics to actual moral problems. He identifies the few places where Balthasar offers his own opinion: contraception, the ordination of women, and the promotion of the secular institutes. Thought not systematic, Nathe argues that we can see in Balthasar’s comments a certain “consistency” and “harmony.” He strives to show the same with his chapter on the “Balthasarian” David Schindler. Nathe presents Schindler’s responses to neo-conservatism, stem cell research, and debates over theology of the body as evidence that a Balthasarian ethics provides us with a unique perspective. Ultimately, he wants to show that Balthasar’s “greatest contribution” to ethics is “methodological,” namely that “it is the holistic frame of reference by which he considers all questions first in terms of Jesus Christ’s triune love as the governing light for the cosmos.” The take-away from Nathe is that he does not find an ethical system in Balthasar nor does he translate Balthasar into an “external” ethical system. For Nathe, Balthasar’s ethical thought is better treated as “an artistry of love.” To employ it is to make use of a particular set of skills, but without constraining these skills to a rigid system.

Of the three major works on Balthasar’s ethics, mine falls closest to Nathe’s. Like Steck, Barrett, and Nathe I locate the foundation of Balthasar’s implicit morality in his theological aesthetics, and, like Steck and Barrett, I put a great deal of weight on

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 12.
64 Ibid., 213.
65 Ibid., 215.
66 Ibid., 274.
67 Ibid., 323.
Balthasar’s theological dramatics as his account of Christian life.\textsuperscript{68} But I am persuaded by Nathe’s reservations about applying external theories to Balthasar. While both Steck and Barrett state that their interpretations do not cover every aspect of Balthasar’s thought, my work, like Nathe’s, attempts to describe his morality “intra-Balthasar.”\textsuperscript{69}

The most important difference between my project and those of Steck, Barrett, and Nathe, is that this dissertation is not about Balthasar. Though my work builds from Balthasar, he is not the primary focus. Indeed, at times he may fade from view almost entirely. Steck and Barrett want to outline “Balthasar’s ethics.” Nathe wants to describe “Balthasar’s contribution” to ethics. What I offer, on the other hand, is a “Balthasarian contribution” to moral theology.

\textit{III. What Sort of “Ethic”?}

We must pause for a moment to consider what I mean by “ethics” and “moral theology.” Nathe says that Balthasar’s theology is not “anything typical of moral theology.”\textsuperscript{70} What is typical? For Nathe, typical moral theology would seem to be “a neatly categorized system of moral commendations and prohibitions.”\textsuperscript{71} Nathe wants to draw attention to the fact that Balthasar’s theology does not fit into any popular definition of “ethics.” He contends that Balthasar provides us with a “foundation for ethics without being an ethics in the conventional sense.”\textsuperscript{72} I think Nathe is correct; whatever ethical insights Balthasar offers and whatever Balthasarian morality we construct will not look like an “ethic” as that term has often been used. That, of course, does not necessarily

\textsuperscript{68} Nathe says this is a common judgment, Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 12.
make it less of an “ethics” or “moral theology.” The root question here is: what do we mean when we say “ethics” or “moral theology?” A comprehensive examination of this question would take us too far afield. Nevertheless, since Balthasar’s implicit morality (or Balthasarian morality) offers something that does not fit the “traditional” mold, it behooves us to clarify our definitions to some degree. What kind of “ethic” or “moral theology” is theo-dramatic ethics?

Servais Pinckaers’ evaluation of modern ethics in The Sources of Christian Ethics can help us to answer this question. Pinckaers wants to recover, restore, reintegrate, reform, retrieve, reestablish, and reevaluate moral theology. Morality today, he explains, is defined by obligation, the idea that “human actions are obligatory, regulated by law.”

Things were not always so. Morality used to be centered on the idea of happiness. According to Pinckaers, the dominance of “the morality of obligation or duty-driven ethics” began with William of Ockham’s nominalism and reached a pinnacle with the moral manuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today we assume that obligation, which was once peripheral, is “central and basic” to ethics. What we now consider to be the “classic” models of moral theology (Nathe would say “conventional) follow a pattern based on obligation. In a morality of obligation, first we develop abstract principles and laws and then apply those laws to concrete situations. This form of morality, Pinckaers says, “is too narrow and can become quite inadequate.” It leaves no room for the dynamic interplay between moral knowledge and lived experience; morality is nothing more than the rote application of rules. Without happiness as a unifying center,
moral theology severs itself from the rest of theology (systematics, liturgy, prayer, mysticism, etc).  

Pinckaers wants to reintegrate Christian ethics with the rest of theology by returning it to its sources: “Scripture, the Holy Spirit, the Gospel law, and natural law, which is rooted in freedom itself.” He begins Sources by proposing the following definition of “Christian ethics”:

Christian ethics is the branch of theology that studies human acts so as to direct them to a loving vision of God seen as our true, complete, happiness and our final end. This vision is attained by means of grace, the virtues, and the gifts in the light of revelation and reason.

This definition of morality is centered on beatitude; the vision of ultimate happiness found in Scripture and promoted by the fathers and Thomas. Pinckaers wants to preserve the status of ethics as a discipline distinct from dogma, exegesis, and spirituality while also acknowledging the unity of all these parts. If, for instance, Christian ethics is directed to “a loving vision of God” then it must also attend to theologies of the Trinity and the interpretation of Scripture.

Pinckaers's definition of Christian ethics maintains its uniquely “Christian” character. He wants to reconnect Christian ethics with revelation. Ethics should consider revelation as its “principle and direct source.” If Christian ethics is oriented to God as our final end and bliss, then how can we possibly ignore the revelation of that end?

Pinckaers, going back to the sources, builds his vision of Christian ethics upon Paul and the Sermon on the Mount (with insight from Augustine’s commentary), with which he

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77 Ibid., 16–17.
78 Ibid., xxi.
79 Ibid., 8.
80 Ibid., 8–9.
81 Ibid., 9.
82 Ibid., 13.
then validates Thomas’s moral theology as truly and distinctly “Christian.” For Pinckaers, these sources reveal a distinctly Christian ethic. Paul teaches us that “all Christian ethics flowed from faith in Jesus” and the Sermon gives us “the charter of the Christian life.”\(^83\) We do not, however, find this ethic by isolating and extracting specific rules from Scripture.\(^84\) We must consider these sources in the totality of their concern: namely, faith in Christ and the lived implications of that faith.\(^85\) As Pinckaers says of Paul:

> If we wish to know St. Paul’s view of the existence and nature of Christian morality, we will have to set aside the moral categories we learned in school and simply let ourselves be guided by him, following his text and teaching and keeping our preconceived ideas firmly under control.\(^86\)

We must let the sources of our morality determine the shape of our morality, not vice versa. This, at least, is how Pinckaers defends the Christian character of Thomas’ moral system. Yes, Thomas makes great use of Aristotle, but always “at the service of Gospel morality.”\(^87\) The sources guide us, and in so doing they expand our vision.

Pinckaers’ definition includes a dynamic openness to human experience. He distinguishes Christian ethics from the “behavioral sciences, arts and techniques” in order to determine how the two can collaborate.\(^88\) In short, ethics is reflexive and science is positivist.\(^89\) Each, nevertheless, needs the other. The behavioral sciences, which “deal only with the visible, external aspect of human actions,” needs morality to make sense of those actions that spring from human interiority: love, hate, truth, duty, etc.\(^90\) Morality, in

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 458–459.  
\(^{84}\) Ibid., 106–107.  
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 107–108.  
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 107.  
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 188.  
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 47.  
\(^{89}\) Ibid., 457.  
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 73.
turn, needs the sciences to “promote a better understanding of the many social, psychological, historical, and cultural factors involved in any concrete action.” Each examines two kinds of truth that “are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive” and so we must ensure that “neither one is allowed to absorb or destroy the other.”

Not every experience is valuable and not all information is useful. Experience is “raw material.” Our openness to experiences and behavioral sciences is useful to the degree that it is grounded upon our desire for true happiness, which we learn from the sources of Christian ethics. The more open we are to God, the more open we are to everything else: “the more we hand ourselves over to God…the more fully human we become and the more sensitive to others and to the whole of created reality.”

It is not in Pinckaers’s definition so much as in his general project to renew and reintegrate moral theology that I situate theo-dramatic ethics. Though Pinckaers uses Thomas, his ethics is by no means narrowly Thomist: “Father Pinckaers considers that a genuine esteem for St. Thomas will deepen our appreciation of the Fathers of the Church and of the authentic theologians of any age.” Pinckaers recovers Christian ethics and reunites and reintegrates it with the other branches of theology by recentering it on beatitude and reaffirming that our openness to God is openness to the world. It is a distinct and distinctly Christian discipline; distinct by its focus on the lived implications of faith, on steering the actions that spring forth from faith, and distinctively Christian in its character by the well from which it springs. In this approach, we can recognize an

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 74.
93 Ibid., 93.
94 Ibid., 90.
affinity between Balthasar and Pinckaers as both seek to retrieve what earlier theologians had assumed. Both seek to reunite theology around its proper center: Christ. Though not “conventional,” as Nathe observes, Balthasar’s theology certainly fulfills Pinckaers’ definition of ethics (and one could easily apply this definition to a Balthasarian “ethic”). Pinckaers, moreover, laments the evacuation of beauty from moral theology. Modern ethicists, he says, are “suspicious” of something the Fathers knew intuitively:

[The fathers] did not consider beauty only from an aesthetic viewpoint…Beyond visible forms, this beauty radiated from the inmost being of persons and their actions and qualified their very substance. This is why good actions were at the same time beautiful…The love, goodness, and beauty of God, shining through Christian life: these were the wellsprings of the dynamism of the Christian life for the Fathers.  

Here is the convergence of Pinckaers’s work with my own: I intend to investigate how beauty acts as a wellspring for Christian life.

Pinckaers refuses to pin ethics down. Balthasar may not offer a “conventional” ethic, but we do not need to fit his implicit morality into a preexisting system. Like Pinckaers, I think that “ethics” and “moral theology” are discernible, identifiable branches of theology. At the same time, we do not need to—and in fact, we should not—isolate ethics to the degree that we must twist revelation to fit into it. As Rourke notes in her review of The Pinckaers Reader, what Pinckaers’s work gestures toward is the acknowledgment that “moral theology is, in fact, theology.”  

Christian ethics should exist in harmony with theology. Balthasar’s theology should be neither an aberration for ethics nor a stumbling block. Pinckaers’s recentered, reunited vision of Christian ethics embraces diverse theological approaches. We do not need to sacrifice their unique

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96 Pinckaers, The Sources of Christian Ethics, 31.
perspectives by forcing them into a few, “conventional” ethical categories. Theo-dramatic ethics is one possible vision of this reintegration.

IV. Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 of this work outlines the morality implicit in Balthasar’s theology. Here, much like Steck and Barrett, I rely mostly on his theological aesthetics and theological dramatics. Unlike Steck and Barrett, I do not look to an external ethical method. Instead of extracting or transplanting Balthasar’s implicit morality, the effect will be more like injecting radioactive dye into his theology. The moral aspects will glow, but as part of a larger system. In his theological aesthetics Balthasar reminds us that beauty is not something we designate, but something we recognize. Beauty, as Balthasar describes it, is formational. When we subjectively experience objective beauty, it changes us. For Christians this takes on concrete form because Christ is beauty. So, not only is beauty formational, it is also moral. In perceiving beauty we receive objective content that guides our moral formation. Balthasar holds together, without reducing one to the other, the subjective and the objective aspects of revelation. His theological dramatics then explores how this encounter with beauty tasks each of us with a unique mission that forms our actions and our identities. Consequently, we should not presume to define the limits of what constitutes a “Christian” life. Since our goal is transcendent we strive for the good knowing that we will fall short, but also knowing that actions that participate in the good have transcendent significance. A narrow conception of ethics cannot accommodate Balthasar’s “implicit morality.”
Balthasar’s theo-dramatic ethics thus charts a course between the cosmological and anthropological reductions, both of which lead to an ethics without Christ. In the cosmological reduction, Christ cannot guide moral formation because he is too narrow a measure. In the anthropological reduction, Christ cannot be a universal norm, for that would displace the individual human being. Balthasar’s theo-dramatic ethics upholds Christ as the objective norm without sacrificing his personal impact on the individual.

Chapter 2 offers the first glimpse of theo-dramatic ethics in practice. The chapter begins by pointing out the obvious traps for an ethics based on beauty: either it is too broad to be guided by the particular form of Christ (we can find no clear direction because everything is “beautiful”), or its method supersedes the actual content of revelation (we make our descriptions of beauty the focus rather than the beauty we strive to describe). Contrasting theo-dramatic ethics with narrative theology helps us to see how theo-dramatic ethics can avoid these traps. I then turn to some of Balthasar’s lesser-known works, in particular *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels* and *Tragedy Under Grace*, as illustrative of how he sees his theology in practice. These works put meat on the bones of three aspects of my articulation of theo-dramatic ethics: 1) how we are formed by beautiful lives; 2) how it manifests as polyphony; 3) how it is “transethical.”

Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate theo-dramatic ethics in two particular spheres of life: our practice of pacifism in the nation-state and our treatment of non-human animals. At the center of each is a beautiful “archetype:” Augustine and Bonaventure. Underlying my use of these figures is the Balthasarian conviction that the tradition is formational rather than static, diverse but not contradictory. Both chapters follow the same structure: first I articulate the theology of the archetype, then I diagnose our modern circumstances
in light of this theology, and finally I propose various ways these archetypes can form Christians who live in these circumstances.

Chapter 3 offers a performance of theo-dramatic ethics in which Augustine’s vision of a society guided by peace forms modern Christian politics. For Augustine, living the city of God is about forming lives toward a vision of eternal peace. The visio pacis, in fact, is the defining feature behind this political performance. William T. Cavanaugh’s critique of the nation-state helps us to see our modern political circumstances in analogous aesthetic terms. Performing the city of God, I find, is not about violence or the prohibition of violence, but about embodying this peace. Le Chambon’s efforts to save Jewish refugees during World War II, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “beloved community,” and liberation theology’s Cristo Compañero suggest the variety of ways in which Christians can perform the visio pacis.

Chapter 4 offers a performance of theo-dramatic ethics in which Bonaventure’s theology forms our treatment of non-human animals. Balthasar chooses Bonaventure as an example of theological aesthetics because, he argues, beauty occupies a central place in his theology. His commentary helps explain to how Bonaventure serves as an archetype. I then provide my own reading of the Breviloquium, Itinerarium mentis in Deum, and Legenda Maior to show, respectively, that Christian faith makes us receptive to creation, that receptivity to creation is formational, and that beneficence to animals is the expression of this receptivity. Having been formed by Bonaventure, we can recognize that animals suffer on modern factory farms because these facilities lack receptivity. Alternatively, attention to modern animal studies, humane farming methods, and more
community-centric consumption practices are ways we can embody receptivity to animals.

Speaking in terms of performance helps to convey that theo-dramatic ethics is not reducible to a single set of rules. When an orchestra performs a symphony, each section performs its own unique part. We only appreciate each individual contribution, however, in the context of the whole symphony. The symphony, in turn, is nothing but the combined performance of all the sections. To hear the beauty of the symphony, we must do two things at once. On the one hand, we must be able to isolate the performances of each individual section. On the other hand, we must hear the whole as more than a collection of parts; we must allow the sections to sound together. We must hear both the individual sections and the whole orchestra without reducing one to the other. Chapter 1 is about the symphony, the broad themes of theo-dramatic ethics. Chapter 2 is about the orchestra, the large structure behind each performance. Chapters 3 and 4 are about the performances of individual sections. These chapters are not rote implementations of the themes discussed in the first two chapters. They are performances, unique and irreducible and yet intelligible only as part of a larger whole. The broad themes of Chapters 1 and 2 help us to understand these performances, but themes alone do not constitute a symphony. Even the performance chapters will only expose us to a fraction of the symphony.

We must always remain open to the possibility that new and unexpected performances will join the symphony. Unimaginable beforehand, but indispensable once heard, each new performance reveals the depth of theo-dramatic ethics. We could never presume to exhaust theo-dramatic ethics any more than we could presume to exhaust the
Christ-form, so I offer two “sections” as a sampling of the polyphony that follows from applying beauty to moral formation. Each chapter will focus on a different sphere of human existence: pacifism in the nation-state and our treatment of non-human animals. These two topics speak to two broad moral questions: how do we treat one another and how do we treat the natural world? More chapters on other topics would offer a more complete—but never totally complete—experience of the symphony.

This dissertation points to the convergence of method and performance. The “method” of theo-dramatic ethics can never truly be distilled down to abstract rules or terms. Doing so artificially helps us to understand what makes performances of the good beautiful, but the beauty lies in the performance itself. We can, similarly, talk about the way a poem rhymes, but it is the actual rhyme, not the concept of rhyming, that we find enchanting. It is the performance of theo-dramatic ethics, not the method, which we should find enrapturing. The more beautiful performances we encounter, the more we are formed by beauty, and the better we are able to recognize new forms of beauty.
CHAPTER I: THE SYMPHONY: A BALTHASARIAN ETHIC

I. Introduction

We begin with the symphony. Balthasar writes: “First there is sound, then different sounds and then we hear the different sounds singing together in a dance of sound.”¹ In subsequent chapters we will focus our hearing on some of those individual sounds. We could start with the performances of the individual sections and then build up to the symphony, but I want instead to begin with the way a child first hears a symphony. The child does not hear violins and flutes and trumpets. She does, of course, hear their contributions, but she does not know anything of violins or flutes or trumpets. The child hears only “a dance of sound,” and so we start here with the whole. The symphony, after all, is not just the score but also the performance of the entire orchestra. For now we will remain in the audience and let the symphony wash over us.

Be careful, though, not to overemphasize the role of beauty in Balthasar’s theology. Balthasar calls it a “prelude.”² Francesca Aran Murphy dubs it “a gateway to love.”³ Balthasar worries, and Murphy contends, that readers will misapprehend his theological aesthetics as the summation of his theology. It is not hard to imagine why some might be tempted to read him this way. Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is entrancing. Not only does he show how beauty, an experience universal in scope yet particular in occurrence, is revelatory, he also uses the greatest writers and poets in

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² Hans Urs von Balthasar, My Work: In Retrospect (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 96. Balthasar notes: “very often only the introductory volume has been read, and on the basis of that all the rest is presupposed” (Ibid.).
Western history to do so. It is tempting to linger in Balthasar’s aesthetics. More often than not we find there (to reuse his own evaluation of Georges Bernanos’ work) “more originality and vibrancy of thought...[than] in the somewhat long-winded theology of our time, which is satisfied with quite slender fare.”⁴ Of course we linger, yet we should not mistake the prelude for the whole. We must, as Murphy observes, recognize that “Balthasar expects aesthetics to perforate theology, and not simply to ice it.”⁵ Aesthetic appreciation contextualizes and characterizes the rest of theology.

Even if beauty is not the summation of Balthasar’s theology, its retrieval necessitates a particular way of doing and living theology. The moral implications of Balthasar’s theology rest on the foundation of beauty. What follows will not be pure exposition of Balthasar’s aesthetics and dramtics since such work has already been done.⁶ This chapter will not extract a morality or an ethical system nor will it impose one. Balthasar’s theology cannot be constrained to a conventional ethical model. However, it contains an implicit morality. By beginning with beauty Balthasar reverses the order of Kant’s trilogy (reason, ethics, aesthetics).⁷ This is not arbitrary. Balthasar starts with beauty because he recognizes that it is the necessary prelude for theological reflection. His theological aesthetics describes the way God’s form appears and is perceived, and his

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theological dramatics then follows the way this appearance and perception affects Christian action.

This chapter outlines the morality implicit in Balthasar’s theology. I argue that Balthasar’s conception of beauty—as something that appears and is perceived—necessarily implies that beauty is moral and formational. The Christian action that he then describes in the dramatics exhibits these beautiful characteristics in terms of freedom and mission. I expand upon Balthasar’s own term, “transethical,” to illuminate how finite actions express infinite beauty. We learn how to act by observing and imitating beautiful forms (as lives, stories, and narratives). These performances of beauty, reflecting the diversity of beauty, resound in the world as polyphony. These finite lives express and have significance in the infinite. In short, Balthasar’s “ethics”—which I refer to as a theo-dramatic ethics—is the proper Christian response to Christ. Theo-dramatic ethics, therefore, is simply another name for Christian formation: imitating the infinite Christ-form in a multitude of finite ways.8

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8 One could perhaps use the term “theological aesthetic-dramatic ethics” to emphasize the continuing role of beauty, but I will make it clear later that dramatics necessarily includes and presupposes the presence of aesthetics. Given that, I prefer to use a less unwieldy term.
II. Theological Aesthetics: Beauty as the Horizon of Moral Formation

a. The Need for Beauty

i. Theology without Beauty

In the foreword to *The Glory of the Lord Vol. I*, Balthasar defines his purpose thus: “To complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful.”

Once regarded as a transcendental property of Being, theologians and philosophers since the Enlightenment have rejected beauty as shallow, bourgeois, and ornamental. Balthasar, alternatively, contends that ignoring beauty leads to anemic theology. Without beauty “the good loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out…[and] the proofs of truth have lost their cogency.”

Good becomes arbitrary; truth becomes mechanical. Balthasar insists that humans do not experience truth or goodness so ambivalently. It matters that good is attractive and that truth is cogent, since attraction and cogency are what make good preferable to evil and truth preferable to falsity. Beauty is the why of the good and the true. Without beauty one cannot even say that existence is preferable to non-existence.

In *Love Alone Is Credible*, Balthasar poses the question: what makes Christianity persuasive? His answer reveals how beauty acts as the foundation of Christian moral formation. Balthasar describes two ways in which the question of Christianity’s persuasiveness has been answered without beauty: the cosmological and anthropological

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10 Ibid., 19.
11 Ibid.
reductions. He calls them, “the Scylla of extrinsicism and the Charybdis of immanentism,” respectively.¹²

The cosmological reduction appeals to what is external to persuade. The church fathers argued that Christ was the fulfillment of the cosmos.¹³ The multiplicity of world religions, the different *logoi*, all unknowingly point to the same center; Christianity reveals this center and so provides unity. This view, of course, relies on the belief that “God has been manifest from the beginning of the world and from Adam onward, and the pagan world failed to recognize that which is clearly there to be seen (Rom 1:18f).”¹⁴ The cosmos themselves, available for all to apprehend, show the credibility of Christianity.

As the ancient age gave way to the middle and then the modern, however, the cosmos was “demythologized.”¹⁵ Especially with the advent of humanism, the abstract idea of unity took the place of Christianity as the fulfillment of God’s cosmos. The Christianity that unifies is not the particular Christianity of the Gospels but a stripped down, abstracted Christianity. Eventually Christianity no longer explains, fulfills or unifies anything but is instead absorbed by “scientific” and “rational” investigation (in the Enlightenment sense). This outside principle must be greater than Christ in order to explain Christ, so the particularity of Christianity is lost. Moreover, it cannot make sense of revelation as a dialogue with God; there can be no relationship because everything that makes a belief “credible” must come from the outside.

The anthropological reduction, on the other hand, attempts to verify Christianity by human experience alone. This reduction leads to a “purely human and predominantly

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¹³ Ibid., 15.
¹⁴ Ibid., 16–17.
¹⁵ Ibid., 31.
ethical religion” because it limits itself to what individuals can experience.\textsuperscript{16} Individual human experience is the measure and the limit of what God can say to humanity.\textsuperscript{17} Revelation only has significance insofar as an individual experiences it. In other words, God can never be “other” nor can ever be recognized as “other” because subjective human experience is the sole determiner of credibility. The Christ we come to know is purely rational and ethical, not an actual person.

The problem again has to do with overemphasizing one side of what should be a dialogical relationship. This culminates, Balthasar says, with Kant: “For him, everything that is humanly knowable in the strict sense is restricted to the synthesis of sensible intuition and concept.”\textsuperscript{18} Even those who react against Kant place the credibility of Christ on an effect we can measure in human beings. The personal conversion (rational, emotional, spiritual) is the evidence that verifies Christianity.

The immanentist approach offered by the anthropological reduction cannot recognize God as “other,” let alone “Wholly-Other.”\textsuperscript{19} God is more than an interior spirit. Even though the anthropological reduction focuses on our apprehension of God, our focus is still on ourselves rather than on God. Though revelation in some sense may be confirmed in us or by our experience, that confirmation cannot be the verification of Christianity because it strips Christ of transcendence, turning him into the satisfaction of human needs and desires.

The cosmological and anthropological reductions fail to make Christianity credible because revelation is both objective and subjective. Only a theology that

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 46.
appreciates beauty as a transcendental property of being can hold together both objective and subjective experiences. Beauty refuses to be reduced to the external or the internal:

In the experiences of extraordinary beauty…we are able to grasp a phenomenon in its distinctiveness that otherwise remains veiled…[It is] as overwhelming as a miracle…And yet it possesses intelligibility precisely as a miracle; it is something that binds and frees at the same time.\(^\text{20}\)

Beauty unites the self with the other. Christ, the union of human and divine, is only persuasive when put in terms of theological aesthetics. Revelation, like beauty, is the “convergence of what I cannot have invented and yet at the same time what possesses compelling plausibility for me.”\(^\text{21}\) It is beyond the power of reason and yet supremely rational.

Though Balthasar does not apply his argument to moral questions, we can put this concern for credibility in terms of morality. The cosmological reduction, by limiting itself to the external, prohibits any formational effect on the individual. The abstracted Christ does not offer us anything that we could not already glean from the world. It denies the possibility of meaningful revelation; there may be objective truth, but there is no unveiling, nothing beyond the grasp of observation and reason. We may blindly obey, but we cannot become more than the world says we can be. Morality may still exist, but it would have a worldly orientation rather than a transcendent one. Christ has no place in this morality. The anthropological reduction, by limiting itself to the immanent, likewise excludes Christ from morality. As an existential and “purely human” religion, it must reject any universal, transcendent norm. Christ has no place because Christ would displace the primacy of human experience. In both cases, morality amounts to nothing but an arbitrary preference for the objective or the subjective. Neither leads to an account

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 52–53.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 53.
of action that holds the two together. Their shortcomings demonstrate why it is necessary to ground morality on beauty.

Alasdair MacIntyre laments the dominance of these types of ethical methods in *After Virtue*. Moral disagreements, he argues, have become “interminable” because they presume an impersonal standard when in reality each conversant builds a system on arbitrary choice (MacIntyre has in mind methods like consequentialism and deontology).\(^2^2\) Objective and subjective fall apart: “The utterance of any universal principle is in the end an expression of the preferences of an individual will and for that will its principles have and can have only such authority as it chooses to confer upon them by adopting them.”\(^2^3\) Without a *telos*, morality veers into either Scylla or Charybdis. Edward T. Oakes argues that Balthasar provides the guiding *telos* for which MacIntyre longs. Balthasar’s account of mission ties together the personal and the universal: “That main contribution Balthasar’s Theodramatics can make to this debate is his discussion of the end and purpose of man *within the divine drama* as revealed in a sense of *personal vocation*.\(^2^4\) Rather than an arbitrary personal choice masquerading as an impersonal standard, we embrace the universal through the personal. Balthasar’s conception of beauty makes this morality intelligible.

In fact, Balthasar’s argument for the necessity of beauty suggests that moral language is sterile without aesthetic language. How can we speak of choosing the good or of struggling for the good without beauty? If morality is totally objective, then “good” is reduced to an abstract principle, demanding obedience without offering anything truly

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 20–21.
positive. This ethic is pure disinterest; it has nothing to make it compelling to the
individual. If morality is totally subjective, then “good” is reduced to the fulfillment of
personal needs and desires. This ethic is purely existential; it has nothing by which to
direct itself except the whims of the individual. Both use the word “good,” but without a
connection to metaphysical beauty, this “good” can mean anything.

In *The Beauty of the Infinite*, David Bentley Hart explores the connection between
rhetoric and beauty at great length. He rejects postmodern claims that all rhetoric is
inherently violent, arguing that Christian rhetoric is based on an ontology of peace. One
of the many things Hart argues is that one cannot ever truly escape metaphysical claims,
which he defines as any terms or conjectures that exceed the empirical. After all, one
cannot limit consideration to the immanent without defining the limits of the immanent
and thus presuming a boundary between immanent and transcendent, which presupposes
a metaphysics.²⁵ He notes that Nietzsche, the progenitor of rhetoric as violence, offers an
arbitrary aesthetic no more self-evident than that offered by Christianity.²⁶

The key question is whether or not beauty is arbitrary. Hart contends that it is
not—or at least that Christians must affirm that it is not. Creation is a gift, and as such it
implies a great deal about the nature of beauty. Hart elaborates: if creation is unnecessary
and gracious, then it must be ontologically beautiful and good.²⁷ From the beginning God
called creation “good.” For Hart, God’s interest in creation is the ground of morality:

The Christian infinite, though, is ‘ethical’ only because it is first ‘aesthetic’; it
opens up being and beings—to knowledge or love—only within the free ordering
of its beauty, inviting a desire that is moral only because it is not disinterested.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 102.
²⁷ Ibid., 166–167.
²⁸ Ibid., 15.
Beauty makes possible moral claims that transcend the self. Balthasar relies on a similar idea in Love Alone, arguing that Christianity is persuasive because it affirms the self and the other, which is love. If love alone is credible, then good is only attractive under the aegis of love.

Balthasar is careful to distinguish his approach from one that simply employs aesthetic terms by stressing the difference between this approach, “aesthetic theology” and his own, “theological aesthetics.” Both want to explore the “possibility of there being a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world.” They differ radically, however, in the way they conceive this relationship. Notice what the different adjectives imply: theological aesthetics presumes there can be aesthetics without theology, while aesthetic theology presumes there can be theology without aesthetics. It is the latter notion that Balthasar fervently rejects. Aesthetic theology was the German Idealist/Romantic response to Enlightenment rationalism. Balthasar cites Johann Gottfried Herder, who attempted to produce a “bridge” between poetry and theology, as one example. Herder regarded the Bible as the manifestation of all the beauty and truth of humanity. The problem, Balthasar explains, is that this is all the Bible is for Herder: the pinnacle of human truth. Even the most transcendent moments in the Bible, like the Resurrection, only proclaim humanity’s eternity and immortality. Herder fails to distinguish the natural from the supernatural.

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30 Ibid., 78.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 81.
33 Ibid., 86–89.
Aesthetic theology does not permit divine revelation to bring anything new to the table. It confuses human subjective freedom with divine freedom. Revelation, argues Balthasar, must bring “its own criterion and its own beauty” or else it is simply a reflection of human realities. Aesthetic theology’s criterion for judging beauty is the worldly measure of beauty. Balthasar argues that this limitation diminishes the autonomy of divine revelation. Theological aesthetics, for instance, judges poetry by the criterion of divine revelation. Aesthetic theology judges divine revelation by the criterion of human poetry; it subsumes divine revelation under human preferences. But divine revelation should tell us something that we could not know otherwise.

*ii. Theology with Beauty*

So how does theological aesthetics illuminate revelation? How does the experience of beauty hold together the objective and the subjective? How can we affirm that something is both unimaginable and utterly compelling? For Balthasar things are always more than the sum of their parts. His theological aesthetics does more than reject the cosmological and anthropological reductions.\(^\text{34}\) Balthasar affirms, first of all, the *analogia entis*, the belief that “there exists an analogy between God’s work of formation and the shaping forces of nature and of man as they generate and give birth…[such that] the beautiful brings with it a self-evidence that en-lightens without mediation.”\(^\text{35}\) There is a likeness between God and creation, even though the unlikeness is always greater. Hart argues that every conception of revelation depends upon this analogy; without it creation


would have no way to understand God’s communication. Finite beings disclose something of Being itself. A finite being expresses the infinite (and grows closer to it) by becoming more itself, that is, by embracing its particular form of finitude. Balthasar describes this in terms of form and splendor. “Form” is the physical composition of a finite being, whereas “splendor” is the infinite/divine reality shining through form. The form of a beautiful thing is a union of two things: “It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, and it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths.” Although we can speak of form and splendor individually, we cannot actually separate them: “We see form as the splendour…We are ‘enraptured’ by our contemplation of these depths and are ‘transported’ to them.” We only delight in a beautiful form because of the splendor that it manifests. In order to truly perceive a flower—to appreciate its beauty—one must “receive” it as an “appearance” of the depths of reality. One delights in the form of the flower only because in that form one perceives the splendor of beauty. Thus the beauty of the flower is the revelation of an invisible, interior, transcendent reality. Balthasar insists: “To reduce the laws of this essence to mere utilitarian principles would be blasphemous.” Such a reduction would reject delight outright. Knowledge, so conceived, could not help but run “aground in shallow functionalism.” Once again the true and the good become arbitrary choices; there is nothing attractive or desirable about either. We would be mistaken, however, to think that theological aesthetics merely defends ephemeral loveliness. Balthasar’s concept of delight has broader implications. It

37 Ibid., 246.
39 Ibid., 116.
40 Ibid., 115.
41 Ibid., 149.
42 Ibid., 433.
43 Ibid., 436.
is the answer to what makes Christianity credible and this is why Balthasar’s theology has moral implications. It applies to perception itself. Perceiving the form and splendor of a flower or a saint does not leave us untouched. We do not perceive without responding.

iii. Combining Perception and Participation

Talking about “perception,” either as a term or as an activity, raises many questions. How do we perceive? What do we perceive? Can we trust our perceptions? We cannot answer these questions easily or quickly. The English word “perception” comes from the Latin *per-cipio*, “to seize, to take to one’s self.” The German verb *Wahr-nnehmen* comes across a bit more nobly as “to take to oneself what is true.” Perception, in short, focuses on the subject. Changes in how we understand the subject—changes in anthropology or epistemology—change the way we define perception. A full account of the problems and loaded meanings of “perception” in modern theological and philosophical literature would distract more than it would inform. Nevertheless we should not gloss over the problems of perception. Better to clarify what Balthasar means by perception.

Balthasar rejects aesthetic theology for its failure to perceive rightly. Aesthetic theology limits perception to the subjective. It locates perception entirely within the activity and capacity of the perceiver. The worldly becomes the limit of what aesthetic theology can perceive, leaving no possibility that in perceiving our capacity to perceive may expand. Though it may encounter the same divine revelation as theological aesthetics, aesthetic theology cannot recognize anything supra-worldly. It cannot perceive divine revelation because it cannot see beyond the limits of the subjective. We recognize

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in this constraint a claim of modernity: the belief that our truths and epistemological foundations must precede any “perceptions” of the world. Modernity, to risk a generalization, possesses an inherent distrust of perception. For instance, William P. Alston’s impressive work on religious perception and epistemology, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, argues that religious perception serves as a rational basis for religious belief. He does not set out to prove the truth of these perceptions or even of their connection to absolute Truth. Rather, Alston wants to defend the idea that “putative direct awareness of God” can provide a rational basis for certain religious beliefs and practices. For Alston, religious practices based on “putative” perceptions are just as rational as any other human practices. He even admits that one must be a member of a particular religious tradition for the rationality of that tradition to be clear. Perception for Alston has a subjective orientation. Alston has different concerns than Balthasar, so it would be unfair to dismiss this approach out of hand, yet we can see in his basic goal the acceptance of modernity’s claim. Alston isolates “religious experience” as a particular type of perception. Balthasar does not. For Balthasar every human perception in every possible form points to God. Indeed, Sarah Coakley criticizes Alston for focusing on Teresa of Ávila’s “peak experiences” rather than on how her daily practices transformed her perception.

Philip Blond argues that modernity’s turn to the subjective, precipitated in part by nominalism, separates revelation from reality and isolates perception within subjectivity.

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The active subject “perceives” a world that is “passive and existent, there either for itself or as a fulfilling receptacle for our intentions.” Marxism, which believes that the world and revelation are given to us, cannot accept this one-sided understanding of perception. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Blond explains, recognizes that there is an “irreducible distance between ‘my particular flesh’ and the world in general” which leads him to consider a “second visibility.” This second visibility is the background against which individual things exist and are recognized to exist as individuals, despite all being part of the “one body” of the world. The recognition of distance, in other words, informs us that the visible cannot explain the whole of reality. We can only explain it honestly—but not fully—by appealing to the “invisible.” All things exist as participations in the invisible. For Blond, we cannot speak of perception solely in subjective terms: “Perception takes us beyond any secular opposition [between world and God], it affirms us and our objects and it affirms them both as participation in and as culmination of God.” We must appeal to something beyond the subject to explain perception.

For Balthasar the perception of revelation is also participation in revelation. Aidan Nichols explains that the object takes an active role in perception: “The light of faith also breaks forth from within the revelatory form itself.” Splendor does not wait for us to perceive it; we perceive by participating. Perception for Balthasar includes seeing, hearing, believing, understanding and any human activity that illumines the perceiver. When we perceive, we encounter the other. The degree to which we perceive depends upon the degree to which we allow ourselves to engage this objective element. Blond

49 Ibid., 529.
50 Ibid., 533.
51 Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 25.
contends that Christianity offers the best possibility of explaining perception: “Without a cognisance of the invisible, immanence remains trapped in untruth, for it is impossible to account for visibility apart from invisibility and then claim truthful knowledge.”

He goes on: “God is only seen when every being and each and every visible surrenders idolatrous self-determination to enter into the beauty and light of infinite participation.”

Blond rejects the modernist notion of a secular realm—a realm intelligible apart from theological reasoning—because perception of existence always means participation in an existence that is both visible and invisible.

Only theological aesthetics accurately expresses the experience of revelation such that we understand what makes Christianity persuasive. If form really does radiate splendor, then theology must be more than rhetoric. We need theological aesthetics in order to respect the autonomy of the object. After all, form is only the physical structure of a beautiful object. Splendor, the radiation of beauty, is the enrapturing testimony of an interior reality. One can describe it, but never completely comprehend it. This enduring mysteriousness is why Balthasar calls the reduction of a flower’s beauty to utilitarian principles “blasphemous.”

Form lends itself to objective descriptors (e.g. red versus blue; tulip versus rose), but splendor, though subjectively experienced, defies definition. Balthasar’s theological aesthetics consequently includes both a “theory of vision” and a “theory of rapture.” These refer to perception and participation, respectively. Balthasar also calls them, “fundamental theology” and “dogmatic theology.”

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53 Ibid., 533.
55 Ibid., 122.
56 Ibid.
theology are “inseparable.”\textsuperscript{57} We perceive that a flower is beautiful only after its beauty enraptures us.

Here we can see clearly why Balthasar’s theological aesthetics must be the starting point of Christian morality. One does not perceive without participating, and one does not participate without perceiving. In the same way, one does not receive moral knowledge without being formed, and one cannot be formed without moral knowledge. The fact that perception is inseparable from participation indicates that beauty is necessarily \textit{moral} in that it provides objective norms and \textit{formational} in that it compels a response. Though in what follows I will discuss each of these in turn, one cannot, strictly speaking, separate the two. “Moral” here refers to the content of perception whether this knowledge takes the shape of intuition or scholarship depends upon the particular formation, as will become clear later. If only theological aesthetics can articulate what makes Christianity persuasive, then only by starting with theological aesthetics can Christians make their morality intelligible.

\textit{b. The Subjective Evidence: Beauty is Formational}

Rodney Howsare summarize the first volume of \textit{The Glory of the Lord} as the way beauty appears and the way it is perceived.\textsuperscript{58} Balthasar addresses these aspects in the two main sections of \textit{GLI}, “the objective evidence” and “the subjective evidence.” The two are inseparable, yet distinguishable. Ontologically the objective evidence precedes the subjective because beauty exists before we perceive it. Epistemologically, though, the subjective precedes the objective because we are not aware of beauty until we perceive it.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{58} Howsare, \textit{Balthasar}, 69.
Balthasar begins with the subjective because it is what we experience first. Adopting Balthasar’s order here illustrates that we must first be formed in order to engage the content of that formation, even if the content technically precedes the formation. Only after we are formed do we realize that we have been formed. This realization then propels us to an even greater formation. Although Balthasar does not connect this experience to ethics, we can take up his account of the subjective evidence to show that beauty is necessarily formational.

i. Formation

Stanley Hauerwas, in searching for the best response to the question “Why should I be moral?” eventually settled on responding to the question with another question: “Do you like to eat?” Hauerwas’s point is that if you are alive, you are already moral. “Moral” refers to the manner in which you live. The real question is not “Why should I be moral?” but “What sort of habits should I develop?”59 In a general sense, “formation” refers to all the things that go into making each of us who we are. An Aristotelian or Thomist might use the term “habituation.” We are all formed into particular individuals; the question facing us is “How should I be formed?”

In a narrower sense, formation can also refer to specific social contexts. Though “formation” may be a universal phenomenon, we all experience it particularly. We all are the products of specific cultures with specific traditions and histories. MacIntyre argues that we cannot escape being formed by these practices: “The story of my life is always

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embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.\textsuperscript{60} Moral philosophies, according to MacIntyre, reflect the social situations in which they exist (though we are not necessarily limited to the moralities we receive). Formation always occurs within a society. “Formation,” as I use the term, incorporates this meaning too.

I claim that formation also occurs as the response to beauty. In fact, encountering beauty is unavoidably formational. Consequently, we cannot consequently put any limits upon it. Christians still ought to rely upon tradition—especially given the Incarnation—but if we regard formation as the response to beauty, then we cannot place limits upon it without also placing limits on beauty. Beauty demands a radically open conception of formation, one that includes traditional notions of habituation and social practices without limiting it to these things. We should expect new formations to emerge within older ones.

\textit{ii. Perception is Formation}

Theological aesthetics concerns the most formational of all human activities: perception. Perception, as Balthasar’s appeal to the \textit{analogia entis} makes clear, is nothing less than the apprehension of God’s glory in the world, which is a “universal human phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{61} It applies to all people regardless of holiness or even age. We must remember that Balthasar retrieves beauty as a transcendental property of being. There is no corner of creation in which beauty is not present. If reality has form, then reality is beautiful. The cosmological and anthropological reductions and aesthetic theology fail because they do not keep themselves open to the whole. In some way they close.

\textsuperscript{60} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 221.
themselves off to part of reality. In *Theo-Drama Vol. 4*, Balthasar explains that these approaches rely on a lie.\(^6^2\) Insisting that autonomy is self-given, denies the transcendent origin of the very thing that allows us to deny it at all.\(^6^3\) Perception, properly understood, is openness to the world, to other people, and most fundamentally, to God. Yet it is the objective evidence that enables this openness. The objective evidence must first create the subject. Nowhere is this clearer than in the relationship between a mother and child:

> After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child’s smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child, and as the child awakens to love, it also awakens to knowledge: the initially empty-sense impressions gather meaningfully around the core of the Thou.\(^6^4\)

Balthasar returns to this image frequently. Appropriately too, since it challenges many of the modern world’s assumptions about individualism. The child does not first encounter her mother as an “I.” Her “I”-ness must be awakened by the mother, who is a “Thou.” There is no “I” without “Thou.”

> With this primal experience of beauty, Balthasar emphasizes the inseparability of beauty and love. “Love” describes the unity of vision and rapture, subjective and objective:

> Whatever we love—no matter how profoundly or superficially we may love it always appears radiant with glory; and whatever is objectively perceived as glorious—no matter how profoundly or superficially we experience it—does not penetrate into the onlooker except through the specificity of an eros.\(^6^5\)

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\(^{6^3}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{6^4}\) Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, 76.

\(^{6^5}\) Ibid., 54.
The child comes to know beauty through the love her mother offers. In the same way God is revealed as love through beauty.  

Balthasar spells out that this primal experience reveals beauty as well as the other transcendentals:

Man exists only in dialogue with his neighbor. The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother. In that encounter, the horizon of all unlimited being opens itself for him, revealing four things to him: (1) that he is one in love with the mother, even in being other than his mother, therefore all Being is one; (2) that that love is good, therefore all Being is good; (3) that that love is true, therefore all Being is true; and (4) that that love evokes joy, therefore all Being is beautiful.

We do not grasp beauty; beauty grasps us. Every human being experiences beauty as formational from the very first moments of awareness. Through this formative aesthetic experience the depths of reality become intelligible. Only after being formed by beauty do we become capable of responding to beauty.

The language of beauty allows Christians to articulate a response not just to beauty but to revelation. Christians affirm that “God appears. He appeared to Abraham, to Moses, to Isaiah, and finally in Jesus Christ.”

God witnesses in us so that we may recognize the witness. Faith cannot approach God’s historical witness with pre-determined, self-derived criteria. The Christian neither controls revelation, as shown with regard to the anthropological and cosmological reductions, nor rationally deduces the content of revelation. Faith is being “struck” by God’s witness, recognizing the uniqueness, rightness, and absoluteness of Christ’s witness. Balthasar calls this response “Christian attunement.” He describes it as “‘consonance’ with God.”

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67 Balthasar, My Work, 114.
68 Ibid., 116.
70 Ibid., 236.
matching, accomplished in and through grace, of one’s ontology and experience to Christ’s.  

Christian attunement “lies beyond activity and passivity.” It is passive due to the “im-pressing of a superior human and divine feeling upon the believer” and at the same time active in that the Holy Spirit directs the impression “to become the ex-pression of the soul itself.” Attunement explains why the subjective experience of beauty is necessarily formational: to perceive beauty is to become more beautiful. Balthasar explains: “He [the Christian] not only ‘finds’ the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.” “Possession” can have a negative connotation of dominance or coercion. Here, however, it acknowledges that we cannot dominate beauty. Perception as participation is to allow oneself to be “taken up wholesale into the reality of the beautiful.” In the sense of “attunement,” it is to vibrate in harmony with the beautiful. A violin does not lose its individual distinctiveness by playing with an orchestra. Rather, its distinctness is brought to fulfillment. Similarly the Christian does not lose anything by becoming attuned to Christ. Attunement to Christ is Christian formation.

Accordingly, Christian perception is participation in the Christ-form. To put it in Scriptural terms, “The Biblical experience of God in both the Old and the New Testaments is characterized as a whole by the fact that the essentially ‘invisible’ (Jn 1.18) and ‘unapproachable’ (1 Tim 6.16) God enters the sphere of creaturely visibleness, not by

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71 Ibid., 236–237.
72 Ibid., 248.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 240.
75 Ibid., 241.
means of intermediary beings, but in himself.” As the form, “[Christ the] archetype is both things at once: the inimitable and what must be imitated.” Christ is the revelation of the Father: “The Incarnation is the eschaton, and, as such, is unsurpassable.” At the same time, as the summation of human being he draws all other human beings “into this highest archetypal experience.” Imitation of the Christ-form, that is, formation, must occur in the whole Christian. Not just inner thoughts and feelings, but our whole lives must radiate the beauty of Christ. Scripture and tradition testify to the necessary corporeality of imitating Christ. Balthasar identifies a fourfold tradition of archetypal experience—Petrine, Pauline, Johannine, and Marian—that reveal and honor the different charisms of Christian life as well as the “multi-layered” Church. No one experience perfectly imitates the inimitable, just as no single beautiful thing perfectly expresses beauty, but nothing is beautiful without radiating transcendent beauty, and no one is a Christian without radiating the Christ-form.

By upholding the mystery of God, theological aesthetics also suggests that no single formational system, method, or principle can express it completely. This openness also points to what can go wrong in formation. For while the process of formation relies on the individual Christian’s receptivity, perceiving does not completely protect against mal-formation. To perceive is to participate, but one can participate poorly. An individual may be so closed-off that rapture cannot take place. Even being enraptured, however,

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76 Ibid., 293.
77 Ibid., 294.
78 Ibid., 296.
79 Ibid., 294.
80 Ibid., 296.
81 Ibid., 301.
82 Ibid., 342.
does not guarantee a lasting or perfect transformation. Participation is twofold: the one who perceives must also respond correctly. An individual might encounter something beautiful—a painting, a musical composition, or a geological wonder—but fail to follow its beauty back to Christ (or even a non-Christian conception of the infinite). Or one might, like Nietzsche, offer an arbitrary aesthetic. Balthasar, quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins, explains that those who fail to follow beauty back to its source are like Lucifer, “‘dwelling on his own beauty, an instressing of his own inscape…’ which explains how there can be ‘beautiful evil.”’\(^{83}\) Those who love art and beauty can still commit monstrous acts; some have even committed atrocities in the name of beauty.

If we see but do not re-form, then we have only half-seen. We have sated ourselves on the slender fare of mere delight. We can twist beauty into an idol, the incarnation of our hubris. We can perceive and then choose not to live out the response; this is the “lie” that Balthasar defines as “evil.”\(^{84}\) Truly perceiving beauty requires participation in the Christ-form, which further means recognizing that Christ is the form, measure, content, and goal of formation.

**c. The Objective Evidence: Beauty is Moral**

**i. Christ is the Form**

I claim that “beauty is moral” represents the proper response to perceiving beauty. Again, though Balthasar does not put his argument in these terms, calling beauty “moral” is one way to interpret his account of objective beauty. This interpretation acknowledges

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beauty’s transcendence and affirms the human orientation to it. Beauty is moral because it has an objective existence apart from our perception of it. To lay hold of it, to attempt to verify, validate or definitively prove the necessity of it would require one to deny its very existence. Aesthetic theology and the cosmological and anthropological reductions proffer a purely subjective beauty that exists only in perception (the cosmological reduction, after all, is only the human perception of the external). The problem is that a morality without an objective account of beauty, and consequently the good, is self-referential rather than formational. There is nothing objective upon which to build a morality.

Balthasar claims that we need to appreciate the objective form of revelation for three reasons. First, if God is free, then even the most interior, subjective experience of revelation is objective. God remains distinct from creation. Second, if God is the creator, then creation reveals his glory; the being of things reveals Being. Third, if Christ is the totality of revelation, then he is God and not merely part of God. Indeed, since Christ has a definite form, the form of revelation is not “the limitation (περάς) of an infinite non-form (ἄπειρον), but the appearance of an infinitely determined super-form.” Revelation has form because God has super-form; we do not impose form on an amorphous divine experience.

Affirming the objective from a Christological perspective helps to explain why one experiences “rapture” in perception. Even though revelation may have different

86 Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 34.
88 Ibid., 422.
expressions, it is never merely a Platonic sign. Christ is a unity between material and spiritual. This unity is the center of existence; all external forms of being reveal an inner depth (the Word) that makes them enrapturing; the visible reveals the invisible. To limit consideration to the purely visible would reduce everything to “shallow functionalism” and ignore the enrapturing quality of beauty.

Christ is, first of all, the “centre of the form of revelation.” Everything the Church affirms revolves around the form of Christ. In order to be plausible as an objective revelation, the Christ-form must have an “interior rightness” and an “evidential power.” One finds the same features in an artistic masterpiece. The Christ-form, like the masterpiece, has the power to “illumine the perceiving person.” - Thou does more than awaken I; the Christ-form awakens the I by filling it with light. One can further apply this to formation in the broadest possible sense: “No one will ever argue that it is a person’s formation that actually produces the law of physics or the beauty and value of the work of art.” Formation draws its particular shape—and adjusts it when necessary—from the measure provided by objective reality. As the center of revelation, Christ provides both the form and the measure.

Accordingly, Christ is the form and measure of ethics. Christians seek to “attune” their form to the measure of Christ because Christ is both at once. Balthasar explains: “There is between his mission and his existence a perfect concordance: these two things

89 Ibid., 426.
90 Ibid., 424–426.
91 Ibid., 431.
92 Ibid., 436.
93 Ibid., 451.
94 Ibid., 453.
95 Ibid., 454.
96 Ibid., 452.
97 Ibid., 456.
‘are in tune.’” Christ’s form of human action provides the measure by which we judge human action. Balthasar contends that Christians must dispel all notions of Christ teaching an “interim ethics.” The singularity of his existence and mission reveals that Christ is what he taught. We must accept the Sermon on the Mount and all the rest of Christ’s teachings as established on the foundation of Jesus’ divine mission, on the guarantee of its implementability as insured by Jesus’ commitment of himself. The rock-like hardness of each of his sayings derives from the fact that each of them coincides with the totality of his existence.  

We accept Christ’s actions—indeed, the totality of his life—as morally formational. He is the aim of all ethics and aesthetics and all strivings for the absolute. Moreover, Christ the archetypal form offers a concrete goal. We do not seek a diluted or generalized principle: “if God did not in himself possess form, no form could ever arise between him and man.” Christ reveals the form of love that exists in the Trinity.  

Christ, as form and measure, provides the content of our ethics. He is that from which we draw our actions and that by which we judge our actions. We must reiterate here—even at the risk of belaboring the point—that the Christ-form, even summed up as “love,” must not be conflated with a purely worldly understanding of love. Our being and sense of goodness derive from this love, even while it remains incomprehensible to us. Human beings depend upon “God’s self-disclosure: it is not something he [man] can postulate.” We receive and respond.

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98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 459.
100 Ibid., 465.
101 Ibid., 467.
102 Ibid., 468.
ii. Learning the Form

Balthasar describes the process of learning to see the Christ-form as the ability to “distinguish art from kitsch.”\textsuperscript{104} This ability is recognition rather than designation. A “good eye” is more “bestowed” than “acquired” says Balthasar.\textsuperscript{105} We do not designate masterpieces (whether they be in the visuals arts, music, or literature); we recognize them. We recognize that these practices possess a perfection that we could not otherwise have imagined. Only after we recognize a masterpiece can we contemplate what makes it a masterpiece. The more we recognize, the fuller our picture of perfection. At the same time, the unpredictable, the otherwise unimaginable qualities of masterpieces prevent us from acquiring of our own volition, a “good eye.” We would have to imagine the unimaginable. The ability to distinguish the Christ-form is like the ability to recognize a masterpiece. It lies in the fact that Christ’s form is qualitatively different from all others.\textsuperscript{106} As a result, the ability to perceive Christ’s quality comes from the Christ-form. His quality enables discernment and distinction—Christian formation. Someone with a “good eye” craves the unimaginable, which we recognize but cannot predict, and which finally lies beyond our control. Kitsch, on the other hand, is the most imaginable of all art.\textsuperscript{107} It “plays on easy emotions and reflexive responses.”\textsuperscript{108} Balthasar had elite taste, so one can easily imagine why he might set Christ against mass-produced, mass-appealing

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
kitsch. The “easy emotions” and “reflexive responses” it plays on are not false emotions or false responses, but they also do not lead to growth. Kitsch is palatable, even pleasant, but it does not sustain. It may bring joy, but only the joy of easy pleasure. Kitsch is a food without calories, or too many calories and not enough nutrients. On its own, kitsch is harmless. Problems arise when one confuses kitsch with art.

Balthasar argues that one’s eye for Christ’s quality develops in four directions: 1) contemplation; 2) verification; 3) self-differentiation; 4) demonstrability. “Contemplation” refers to the way the Christ-form re-forms the perceiver: “The image unfolds into the one contemplating it, and it opens out its consequences in his life.” Contemplation is the expression of the form’s impression on the perceiver. “Verification” describes the enrapturing quality that testifies to quality; the Spirit verifies the unity of image and power radiating from the form. “Self-differentiation” testifies to the uniqueness that the Christ-form proclaims; just as a masterpiece must offer something new, the Christ-form stands apart from all other religious forms. Finally, “demonstrability” attests to the fact of misapprehension; the failure to perceive the Christ-form constitutes a failure on the part of the perceiver. Balthasar does not seek to pillory non-Christians or non-believers. He simply argues that if beauty exists, then the fact that some fail to recognize its existence does not diminish that existence. Before one can see the Christ-form, faith must first re-form one’s capacity to see: “A whole symphony cannot be recorded on a tape that is too short.” The Church can catechize all

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110 Ibid., 473.
111 Ibid., 496.
112 Ibid., 499.
it wants—even at the end of a spear or a gun or a sermon threatening the conflagrations of hell—but it cannot coerce true faith nor force the perception of glory.

The content of moral formation comes from the multitude of ways in which Christians perceive the Christ-form. It must be a multitude because beauty defies abstraction. We do not recognize beauty only after we have developed abstract propositions defining it, for beauty is prior. We cannot, likewise, limit our morality to abstract propositions. Rationalist ethics (e.g. deontology or utilitarianism) is ethics as a series of abstract propositions, something Hauerwas and Burrell call, “quandary ethics.”

Rationalist ethics places the focus of ethics on a dilemma that can be solved, supposedly, only by the correct application of abstract principles. As a result, ethicists of these schools ground ethics on what Balthasar calls the “sandbank of rationalist abstraction.” To derive a rationalist Christian ethics would require us to view Christ as an abstract proposition rather than as a concrete, historical person—and consequently to reject everything significant about the Incarnation. But the Incarnation necessitates a sacramental view of creation. Beauty can only be seen through particular, historical, and concrete things. In the second and third volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*, accordingly, Balthasar appeals to the works of twelve historical individuals, letting all twelve stand on their own, for each possesses a unique beauty.

Rationalist ethics, on the other hand, would attempt to define the single, universally “beautiful” trait that lies behind these lives. The problem with this approach is

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that beauty (like the good) is neither a thing nor a system.\textsuperscript{116} In GL1 Balthasar shows that “one both can and must consider the revelation of the living God...not only from the point of view of its truth and goodness, but also from that of its ineffable beauty” such that “the ‘ethical’ is realised precisely in the figure of the ‘aesthetic.’”\textsuperscript{117} To learn the content of Christian ethics, we must learn to perceive expressions of the Christ-form. It is a task that cannot be reduced to learning abstract rules.

For instance, Balthasar praises the English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins for appreciating that one must see all things in light of the Incarnation. Hopkins understood that “the fact that all natures and selves are fashioned and determined for Christ, who is both their ultimate inscape and instress, means that there is no other possibility of reading them objectively and understanding them in relation to this centre in which they are integrated.”\textsuperscript{118} Hopkins’s concepts of “inscape” and “instress” are roughly equivalent to Balthasar’s terms “form” and “splendor.” Hopkins’s view of nature and his poetry are both sacramental, that is, both are what they signify. Christ is both aesthetic and ethical judge.

Theo-dramatic ethics recognizes that ethics represents the Christian response to beauty. The enrapturing experience of beauty does not alienate the finite being from finitude; rather, it draws the “I” into glory and away from self-centeredness.\textsuperscript{119} Through the process of glorification, Balthasar explains, we respond to God’s gift. Having been

\textsuperscript{116} Balthasar, \textit{Truth Is Symphonic}, 19.
enraptured causes us to recognize that “we must praise [God] through our existence.” As Balthasar says in *GL7*, “theology and dogmatics are not separable.” Neither, I would add, are aesthetics and ethics separable. The final experience and fulfillment of beauty for the Christian occurs through the appropriation and expropriation of the Christ-form. These actions are coterminus; to distinguish them is like trying to distinguish whether the beloved is loved in himself or in the lover. We only “appropriate” the Christ-form by allowing the Christ-form to “expropriate” us. In so doing the Christian is “stamped” with the kenotic love of Christ.

The pinnacle of this love is the cross. Christ, in dying for all, made all men brothers, and thus all perceptions of beauty occur in light of this truth. We cannot proclaim God’s glory, nor be proclaimed as God’s glory, without encountering God in our brother, which is to say in all human beings and even in all things. This election gives eternal value to the “Thou” such that the “I-Thou-We” of human fellowship is taken up into the I-Thou-We of trinitarian life. Christ in his entire existence—actions and teachings—is the “ontological basis and ethical model” for the Church. Christians must let themselves “be carried along” by the “rhythm” of Christ’s self-giving love. This is the connection between religion and morality; love is both the theory and the praxis of God. We respond to the Christ-form with our whole existence by recognizing and responding to God in all things that we perceive. The more we perceive and respond by

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120 Ibid., 397.
121 Ibid., 29.
122 Ibid., 400.
123 Ibid., 433.
124 Ibid., 438–439.
125 Ibid., 445.
126 Ibid., 446.
allowing ourselves to be enraptured, the more we are able to perceive and the better we are able to respond.

III. Theological Dramatics: Freedom and the Polyphony of Response

If Balthasar’s theological aesthetics are, as I claim, necessarily formational and moral, then why bother with dramatics? To put it another way, does the very fact that Balthasar moves on from aesthetics to dramatics undercut my claim that his aesthetics are moral and formational? Those acting—the spectators who become actors—are those formed within the horizon of beauty. As we have seen, beautiful things reflect beauty in their particularity, not in a homogenizing or reductive way. Good actions, then, reflect the good in their particularity. Balthasar contends that to articulate properly and to guide Christian action, one must use dramatic categories. This necessity explains why Balthasar makes the transition, moving to dramatics not in spite of the fact that aesthetics is moral and formational, but because it is. Unlike aesthetics, dramatics directly addresses the vicissitudes, uncertainties, and paradoxes that characterize action within finite existence. Throughout *Theo-Drama* Balthasar describes aspects of existence (death, anthropology, soteriology, etc.) using multiple overlapping explanations, insisting that no one definition encompasses the entirety of these concepts.

Balthasar’s theological dramatics describes Christian action not as a singular method or style, but as a polyphonous response to transcendent beauty. We cannot pin down action to a fixed set of rules. No single description of action encompasses every possibly response to beauty. Balthasar maintained that he had no ethic.¹²⁷ I argue that this

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polyphonic response, grounded in beauty and delineated in the *Theo-Drama*, constitutes a theo-dramatic ethics. This ethic is not a system, but a dynamic engagement with the world—an engagement that follows the perception of beauty.

*a. Christian Life as a Drama*

*i. The Transition from Aesthetics to Dramatics*

The transition from aesthetics to dramatics represents not so much a change in topic as a change in perspective. As transcendental properties of Being beauty, the good, and the true are convertible. Beauty is good is true. But the circumincession of transcendentals does not make dramatics or logic superfluous. Aesthetics presupposes dramatics and logic just as they presuppose aesthetics. Balthasar begins the *Theo-Drama* by insisting on this connection: “Right at the heart of the *Aesthetics*, the ‘theological drama’ has already begun.”\(^{128}\) The three cannot be totally separated, which is why Balthasar deems it necessary to revive theological aesthetics.\(^ {129}\)

The corollary is that theological aesthetics cannot stand on its own. Balthasar worries that an overemphasis on the aesthetic leads to a focus on perception of the Christ-form at the expense of participation in the Christ-form. No matter how closely linked perception and participation should be, Balthasar reminds us that aesthetics is “essentially a doctrine of perception,” and however much it expresses there remains “always a boundary between object and onlooker.”\(^ {130}\) Aesthetic language presupposes distance between human being and the object of human perception. The problem is that there is no


\(^{129}\) Ibid.; Howsare, *Balthasar*, 68. Regarding aesthetics, dramatics, and logic, Howsare says that “Balthasar distinguishes; he does not separate.”

absolute distance between us and what we perceive. The fact that we exist within creation as part of creation prohibits us from appealing solely to aesthetic categories to judge what takes place in creation.

Imagine if the figures in Georges Seurat’s painting *Un dimanche après-midi à l’Île de la Grande Jatte* tried to critique the work’s composition. At a certain point the exercise would become more reflexive than objective; they would be critiquing themselves. Even if they diligently mapped out the entire painting to the very edge of the canvas, they would still lack the distance necessary to make an objective aesthetic judgment. They cannot step out of the painting because they are the painting. We can see this easily because we can judge the painting from a position of distance. From our perspective, we can recognize how the use of pointillism only gives the impression of distinct figures. Look closely enough and there are no firm boundaries between the people and their world.

Human beings face a similar predicament: we lack the necessary perspective to objectively judge finite existence. We cannot judge creation as if we have uncreated eyes and so we only see transcendent beauty as it is mediated in creation. Imagine that Seurat wanted to communicate something to the figures in his painting. He would do so using means that his painted figures would understand. Their perception of his “revelation” would not require them to step out of the painting—to become “unpainted”—because this demand would defeat the purpose of the painting and of Seurat’s revelation to it. Though they could not imitate Seurat’s existence outside the painting, they could reflect it by imitating the way he expresses himself in the painting. This approach would also provide
them with a better aesthetic judgment because it is oriented beyond their own perspective. Participation improves and fulfills perception.

Theological aesthetics teaches us to recognize beauty in the world and in the process of recognizing it to be transformed by it. As an aesthetic approach it reaches a point at which perception must lead either to participation or delusion. To limit oneself to aesthetic perception will inevitably lead to aesthetic theology: “Succumbing to a static view which cannot do justice to the phenomenon.” Revelation is not static nor can the way we engage it be static without reducing its significance; our perception must presuppose participation. While aesthetics provides us with the tools for formation, dramatics instructs us in regards to how to put that formation to use. If theological aesthetic language does not progress beyond the static, it fails. In learning to tell art from kitsch we recognize that we lack the necessary distance to contemplate God’s form objectively. Theological aesthetics does not presuppose objective distance, and this lack of distance does not make our perceptions illusory. It does, however, drive us toward an understanding of perception as participation. Consequently, Balthasar argues that we must turn to dramatic categories, explaining that “man is a spectator only insofar as he is a player: he does not merely see himself on stage, he really acts on it.” Perception demands participation.

The transition from aesthetic to dramatics, then, follows naturally from the needs of theology. Balthasar affirms: “Revelation…is dramatic.” Since a doctrine of perception by itself cannot fully express the content of revelation, Balthasar proffers a doctrine of perception oriented toward participation. If theological aesthetics does not

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131 Ibid., 16.
132 Ibid., 18.
133 Ibid., 125.
lead to theological dramatics, Balthasar might say, then it would be aesthetic theology.

Aesthetics remains within dramatics because dramatics has its foundation in the experience of beauty.

Aidan Nichols says that Balthasar provides three reasons why “aesthetics needs dramatics”:

1) form, expression, and meaning (aesthetic categories) lead to dialogue, which is the ground of response and confrontation (drama);
2) in order to receive a word (a form) we need a receptive disposition, which means we have to have made a decision in freedom to receive;
3) the enrapturing encounter with beauty is an election.\footnote{Nichols, \textit{No Bloodless Myth}, 4–6.}

Aesthetic categories, according to Nichols, inevitably lead to dramatic ones (here: dialogue, freedom, and election). Indeed, Balthasar uses these categories to show the necessity of transitioning from aesthetics to dramatics.\footnote{Balthasar, \textit{Theo-Drama}, 1989, 23–30. Although in Balthasar the relevant subsections are titled, respectively, “form, expression, meaning,” “word, freedom,” and “election.”} Nichols specifies that the two are not parallel, but “inter-related essentially, not accidentally—not contingently but of their very nature.”\footnote{Nichols, \textit{No Bloodless Myth}, 4.} In the second volume of \textit{Theo-Drama}, Balthasar writes: “No one is enraptured [by beauty] without returning, from this encounter, with a personal mission.”\footnote{Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. 2: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God}, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 31.} This commissioning helps to explain why one can distinguish but not separate aesthetics from moral formation. It shows that Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is necessarily moral and formational only because it leads to theological dramatics. Conversely, it suggests that theological dramatics can be centered on the good only because it is grounded first on a theological aesthetics that is moral and formational.\footnote{Balthasar, \textit{Theo-Drama}, 1989, 16. Here Balthasar says, “aesthetics must surrender itself and go in search of new categories” (my emphasis).}
In short, Nichols argues that the circumincession of transcendentals explains the transition from aesthetics to dramatics. If beauty is good and good is beauty, then the study of beauty (aesthetics) has a natural connection to the study of good (dramatics). This interrelation, based on the convertibility of the transcendental properties, is certainly an adequate explanation of the transition.

Kevin Mongrain, on the other hand, argues that although unity of the beautiful and the good may explain why a transition is necessary, it does not explain why it is significant. He offers two ways to describe the transition. First he explains the “organic implicit-explicit” model, which states that contemplating beauty leads to performing good actions on account of the circumincession. Perception (abstractly conceived) leads to participation (abstractly sketched). Nichols’ analysis that aesthetic categories necessarily lead to dramatic ones fits under this model. While technically correct, Mongrain thinks that this explanation simplifies the meaning of the transition; we are left with an abstract understanding of the connection between perception and participation. Instead Mongrain offers the “dramatic organic” model. The “dramatic organic” heightens the claims of the organic implicit-explicit by attending to the particular roles played by Christ and the Holy Spirit. Balthasar, after all, repeatedly affirms that the Christ-form, the concrete universal, forms the center of his aesthetics and his dramatics. Addressing the same three dramatic categories as Nichols, Mongrain argues: First, the form that inspires dialogue is not an “impersonal worldly form,” but the Christ-form. Second, the decision we make in freedom is not simply to be receptive, but to be receptive to a

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140 Ibid., 191.
141 Ibid., 192.
142 Ibid., 191.
personal praxis guided by the Trinity. Third, our election emphasizes our unique roles in history because “the Christ-form grants horizontal history absolute meaning.” Beauty compels us to do something specific because it is not abstract. Consequently, Balthasar’s theological dramatics has the Christ-form as its center. Consequently, action grounded in beauty has a distinctly Christian character. Mongrain concludes: “Although aesthetic categories have the potential to express the integration of contemplation and action…this potential needs to be activated through the use of complementary analogical categories.”

Indeed, potential is not performance. Balthasar explains at the beginning of *Theo-Drama I* that while objects are beautiful, only actions can be good. Aesthetics can “ossify” in a way that dramatics cannot. This difference is the crux of the transition. They share the same content, but differ in their application. As Balthasar writes, “The reason why the *Aesthetics* has taken up so much space is that it always had to show the encountered reality at work—as theo-praxy.” Having been formed by the Christ-form, our actions shine with the light of Christ (as form does with splendor). Theological aesthetics perceives beauty through the actions of others. What is theo-praxy from one angle is theo-phany from another. As Balthasar notes in his analysis of Gerard Manley Hopkins: all things of beauty must be seen in light of Christ. The dramatics of one Christian’s life might provide the content of another Christian’s aesthetics.

\[143\text{ Ibid., 192.}\]
\[144\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[146\text{ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1990, 21.}\]
We learn the content of good actions (i.e. beauty) aesthetically, but we practice them dramatically. This connection shows why theological aesthetics must lead to theological dramas, for in order to remain theological aesthetics, a subject must recognize that what it perceives demands a participatory response. What one perceives is not static, but “at work.” As Mongrain’s second model makes clear, we perceive beauty not as a vague concept, but as the person of Christ. Dramatics is the response to the perception of the Christ-form with participation in the Christ-form. Dramatics is only concerned with the good because it is grounded in beauty, that is, Christ. Just as the Christ-form radiates in a multitude of particular forms, we participate in Christ through a multitude of different actions.

ii. Dramatics is a Theory of Action

Dramatics, quite simply, provides a better set of resources to describe the polyphony of possible actions. We all have at least an intuition of drama: “We are acquainted with it from the complications, tensions, catastrophes and reconciliations which characterize our lives.”149 Life is drama. Balthasar dedicates the prolegomena of the Theo-Drama to exploring it through examples from stage drama.150 On stage the human being endeavors “to observe and to judge his own truth,” an endeavor that highlights the paradox of human existence: observation and judgment require distance and yet there is no distance between the human being and existence.151 To observe and to judge one’s own truth is a goal beyond human capabilities. Balthasar insists that we

150 Ibid., 11.
151 Ibid., 12.
cannot do theology “from below” (the horizontal dimension, or finitude). There is no
distance between human life and theology. Balthasar privileges stage drama for a reason:
“In its première, the play enters into time as an event. It is so much an event, indeed, that
the Greeks mostly eschewed repeat performances: historical events are unique.” A
performance is an unrepeatable event—for both the performers and the spectators—in
which human beings have striven for transcendence. The same is true, claims Balthasar,
of life. Other representations of life (e.g. novels and films) are not unrepeatable in a way
that is as analogous to the experience of a finite life. We can examine a play and life from
many different angles, but we can never examine them from outside. Nor should we try.
The impossibility of an external standpoint leads Balthasar to discuss the conflict
between the “lyric” and “epic” styles of narrative. The lyric refers to the emotional,
personal, internal response and expression of a past event or experience, the perspective
of the participant. The epic, on the other hand, is the distanced, measured, rational
explanation of the disinterested observer. In lyric spirituality we talk to God; in epic
theology we talk about God. Both are important: the lyric provides Christians with an
“edifying utterance” while the epic focuses on external relations in order to deal “with
heretics or the threat of error.” At the same time, neither mode is sufficient for
theological reflection; the lyric limits itself to the subjective and the epic presupposes an
impossible objectivity. Balthasar offers drama as that which resolves the tension between
the two because the dramatic approach “embraces [the tension]: in the context of God’s
actions, which challenges the believer, takes him over and appoints him to be a

155 Ibid., 56.
One must commit one’s whole life, the entirety of one’s participation in existence, in order to “witness.”

Theological dramatics is more than a combination of epic and lyric. Frederick Bauerschmidt, in critiquing Balthasar’s (lack of a) political theology, claims that Balthasar “positions the dramatic between the poles of the ‘epic’ and the ‘lyric.’” Similarly, in *Improvisation*, Samuel Wells suggests that Balthasar “cannot quite maintain the dramatic tension balancing epic and lyric: anxious about modernity’s tendency to question, to doubt, and to debate, he lapses into epic mode and the perception of a predetermined narrative.” Both Bauerschmidt and Wells treat the epic and lyric as opposing forces. Even Balthasar recognizes the tension, speaking about the “split” of Christian utterance into these two “streams” as well as the need for synthesis. Bauerschmidt and Wells, however, overemphasize this split. One can distinguish between the two and talk about both in individual terms, but they are not truly “poles” because they are not antitheses. They do not oppose one another since neither can exist without the other. The lyric and the epic correspond to the subjective and the objective evidence of revelation in theological aesthetics (and in the negative sense, to the anthropological and cosmological reductions). Dramatics, accordingly, is not a balance point between lyric and epic. Instead, Balthasar talks about the “unity” between the lyric and the epic. In reference to Paul, he remarks:

> It is irrelevant whether he is speaking more ‘lyrically’ or more in ‘epic’ terms, for in both respects, above all, he is speaking dramatically: he shows how the drama

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156 Ibid., 57.
comes from God, via Christ, to him, and how he hands it on to the community, which is already involved in the action and must bring it into reality.\textsuperscript{160}

For Balthasar, Christian action—dramatic action—only reflects objective reality when it is supremely personal. We are always on stage; there is “no external standpoint.”\textsuperscript{161} The only way to “be” on stage (an epic way of putting it) is to participate (a lyrical exercise). Consequently, “epic” and “lyric” approaches constitute either useful tools or insidious temptations. Criticisms that Balthasar tends toward the epic do not appreciate the fact that he regards the epic and the lyric as in unity within the dramatic.

Karen Kilby recognizes this unity, but argues that Balthasar does not practice the dramatic theology that he advocates. Kilby questions whether a theological dramatics that eschews a purely external account can make objective claims about existence as “an all-encompassing drama.”\textsuperscript{162} Rodney Howsare, in a review of Kilby, contends that she fundamentally misunderstands Balthasar. Howsare says that Balthasar follows Thomas Aquinas in thinking that substance shines through accidents. Beauty radiates through particular forms (or that the whole shines forth through its parts). Since “difference does not preclude unity,” the dramatic actor can regard a unique role as part of a greater whole.\textsuperscript{163} Kilby, according to Howsare, denies this possibility. In response to Howsare, Kilby claims that she observes “that we cannot necessarily have a grasp on the \textit{whole of everything}, all at once, of a kind that Balthasar seems in places to suppose.”\textsuperscript{164} The above quotation from Balthasar regarding Paul, however, shows how Balthasar could respond to such a charge. His dramatics posit that since the perception of beauty keys us into the

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{162} Kilby, \textit{Balthasar}, 64.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 113.
existence of the whole, we can still act as if we are part of a whole, even without comprehending the entirety of the whole. To put it another way, Balthasar thinks that Christians have the freedom sometimes to speak “more epically” or “more lyrically” so long as they do so under the overarching category of the dramatic.

In addressing the epic and the lyric, Balthasar puts his finger on the tension within finite existence. Namely, the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions: Jesus Christ. God became flesh, not the concept of “flesh;” God became a particular human person while remaining God. Kilby, at least as Howsare reads her, wants to embrace the lyric because it strikes her as more honest: I cannot know the whole; I can only know what I experience. Balthasar, on the other hand, sees that in order to act as individuals we must first presume a whole. This position is simply another iteration of the I-Thou paradigm that grounds formation. Personal actions reveal the universal because they are personal, just as an “I” reveals a “thou.” In Christ’s life,

> every human fate is deprivatized so that its personal range may extend to the whole universe…Not only does this gather the unimaginable plurality of human destinies into a concrete, universal point of unity: it actually maintains their plurality within the unity, but as a function of this unity.\(^{165}\)

Recognizing Christ, as the “concrete, universal point of unity” calls Christians to redefine the personal as universally significant. We do not thereby lose our personhood. Even more, we recognize that persons and personal actions are significant by being personal. Theological dramatics reveals the unity of plurality. If theological dramatic were homogenized it would not be theological dramatics but aesthetic theology, for it would embrace only static objects—objects that we could control by defining them.

Balthasar’s theological dramatics, like his aesthetics, encourages variety. Instead of openness to forms it is openness to forms of life. Ben Quash argues that Balthasar’s approach affirms history. Human actions have transcendent significance because God is Incarnate in time as a particular, personal, and concrete actor. This significance necessitates a linear as opposed to a cyclical view of time since cyclical time does not progress or strive towards an Absolute, instead merely reflecting “the perpetual vicissitudes of the world and the human’s place in it.” In linear time, on the other hand, everything has significance because each moment and action is significant and unrepeatable. By affirming the particular and concrete, says Quash, Balthasar’s dramatics also affirm the “polyphonic character of Christian life, witnessed to both in Scripture and the Church.” Since the Incarnation revealed that particularity and finitude bear glory, “the path to holiness—to sainthood—is not principally one of withdrawal from all the contingent aspects of personhood…but doing things that are uniquely one’s own to do.” If human actions have significance—unrepeatable significance—then existence is characterized by freedom. Consequently, Balthasar’s project does not focus on the constraints of the horizontal—quite the opposite—it testifies to the openness of our existence in time. Dramatics provides the resources in which freedom is expressed as polyphony.

Balthasar’s appraisal of the “Trends of Modern Theology” in *Theo-Drama I* and *II* makes this freedom of expression clear. Balthasar lists nine trends: event, history,
orthopraxy, dialogue, political theology, futurism, function, role, freedom and evil.

Balthasar praises these attempts, noting that each offers something “indispensable.” These trends, he explains, rightly “see theology stuck fast on the sandbank of rationalist abstraction and want to get it moving again.” According to Balthasar, “rationalist abstraction” presupposes disbelief in God by looking for proof in the natural when revelation exists in both the natural and the divine. Like aesthetic theology, rationalist abstraction is intramundane. He points out, however, that each trend fails because each overstates its motivating idea. “Orthopraxy,” for instance, corrects an overemphasis on doctrine by focusing on action, but its focus on praxis ignores the distance between divine praxis and human praxis. If Christ did “everything” for humanity, then following Christ does not consist merely of doing “some right thing.” How, Balthasar asks, can one put the spotlight on human actions without taking it off of the divine action? He does not dismiss the goals of orthopraxy; Christianity should be active in the world. When orthopraxy becomes the whole of theology, though, Christianity becomes merely an ethic (i.e. the anthropological reduction).

Neither orthopraxy nor any of the other eight trends can take center stage. They either highlight the horizontal at the expense of the vertical (like Orthopraxy) or the vertical at the expense of the horizontal (like Event). None, by itself, unifies the horizontal-vertical. They all, Balthasar contends, “converge” in the theo-drama. Only

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173 Ibid.
176 Indeed, in the second volume of Theo-Drama, Balthasar says: “For in the real Christian life, dramatically lived out, there is no moment of pure orthodoxy distinct from and prior to orthopraxy. ‘Doxy’, rather, is simply an internal factor in the transition from divine to human ‘praxis’, in the realm of Christological dramatic action (Balthasar, Theo-Drama, 1990, 68.)
theo-drama has the room to let the strengths of each trend be realized without also being posited as absolute. Indeed, “divorced from this center, they largely cancel each other out.”\footnote{Balthasar, \textit{Theo-Drama}, 1990, 77.} Some worry that Balthasar privileges the vertical dimension at the expense of horizontal concerns (political theology, for instance).\footnote{Bauerschmidt, “Theo-Drama and Political Theology”; Wells, \textit{Improvisation}.} Mongrain describes this misunderstanding as reading Balthasar’s treatment of the vertical and horizontal in “either/or terms,” whereas for Balthasar “the deeper the internalization of vertically bestowed divine grace, the more perfect one’s praxis of creaturely love on earth.”\footnote{Mongrain, \textit{The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, 221.} Attention to the vertical improves one’s actions in the horizontal. Still, Balthasar does not explore these issue-based theologies as much as we might like, nor (as Mongrain and Gerard O’Hanlon lament) does he engage economics or politics at any length.\footnote{Ibid., 225; Gerard F. O’Hanlon, “Theological Dramatics,” in \textit{The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, ed. Bede McGregor, O.P. and Norris Thomas (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 109–109.} Nevertheless, the theological dramatics display a remarkable openness to all aspects of existence. Instead of constraining “theo-drama” by attempting to define it, Balthasar says: “Theo-drama cannot be defined: it can only be approached from various angles; all the more so because, as we have said, God himself, who escapes all our attempts to define him, appears on stage as the center of the dramatic action.”\footnote{Balthasar, \textit{Theo-Drama}, 1990, 62.} These trends, Balthasar shows, cannot complement one another without contradiction. They only converge (their unity is only apparent) when one recognizes theo-drama as their center.

The failure of the nine trends reveals the significance of dramatic categories to ethics. Hauerwas and Burrell reject ethical “systems” based on “quandaries” for reasons similar to why Balthasar thinks the nine trends fail. It is not they deny the existence of
ethical principles, methods, or dilemmas but that they simply want to show that
moralities—even those claiming to give preeminence to “rationality”—rely upon
narratives. Without a unifying center, so-called “rational” ethics will overemphasize their
particular foci (e.g. utility or duty) and lead to the shrill interminability that MacIntyre
bemoans. A theo-dramatic approach to ethics is therefore not an ethical “system” or one
centered on specific “quandaries.” An ethics, or a theology, centered on a completely
definable idea must inevitably become worldly and idolatrous. Aiming for the good
requires one to acknowledge that the good transcends definition. One must accept a
certain amount of apophatic ethical discernment.

“Systems” and “quandaries” still have value. Kant’s categorical imperative and
Mill’s utilitarianism offer useful ways to think about quandaries—because quandaries do
occur from time to time. The problem for ethics arises when we make the quandary
approach absolute. Consider the relationship between infrastructure and disaster
management; even the most stable infrastructure cannot prevent or foresee every disaster.
Or consider the practice of triage in a hospital or a battlefield. Triage is not un-Christian
or unloving, even though it uses a cost-benefit analysis to decide who receives treatment
and who does not. Within the situation, triage is the most caring action possible. To put it
simply, one can reject quandary approaches to ethics without rejecting the reality of
ethical quandaries. For Balthasar, it is the nature of finite life to face such impossible
choices. In addition to all the features noted above, the inevitable polyphony of Christian
actions requires an approach capable of expressing such diversity. Thus, theo-dramatic
ethics is pluralistic, but not pluralism.

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183 Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, “From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for
Rationality,” in Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory
Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 158–90.
b. Freedom

i. Responding to Beauty

Freedom according to Balthasar is the fundamental premise and the defining feature of theo-drama and hence of theo-dramatic ethics. The word “drama” has many connotations, but like its Greek root, δράω, it fundamentally means “action.” When Balthasar talks about drama he never forgets this meaning. Action presupposes tension. Tension presupposes distance, dialogue, and all the other interactions that take place between players. In terms of distance, there can be no action without room to move. Balthasar explains, for instance, that the distance and tension between heaven and earth reveals and forms the stage on which the theo-drama occurs.¹⁸⁴ There can be no action without tension, but there can be no tension without freedom. Thomas Dalzell describes freedom as the thread running through the whole trilogy.¹⁸⁵ Indeed, freedom refers not just to God but to God’s interaction with the finite. Biblical, Christian theology, Balthasar explains, makes a twofold claim about freedom: 1) God is genuinely free and 2) God has the ability to create genuinely free finite creatures without infringing upon God’s infinite freedom.¹⁸⁶

This paradox—the tension between infinite and finite freedom—is the tension driving the theo-drama. These two freedoms, moreover, do not exist in alienation from

each other. Finite freedom exists on account of and finds fulfillment in infinite freedom.\textsuperscript{187} Freedom is the driving force behind drama:

If there is to be drama, characters must face each other in freedom. If there is to be theo-drama, the first presupposition is that, ‘beside’ or ‘within’ the absolute, divine freedom, there is some other, nondiveine, created freedom; a freedom that shares, in some true sense, something of the autonomy of the divine freedom.\textsuperscript{188}

We cannot define “theo-drama” because the primary actor, God, defies definition. Finite freedom, in radiating from this infinite freedom, reveals the impossibility of constraining finite actions. Freedom as Balthasar describes it necessitates a polyphonic, pluralistic ethic. To insist upon a single form of life would deny that finite freedom has its source in the infinite (i.e. to resort to the cosmological or anthropological reductions).

Balthasar describes the awareness of freedom as part of our response to beauty. He speaks of beauty as “enrapturing,” but one should not misconstrue this experience as violent. Beauty does not seize us, does not inject us with madness or blind addiction, does not subjugate. Balthasar writes, “The power of aesthetic expression is never an overwhelming power but one that liberates…it does not fetter, it grants freedom.”\textsuperscript{189}

Indeed, beautiful things point back to transcendent beauty through their specific forms. Beauty is formational in that it compels a response and moral in that we obtain specific content from its particular forms. We realize these qualities in our response. Indeed, Balthasar describes the two dimensions of freedom as 1) making a Yes or No decision and 2) the space in which this decision is made.\textsuperscript{190} He offers an illustration: “When lovers hand themselves over to each other, they do not renounce the greater, inexhaustible realm

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 195–196.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 62–63.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 38.
of freedom: they simply anchor their mutual bond within it."\(^{191}\) Beauty awakens us to our freedom and in so doing grants us the freedom to respond.

We might trace the beauty of a flower or a magnificent vista back to Christ, but we cannot imitate petals or landscapes. When one talks about the narrative of Christ’s life, such a response seems easy to articulate, but then what is the moral and formational value of physical beauty, of “dappled things…and finches wings?”\(^{192}\) Balthasar explains: “The work’s freedom can educate us to the freedom of seeing and responding” because the grace of beauty is “a result of the over-fullness of the transcendental word and its revelation, which is too much for the confined and cramped vessels of human communicative skill.”\(^{193}\) Whether we refer to the poem or to the poem’s subject, we see and respond to its beauty by becoming more open to transcendent beauty.

Particular forms of beauty would then seem to provide little more than a catalyst for greater receptivity. If we accept Mongrain’s reading of the transition—that we must regard its full significance in terms of Christ and not abstract beauty—then aesthetic appreciation of things like natural beauty or the visual arts would seem to have no specific value for theological dramatics. In fact, Balthasar would agree that we do not need to know anything about Gerard Manley Hopkins, sprung rhythm, or finches in order to follow Christ. He admits, “Saying No to a work of art has relatively no consequences.”\(^{194}\) On the other hand, we cannot say no to every beautiful form without also saying no to God. Balthasar denounces l’art pour l’art because it diminishes beauty

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\(^{191}\) Ibid.


\(^{194}\) Ibid., 29.
to mere enjoyment; the thing has no value beyond itself. A beautiful form, however, properly perceived, always points beyond itself. Human beings always perceive absolute beauty in particular forms. We are made more open in particular ways; beautiful things are not merely catalysts. Catalysts do no cause reactions, but we never perceive beauty apart from particular beautiful things.

Responding to particular beautiful forms leads to particular actors with particular moral styles and content. Balthasar says explicitly: “no one is enraptured without returning, from this encounter, with a personal mission.” The response to beauty can take any number of forms. In regards to Scripture, he asks: “do not the intelligible units resemble the particles in a kaleidoscope…so that we can never say that any individual pattern is the most important, the normative one?” We respond to beauty particularly. Freedom is the mechanism by which beauty guides action. As we have already seen, perception of beauty is both moral and formational, but not in the same way for everyone. We receive different moral content and are formed into different actors depending on who, what, where, when, and how we perceive. A person who encounters natural beauty in early twentieth century Sauk County, Wisconsin, will respond differently from one who encounters it in twenty-first century downtown Milwaukee. The world offers an incalculable number of encounters with beauty that could lead to an incalculable number of moral formations. What is important is the way we respond: greater receptivity, greater freedom.

Freedom in Theo-Drama defines the core and the paradox of human existence and, consequently, the only way we can be good Christians. Balthasar admits that finite

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195 Ibid.
196 Ibid., 31.
197 Ibid., 63.
freedom sounds “self-contradictory.” Does not the very word “finite” necessitate boundaries and limitations? Balthasar, in fact, never rejects this first appraisal, writing, “While we are free, we are always only moving toward freedom.” We should again recall aesthetic experience, in particular the primal experience of a child with her mother. The child only recognizes herself to be an “I” through the encounter with her mother as a “Thou.” In the second volume of Theo-Drama, Balthasar expresses the dramatic analog to this experience in terms of freedom: “I am unique, but only by making room for others to be unique.” We only understand our uniqueness through openness to others and, conversely, we are only open to other beings through our self-understanding. We cannot embrace our own freedom and being without embracing infinite freedom and Being. Though limited, we are free, and Balthasar explains this paradox by delineating two pillars of freedom: freedom as autonomous motion and freedom as consent.

ii. Consenting to Beauty

Balthasar first addresses freedom as autonomous motion, or autexousion. If creatures lacked autonomy, there would be no infinite-finite interaction, only the infinite performing through finite puppets. Appealing to Irenaeus, however, Balthasar states, “It is a mark of infinite freedom that it does not use force.” Finite creatures do not have freedom if they lack autonomous motion. Balthasar points out that for Aristotle, Justin Martyr, and others, this pillar is necessary for ethics. Without freedom as autonomous

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198 Ibid., 207.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid., 209.
201 Ibid., 208–209.
202 Ibid., 216.
203 Ibid., 215.
motion we would have no responsibility because we would have no control over what we will or what we choose. Without the freedom to choose, human beings would be incapable of obedience.

Nonetheless, Balthasar argues that autonomous motion must be secondary. If we put autonomous motion in the primary position, then all of our activities, no matter how noble they may seem, would be nothing more than a form of egoism. Church fathers like Irenaeus, Clement, Origin, Maximus and Augustine regarded this pillar as a “premise” of the theo-drama but “never insist on this pole for its own sake.” These fathers differ from modern philosophers who posit the “freedom of the will” as primary. Self-possession without other-reference leads to a circular ethic. If one regards autonomous motion as primary, then one constrains ethics to the *autos*, to the self. An ethics that regards autonomous motion as the primary pillar of freedom cannot possess a *telos*; the *telos* would be the *autos*. Hart identifies this constriction as the reason why postmodernism relies on an ontology of violence: if will is primary then there cannot be a “good,” only be arbitrary “goods.” Were autonomous motion the primary pillar of freedom, we would not strive for the good but for our own self-interest. An ethic based on this notion of freedom does not guide action outward but circles back constantly into itself—ethics as Ouroboros, the snake devouring its own tail. This circularity is what basing ethics on beauty avoids; it gives us a transcendental *telos*—one free from the vicissitudes of finitude—that is still mediated to us through finitude. It is an objective ethic that is applicable to the vicissitudes of life more directly than broad, abstract categories.

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204 Ibid., 211–212.
205 Ibid., 215–216.
The other pillar, freedom as consent, is the primary pillar. Balthasar writes:

[It] enables us to affirm the value of things and reject their defects, to become involved with them or turn away from them...[because it is] a new and deeper indifference...to let the Good 'be', whether it be a finite or an infinite Good, simply for the sake of its goodness.”

Balthasar affirms that human beings, in finite freedom, strive toward the good because it is good. It is attractive. More importantly, by “consenting” we direct our attention outwards, which Balthasar insists we must do in order to be fulfilled. He notes that “allowing being to be true and good in itself is of the same (fundamental) order as recognizing what is true and good for me.” I cannot dictate the beauty or the goodness of a thing; I must simply let it be. Therefore, in order for something to be good “for me” I must let it be good on its own. I cannot control it anymore than I control the splendor of a beautiful object.

Freedom is most free when it consents to the good. Ignoring this orientation does not lead to greater freedom but to the opposite. For Balthasar, freedom as autonomous motion—freedom of the will—is not truly freedom. Without direction, one imprisons oneself within one’s self. As Balthasar puts it: “Finite freedom as autoexousian, as consent to oneself in the freedom of self-possession, is by no means alienated but rather inwardly fulfilled by consenting to Being-in-its-totality...as that which, in infinite freedom, creates finite freedom.” Freedom must be autonomous, but it must consent in order to be autonomous.

The performance of theo-dramatic ethics begins as consent to infinite freedom. An ethics based on beauty must begin with consent. Consent to beauty is consent to good.

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208 Ibid., 240.
209 Ibid., 242.
Balthasar argues that finite freedom is contingent upon and fulfilled in infinite freedom. He does not, however, think this contingency diminishes the genuine freedom of finite beings. While less necessarily than infinite freedom, finite freedom is genuinely free. Balthasar insists “God has given him [the human being] a genuine spiritual freedom which, because it has been really given, cannot be ‘upstaged’ by God’s infinite freedom but has to fulfill itself in its proper area.” Finite freedom, again, is made possible by and fulfilled in infinite freedom. Just as the finite only exists within the infinite, theodramatic ethics only exists within the good. The good serves as the goal of and the ontological necessity for “ethics” (at least, an “ethics” that is not a reductionism and that is not shallow or egoistic). At the same time, finite freedom’s fulfillment in infinite freedom does not destroy its finite character. Finite freedom is not absorbed into infinite freedom like a drop of water in the ocean. A better (though still inadequate) image would be of a single tile in a vast mosaic, at once unique and whole, yet only fulfilled when considered in relation to the bigger picture.

In fact, Balthasar argues that if finite freedom is genuinely free, it must somehow express the infinite. As he puts it: “if God wills the finite as such, it follows that he also has a particular will for each finite subject…his goal, too, embraces in unity the plurality of the world (which is created for the sake of this very unity).” For Balthasar, finite existence does not represent a shameful, extraneous encroachment on infinite freedom. Rather, finite freedom expresses something of the infinite. Though we all possess “finite freedom,” we can each use it in our own ways. Infinite freedom is the goal in which all these freedoms come together and remain distinct. Balthasar explains that once we

\[210\] Ibid., 284–285.
\[211\] Ibid., 428.
\[212\] Ibid., 302.
become aware that finite freedom is “given” and that it “can only occur within infinite freedom” we realize that the infinite stretches out before us as the only stage upon which we perform our freedom, upon which we choose our own “idea.” To put this in ethical terms, we each strive toward the good and find fulfillment in the good without thereby losing our individuality.

c. Mission: Responding to Freedom

i. A Plurality of Missions

Freedom without the good is a terrifying notion. Finite freedom made absolute, Balthasar warns, “is bound to become the hellish torment of a Tantalus.” Still, even with an orientation to the good, the way finite freedom interacts with infinite freedom may confound us. If the options are limitless, then choosing an action seems to have greater significance than the content of the action. Hart uses the market as an illustration of this sort of voluntaristic moral logic. In this type of system any expression of “freedom of choice” constitutes a “good” action regardless of the monstrosity of that choice. If infinite freedom not only allows but also necessitates plurality, then what prevents these various forms of life from succumbing to relativism? What is to prevent the proliferation of contradictory definitions of the good? What keeps them united?

Balthasar did not advocate relativism. He insists that finite and infinite freedom remain genuinely free. While “Christ” or “infinite freedom” provides a center, if misunderstood the plurality of theo-dramatic ethics could be mistaken for relativism.

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213 Ibid., 285.
214 Ibid., 213.
Theo-dramatic ethics must articulate how different forms of life can exist without degrading into chaos or arbitrary choice. One might also worry, as Hart does, that the notion of limitless choice could be used to defend despicable forms of life. The primary pillar of freedom is consent to the infinite, which is consent to the good. We each strive toward the same ultimate goal, but the good enables this striving, so protection against relativism must occur at the level of the individual.

Balthasar’s concept of mission explains how theo-dramatic ethics can promote plurality of “ethics” or “forms of life” that do not fundamentally contradict one another. The concept of mission, or at least the “transition from role to mission” begins in *Theo-Drama I* with the question “who am I?” Balthasar stresses that the question is “Who am I?” and not “what kind of being am I?” “Who am I?” is the actor’s realization of the difference between role and identity. In other words we experience an unavoidable tension “between what I represent and what I am in reality.” Simply asking the question reveals our orientation to transcendence. Finite freedom, recognizing that it relies upon infinite freedom, consents to infinite freedom in order to find fulfillment. The interaction between the two drives the theo-drama forward. Balthasar explains how this interaction works: “[God] gives [finite beings] an acting area in which they can creatively exercise their freedom and imagination; but what he gives them is *his* wealth, which they can use wisely or fritter away.” This interaction, in a nutshell, is what Balthasar means by “mission.”

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217 Ibid., 482.
218 Ibid., 481.
Victoria Harrison points out that receiving a mission seems to undermine the prevailing (modern) notion that our identities and vocations are self-determined. Recognizing freedom as consent entails consenting to God, so Balthasar insists that we must receive our missions; we must be sent. Both the Latin *missio* and *sendung*, the German word translated as “mission,” have a primary sense of “sending.” At the same time, we each have the freedom to carry out our missions in our own particular ways. In stage drama an actor playing a role still has the freedom to make a role “his own.” Indeed, the finite being maintains this freedom by consenting to infinite freedom.

Christ is the true form of mission. As the interaction of finite and infinite freedom, Christ renders the theo-drama possible. The finite being struggles over the tension between “I” and “role.” We struggle to harmonize who we are and who we ought to be. For Christ (the God-man), however, the two are identical; he is who he is supposed to be. He is his mission, the unity of *being* and *becoming*. His *missio* is the economic form of his eternal *processio*. Since Christ is the concrete form of that realization, finite beings realize their freedom through Christ. As both man and *theos*, explains Balthasar, Christ “is not only the main character but the model for all other actors and the one who gives them their own identity as characters.”

Mission is the fulfillment of finite freedom, reconciling the tension between “role” and “identity.” To what extent does the actor become a role, given that a role only

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221 Ibid., 3:154; 168.
224 Ibid., 201.
225 Ibid.
exists on stage? Christ empowers us to overcome the tension between “role” and
“identity” because he is on stage with us. In Christ we see one who “by carrying out his
role, either attains his true face or (in analytic drama) unveils his hidden face.” Christ
is the actor. He is not a person but the person. We only become “persons” through
receiving a mission, which is participation in Christ’s universal mission. Balthasar writes:

It is when God addresses a conscious subject, tells him who he is and what he
means to the eternal God of truth and shows him the purpose of his existence—
that is, imparts a distinctive and divinely authorized mission—that we can say of a
conscious subject that he is a ‘person.”

Mission answers the question “Who am I?” rather than “What kind of being am I?”
Without mission, without freedom, finite beings would be “whats,” not “whos.”

Christ’s mission is the archetype of all human action. Even though no one can
hope to imitate Christ perfectly, his mission serves as the moral exemplar of theo-
dramatic ethics: “He is the revelation of man as he ought to be, as he is and as he is once
more to become (through Christ’s action on man’s behalf).” Every mission is a
particular embodiment of the Christ-form, though a single mission never embodies it
perfectly.

Balthasar’s conception of “mission” preserves plurality and protects against
relativism because it unites individuals through their particularities. The personalizing
effect of receiving a mission does not occur in a vacuum. In Theo-Drama I, Balthasar
writes, “Since the call of the Christian always takes place within the context of the
community of those who are in Christ, that is, in the Church, the individual cannot in any
way reflect upon himself…without encountering the Church and his fellowship in her

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226 Ibid.
227 Ibid., 207.
228 Ibid., 225.
Mission, for Balthasar, does not occur outside the Church (though he does not necessarily limit “Church” to the Roman Catholic Church). Receiving a mission leads us to a greater appreciation of our personal and social identity: “When a human being becomes a person, theologically, by being given a unique vocation and mission, he is simultaneously de-privatized, socialized, made into a locus and a bearer of community.” Moreover, “the mission proceeds from the individual member… and its goal is the entire Body.” As Nichols observes, for Balthasar the Church has a “‘personalizing’ and ‘socializing’ role.” “Persons” do not exist in a private relationship with Christ (cf. Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith”). If one receives a mission in Christ then one receives it in the Body of Christ. Everyone who receives a mission, and so personhood, receives it from Christ. Christ’s mission, after all, has a universal scope. Participation in that mission, unsurprisingly, has social implications. My mission, in some way, connects with all missions. Christ, and so the church as the body of Christ, provides the unity in which and under which a polyphony of missions exists without contradiction.

The fulfillment of finite freedom in infinite freedom does not occur in an abstract “infinite” but in the concrete person of Christ. A finch’s beauty is found not in the abstract properties that describe its form or activity, but in the finch’s particular form. Each ethic, likewise, must be recognizably beautiful, which is to say that it must be based on beauty, even if unconsciously. Hart’s extended critique of the ethics of postmodern nihilism reveals that ethics that lack a foundation in beauty rely on an ontology of

231 Ibid., 281.
violence. Since theo-dramatic ethics is grounded on beauty, we cannot limit its practice to a specific set of rules or actions. A tension will always exist in the performance of theo-dramatic ethics. On the one hand, to be an ethics it must provide concrete guidance. On the other hand, ethics rests in the Christ-form, which is ultimately incomprehensible. Theo-dramatic ethics surpasses the boundaries of mundane ethics: it is tranethical.

ii. Tranethical Missions

The tranethical is the defining feature of theo-dramatic ethics. Balthasar rarely addresses ethics explicitly, but in TD3 he contrasts the ethical with the “tranethical.” He critiques “ethics” and “the ethical” for judging Christ’s achievement in “purely worldly terms.” Balthasar contends that “tranethical” (trans-ethisch) more accurately describes the impact of the Incarnation on the world. His argument is simple: if Christ is the interaction of the infinite and finite, the convergence of the horizontal and the vertical, then we cannot judge Christ’s impact in purely finite, horizontal, “ethical” terms. Christ lived and taught in the horizontal realm, and his life and its teachings have horizontal significance. Nonetheless, to claim that they have only horizontal significance would be to mistake them as “simply ethical,” which is to say, simply horizontal. “Transethical,” on the other hand, indicates that Christ’s achievement is “removed from all external statistical reckoning.” Rules and institutions, the successes and failures of saints, popes and bishops, can all be judged in “ethical,” which is to say “worldly,” terms. Balthasar warns that under this constricted measure the Church, the saints, and even

235 Ibid., 29. “Trans-ethisch” in the German (Theodramatik 2.2, 27).
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid., 28–29.
Christ appear inadequate and disappointing. The only way to avoid such a conclusion is to recognize Jesus’ example as “transethical.” The ethical ignores a constituent part of Christ and Christ’s mission: his divine nature. Balthasar worries that this misconception—or perhaps simple overemphasis on the “ethical”—has led to a misunderstanding such that “within human history, where what counts is the success of man’s vision of the present and future, it is felt that Christians have opted out of the contest.”238 The transethical is the admittance that Christ, in his person and in his earthly actions, participates in and expresses the ever-greater mystery of God. We cannot, of course, define this quality because it is simply another way of pointing to God’s mystery. But we must affirm the transethical—that the God-man’s significance surpasses human measure or comprehension—if we affirm the Incarnation. Christians who participate in the Christ-form though their missions share in this transethical significance.

Consequently, Balthasar contends that Christians have not “opted out.”

Granted, Christian ethicists have used the notion of opting out both to define and to reject the applicability of Christ’s teaching to Christian life. Reinhold Niebuhr interprets the intersection of vertical and horizontal differently: “The perfect love of Christ comes into the world, but it does not maintain itself there; that the cross therefore stands at the edge of history and not squarely in history.”239 The distance between Christ and the world is too great for a concrete interaction between the two. Christ’s life and teachings are spiritually edifying and may indirectly guide ethics, but they are not

238 Ibid., 30.
applicable “to the task of securing justice in a sinful world.” Niebuhr rejects liberal Protestant pacifism because it ignores the fallen nature of the world in favor of a fairy tale in which good intentions lead to good results. Of course he does not reject pacifism entirely. He acknowledges that true pacifists—those not selfishly focused on their own morality—remind human beings that although the world is sinful, we must never embrace war as normative. “Opting out,” sums up quite succinctly Niebuhr’s critique of pacifism. While Niebuhr contends that Christ’s achievement is measurable only in terms of the vertical, Balthasar argues that without the horizontal measure we misapprehend Christ’s achievement. Balthasar does not lessen distance between Christ and the world, but he still identifies this distant Christ as the ground of our being. Finite beings are most themselves when they interact with the infinite.

Other theologians accept the basic premises of Niebuhr’s Christian realism but come to opposite conclusions. Robert Brimlow suggests that the only faithful Christian response to militant tyranny (like Nazism) is death. Ulrich Luz affirms that Jesus’ non-retaliation sayings ought to be practiced literally because the Lord commanded them, not because they have any transformative power over the enemy. Some argue that we ought to follow Christ’s teachings because they work. Walter Wink affirms the power of non-violent direct action; he avoids reading Christ’s teachings as merely passive or reactive. For thinkers like Wink, Christians opt out in obedience to Christ’s teachings.

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241 Ibid., 119.
They do not opt out of the world but out of the cycle of violence perpetuated by the worldly powers.

Balthasar’s appeal to the “transethical,” however, sets him apart both from Christian realists, who think the gospel cannot be applied to the world, and from orthopraxists who think the gospel properly applied will bring about utopia. Both of these positions put undue weight on Christ’s earthly significance. The ethical value of the gospel is directly related to its ability to produce measurable results. Balthasar insists that we must take into account both the vertical and horizontal dimensions. Christianity does not persuade in purely worldly terms: “even where its Founder was concerned, Christianity could not come up with a program for mankind’s future that would be satisfying on an earthly level.”

Infinite fulfills finite, grace fulfills nature, precisely because it transcends the earthly.

This transcendence does not leave the earthly behind. Balthasar’s “transethical,” for instance, should not be confused with Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith.” Kierkegaard talks about something above and separate from the ethical. His knight of faith stands alone before the absolute and knows that this higher goal might demand the suspension of the ethical. This figure is unearthly, though he or she may reside on earth. The transethical, on the other hand, does not suspend the ethical. It points out that we cannot describe Christian action only in worldly terms, but it does not diminish the worldly. Rather, the transethical signifies that there are more facets to an action than we can see in this world. Where Kierkegaard sees a divorce, Balthasar sees confluence. For instance, when comparing Barth with Kierkegaard Balthasar writes: “For Kierkegaard, Christianity

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is unworldly, ascetic, polemic.” Kierkegaard, Balthasar goes, cannot appreciate Mozart because Mozart performs in the world. Barth, on the other hand, loves Mozart because his music demonstrates the goodness of creation—something that Kierkegaard must reject. What, Balthasar might ask Kierkegaard, does Christ offer if not divine salvation for this world? This world is where revelation takes place. Balthasar explains that in the Book of Revelation, “the essential history” occurs in the vertical plane between heaven and earth, but still “always has a material side.” The transethical does not draw us away from the world like the knight of faith. For Balthasar the transethical helps us to more fully understand the “material side” of the theo-drama.

The transethical explains why Balthasar “has no ethic” and why he uses theo-drama to describe human existence and action. The “ethical,” as Balthasar understands it, presumes autonomous motion as the primary pillar of human action, but human existence in freedom, formed by beauty and directed to the good, is wholly dependent upon infinite freedom. We have the freedom to act, but first we must consent to the good. This consent carries with it the possibility that we live lives or perform actions that appear wasteful and useless to those who give primacy to autonomous motion. Balthasar contends that Christ’s main achievement “consists in his allowing something to happen, in letting himself be plundered and shared out in Passion and Eucharist.” Plundering and sharing out also describe our participation in Christ, our missions. Both saints hidden in monasteries and saints out in the world carry out missions. Both hidden and visible missions have ramifications, like Christ, that are beyond comprehension. Christ’s

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247 Ibid.
fruitfulness exceeds the limits of this earth such that “attempts (even on the part of the Church) to draw this fruitfulness entirely within the world-historical ambit are bound to fail and end in futility.” Imagine if Mozart’s Requiem Mass in D Minor were never performed and that people were only allowed to read its score. If we were trained musicians perhaps we could “hear” it in our minds, but something fundamental about the experience would be lost if we did not actually hear it. A score is good, but it is not enough. Ethics, even those ostensibly directed towards the cross, lose something fundamental when they limit consideration to the worldly.

This loss represents another instance of the anthropological reduction. In terms of ethics, it also looks a great deal like the decadence of the moral manual tradition. Nathe points out that Balthasar once claimed: “Ich habe keine Ethik.” Perhaps by “ethic” and “ethical” Balthasar had in mind the moral manuals that dominated Catholic moral theology until Vatican II. Indeed, James Keenan notes that by the twentieth century moral manuals focused less on moral theology and more on rehashing canon law: “[The manualist] chided those who looked for moral theology to be more integrated into both dogmatic or fundamental theology and ascetical or devotional theology.” For Keenan, the decline of the manuals becomes most evident in the fact that “girls’ dresses and sperm received more attention than atomic weapons.” This disconnect from the world and from a more holistic theology coheres with what Mongrain says about Balthasar’s

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252 Ibid. Of course, one could argue pace Keenan that the average mid-twentieth-century Catholic faced decisions involving dresses and sperm far more often than decisions involving atomic policy, President Kennedy excepted.
disillusionment with dreary Neo-Scholastic theology.\textsuperscript{253} The tranethical, however, follows naturally from Balthasar’s rejection of overly-rationalized theology (like aesthetic theology). Just as the encounter with beauty transforms the perceiver in a way that surpasses merely subjective or objective experience (the way between and above the anthropological and cosmological reductions), so in the good our tranethical actions surpass earthly measures of success and failure. Balthasar’s discussion of the “tranethical” is the beautiful quality of theo-dramatic ethics.

Tina Beattie claims that this tranethical theology “lends support to a form of authoritarianism that advocates uncritical fidelity to the official Church, however ‘unintelligible’ or ‘extreme’ its demands, in a way that risks flying in the face of the traditional understanding of the relationship between faith and reason.”\textsuperscript{254} Beattie is correct in stating that Balthasar does not reject the Church or the hierarchy, nor does he call into question apostolic succession or the reality of Church as the body of Christ. Beattie, of course, is attempting to level a critique at Balthasar’s own “uncritical fidelity” of the Church’s male hierarchy.\textsuperscript{255} There are certainly grounds for this concern, but by affirming Christ’s achievement in terms of the tranethical, Balthasar affirms that the Church exists and continues in a way that we cannot comprehend: fruitfulness “cannot be assessed by the one who bears fruit.”\textsuperscript{256} The inadequate and occasionally corrupt artifices do not arise from the tranethical dimension of the Gospel, but despite it. Balthasar assures the reader that Christ’s fruitfulness remains effective, no matter how rigid and earthly the face of the Church may become. Rather than “uncritical fidelity,” Balthasar’s

\textsuperscript{253} Mongrain, \textit{The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, 2.
\textsuperscript{254} Beattie, \textit{New Catholic Feminism}, 121.
\textsuperscript{255} Given Balthasar’s choices regarding his own vocation, “uncritical fidelity” hardly represents his relationship with church hierarchy.
tranethical reading is reassurance that faith in Christ remains rational and true, despite all worldly evidence to the contrary.

Acknowledging Christ’s achievement as “tranethical” does not promote fidelity to powerful men but to Christ. One can appreciate Beattie’s fears of granting powerful men a “blank check” or a “divine right” to rule. Even during its most “corrupt” times, the Church still produced saints. Innocent III called for the Fourth Crusade, but he also authorized Francis to found a new religious order. Francis does not excuse the crusades, but his life does lend weight to Balthasar’s suggestion that “the influence of Christ…overwhelms our comprehension.” In fact, without hope in the latter—hope that the Spirit guides the Church—is there any reason to think of the Church as more than just another worldly institution vying for our attention? Is there any reason to think it can ever speak the Truth? Authoritarianism tends to find its own support.

More to the point of Beattie’s critique: the both/and nature of Balthasar’s tranethical approach should prevent “uncritical fidelity” to men like Innocent III. If by tranethical Balthasar simply meant “vertical,” then Beattie’s critique would be apropos. Talking in terms of the tranethical will always carry the danger of overemphasizing the vertical. The tranethical, however, concerns the interaction between the vertical and the horizontal. In fact, the tranethical provides the grounds to critique and challenge “uncritical fidelity” to a corrupt male hierarchy: the horizontal must reflect the vertical and corruption is not cruciform.

Accordingly, theo-dramatic ethics, does not limit consideration to any worldly measure, but considers actions in light of the vertical and horizontal. One should not mistake Balthasar for a “middle way” between realism and utopian orthopraxy, for

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257 Ibid.
Christ’s existence, says Balthasar, “represents a provocation not only by holding up a utopian and transcendent ideal to the ongoing course of history…but by guaranteeing that this idea is attainable.” Balthasar does not limit consideration to effectiveness, but neither does he ignore it. Moreover, Balthasar (and theo-dramatic ethics) does not limit consideration to a single form of Christian life. The transethical helps to explain how polyphony can exist in unity. If considered in purely worldly terms, the attempt to find the unity of the plurality would lead either to a broad, abstract universal or to a cacophony. For Balthasar (and theo-dramatic ethics) the plurality is unified at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal. Each form points to the same transcendent ideal and represents how this ideal is attainable. Of course, from the earthly perspective this manifests as polyphony.

*d. Action: Transethical Missions in the World*

*i. Yearning for the Infinite*

The problem with many ethical systems is that they limit ethics to what can be seen, heard, defined, and easily categorized. I suggested above that Balthasar’s rejection of “ethics” results from the fear that an ethical system limits consideration to the worldly. Balthasar rejects ethics qua worldly categories, but not ethics qua life in finitude. I use the term “theo-dramatic ethics” as a way to focus reflection on life and action (using the orientation of Balthasar’s “dramatics”) in a way that is also accessible to the common understanding of “ethics.” While “worldly ethics” contains many pitfalls, “ethics” and “morality” in a broader sense are still useful terms.

258 Ibid., 31.
I suggest that Balthasar’s resistance to the term arises from his fear that a focus on ethics might limit theological reflection to the worldly (illustrated most clearly in the moral manuals). When it comes to describing action, Balthasar returns again and again to the incomprehensibility of God and the theo-drama. The more the mystery is revealed the more mysterious it becomes, and yet we must live in light of this mystery. We carry out missions in imitation of the Christ-form though we can never hope to imitate it perfectly. The transethical provides us with the assurance that our actions have significance even though they may fail according to every earthly measure.

In Theo-Drama IV Balthasar addresses what it means to live in the “already” but “not yet.”

Salvation has already been achieved but Christians still struggle because the fullness of the Kingdom has not yet been realized on earth. According to Niebuhr the cross stands outside history. It may guide actions indirectly but there is no possibility of realizing the Kingdom on earth. Balthasar disagrees with this conclusion without embracing the sort of naïve social gospel moralism that Niebuhr rejected (e.g. now that we have the correct information we can change the world). To dismiss the infinite is to ignore a fundamental reality of the finite: its trajectory towards transcendence. For Balthasar, the finite world, by virtue of being finite, only finds fulfillment in the infinite. At the same time, he rejects realism qua pessimism (i.e. that we cannot improve the state of the world). If the Incarnation tells us anything (and Balthasar does not think that it tells us just one thing), it tells us that “God is at the same time superior to history and involved in it...[with the result that] the more God intervenes, the more he elicits opposition to

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him."\textsuperscript{261} We can hope that God’s Kingdom is attainable on earth because God stands in history, but we must not think that we can attain it by “historical” means alone.

Consequently, human action is paradoxical. Once we become aware of the infinite as the source of our freedom and the place of our fulfillment, how can we not strain against the bonds of finitude? Balthasar writes, “Yearning for the absolute is at the very heart of man.”\textsuperscript{262} All human actions presuppose meaning, which is found in the absolute. But as finite beings in a finite world we lack both the ability and the resources to “encapsulate that desired absolute meaning.”\textsuperscript{263} The infinite always remains beyond the grasp of the finite. Yearning for the infinite is what makes the human being “a figure of pathos.”\textsuperscript{264} Just as Revelation does not offer concrete predictions about the future but a vision of hope to sustain Christians in the present, we act hoping for fulfillment without comprehending the total meaning of that fulfillment.

Balthasar refers to this paradox as the “relative absolute:” “The need to write the absolute upon the relative, to put some mark upon fleeting time.”\textsuperscript{265} We yearn for the infinite, but we cannot realize it in finite lives. Balthasar lists four interrelated “wounds of existence” that stand in the way: time, freedom, power, and evil.\textsuperscript{266} These are not negatives, but “damaged positives.”\textsuperscript{267} Concordant with time is death, both in the sense of a positive ending and a terrifying inevitability. Freedom can lead us to the good, but it can also lead us to embrace worldly notions of power and evil. These facts of existence

\textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 73.  
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., 83.  
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 77.  
\textsuperscript{267} Here Balthasar describes evil as “permeating the entire life of society and the individual” and “assuming the appearance and attractiveness of some good.” As a “wound of existence,” then, evil is not a “damaged positive” so much as the damage done to something positive. Ibid.
are inescapable. Human beings must act always in view of them, always threatened by them. This inescapability is the tension, the perpetual longing of finitude for redemption. 

We are constrained by the world, but knowing that we are constrained causes us to reconsider, reevaluate, and revise the way in which we struggle against those constraints. Summarizing the “pathos of the world stage,” Balthasar explains that the “wounds of existence” (time, freedom, power, evil) cannot be solved within the finite: “Wherever such attempts at deliberate self-redemption are carried out, they lead logically…to further involvement in guilt.” Mundane ethics is the self-devouring Ouroboros. Only when the “pathos of God” steps onto the stage do we find that “finitude, time and death…are given a new value in a way that is beyond our comprehension.” Human beings are not unfinished but unfulfilled. The question before us is how to articulate a moral formation that takes into account the incomprehensible paradox of existence.

\textit{ii. The Way to the Infinite is Through the Cross}

Balthasar argues that we must act in light of the cross, not some nebulous conception of the infinite. The cross is particular, but also universal. It leads us in a specific direction while remaining a mystery. Balthasar, for instance, accepts five soteriological motifs but refuses to privilege any: “Our aim is not to erect a system, for the Cross explodes all systems.” Balthasar does not use the term “transethical” here, 

\begin{footnotes}
\item[268] Ibid., 75.
\item[269] Ibid., 201.
\item[270] Ibid.
\item[271] Ibid., 319.
\end{footnotes}
but the same logic lies behind what he calls the “paradox of Christian discipleship.”\textsuperscript{272} The Christian mission is both mundane and transcendent. Christians aim for the infinite, but participation in the cross and resurrection is “the ‘sphere’ in which the Christian lives, which is summed up by the term \textit{en Christōi}.”\textsuperscript{273} Consequently, this participation “embraces both the historical Jesus and equally the Risen Christ.”\textsuperscript{274} The Christian is \textit{en Christōi} as part of the Church, which is both mundane and transcendent. The Church’s task accordingly includes both dimensions: “She herself alternates between two impossible poles: preaching to the world purely from without and transforming it purely from within.”\textsuperscript{275} Christ transforms impossible ethical actions into possible transethical actions.

Even Balthasar struggles to follow through on all the implications of this transethical approach. For example, he asks whether or not Christ makes possible a “politics of powerlessness” like that promoted by liberation theologians and twentieth-century Christian pacifists.\textsuperscript{276} Balthasar will not say “no,” but neither will he indulge fantasies. Though much ballyhooed as an instance of his distorted, mythological, epic, God’s-eye-view approach, Balthasar’s critique of liberation theology (especially in \textit{Theo-Drama} IV) is quite measured.\textsuperscript{277} The problem with liberation theology, Balthasar explains, is that “its appeal to ‘the primacy of praxis’” does not do anything to change the already-not-yet reality of the world.\textsuperscript{278} Orthopraxy cannot rend the world from sin’s grasp. Yet the Incarnation has surely changed something. Balthasar considers the claims

\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., 383.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., 385.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid., 465.
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid., 478.
\textsuperscript{278} Balthasar, \textit{Theo-Drama, Vol. 4}, 482.
of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. that Christian nonviolence applies as much to the social-political level as to the interpersonal level. Balthasar admits: “Ultimately the Christian element will rarely be lacking (even in the case of Gandhi) in such appeals.” Balthasar falls back on the traditional opinion—that of Niebuhr, Thomas, and Augustine—that one can choose nonviolence for oneself, but not for others, but he then immediately questions meeting violence with violence:

The strategy of the Cross was a strategy in death…it cannot be applied in its totality—or as the only one—in the midst of earthly power struggles. On the other hand, we have no example from the life of Jesus in which he fought for his cause with earthly means of power. (Not even the cleansing of the Temple.)

Balthasar neither rejects nor embraces the nonviolence of Gandhi or King. Like liberation theology it relies on a too optimistic view of praxis, which was one of the nine trends that fails to free theology from rationalism. Christians must act in the world, but “since neither the goals nor the means are clear-cut…such fighting can only be one element within a more all-embracing struggle, namely, the battle of the Logos.” Balthasar’s struggle lays bare the difficulty of mediating the tensions within a transethical approach. Far from an “anything goes” model, embodying the transethical Christ-form requires a great deal of discernment.

*e. Learning to Act “Transethically”*

*i. Theatre Reflects Life*

Performing in light of the Cross is no easy task. In *Theo-Drama* I, Balthasar deals with the problem that how we strive for the good is never clear, referring to this grappling

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279 Ibid., 484.
280 Ibid., 485.
281 Ibid., 486.
“the struggle for the Good.” No matter how virtuous we may be, “for the most part, man finds himself in a thicket of relative goods and values and tries, with the aid of an internal compass, to find his way to the Absolute.”\textsuperscript{282} On the one hand, we must perform our actions in light of Christ. On the other hand, our actions are always finite, and so limited and flawed. Even more, the fact of our finitude means that the infinite remains beyond our comprehension. Since from our horizontal perspective “the Good exhibits gradations” we can never be totally sure of the best action.\textsuperscript{283} We must adjudicate among a plethora of possible actions, often with little to help us choose.

Dramatic examples, especially the theatre, can help. The Christian understands personal and absolute meaning in terms of drama and so excludes “a dead faith…which has cut itself off from love and hope and become a rational system of truths to be believed, no longer yielding proof in terms of life.”\textsuperscript{284} We learn how to perceive beauty by perceiving beautiful things; we learn how to act by perceiving and performing good lives. Balthasar uses stage drama to make this point. Theatre, Balthasar explains, is “a projection of human existence onto a stage.”\textsuperscript{285} When we see human lives presented before us, we learn how to act (or how not to act).

The good is the goal of all actions, the horizon towards which we strive. From the perspective of finitude, however, absolute good has a “vanishing point” beyond which we cannot see.\textsuperscript{286} We must choose the “best course of action under the circumstances.”\textsuperscript{287} Balthasar does not, however, seek to excuse wrong or sinful actions. Though Othello’s

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{283} Ibid.
\bibitem{284} Ibid., 22.
\bibitem{285} Ibid., 20.
\bibitem{286} Ibid., 414.
\bibitem{287} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
deadly mistake seemed correct “at the moment in which it was taken,” the Venetian general still committed an act of disobedience against God.\footnote{Ibid., 419.} Misconceptions do not excuse murder. The audience recognizes this fault too. After all, Othello does not kill Desdemona by accident; he strangles her for her perceived adultery. Whatever cunning machinations Iago may have employed, at some level Othello allows himself to “be led by th’ nose” otherwise he would be guiltless (\textit{Othello} I.3.338). The “gradations” of the good lead to many problems. \textit{Othello} relies on the fact that distrust and insecurity often seem as sweet as honey, and Iago is able to lead Othello astray because the absolute good is obscured from view. Though we cannot see past the vanishing point, our orientation towards the good still makes us culpable for our faults. Ideologies, distorted scales of value, mistaking “the God who dwells in [one’s] own breast” for God: these things exacerbate the obscuration of the good by offering alternative absolutes.\footnote{Ibid., 423.}

Balthasar recommends two poles by which to guide our actions: conscience and norm.\footnote{Ibid.} We must follow our conscience—our “internal compass”—and our relation to our environment.\footnote{Ibid.} These poles represent an aesthetic approach, taking into account subjective and objective experiences. We critique Othello by using this approach. Indeed, Balthasar’s appeal to stage drama reveals the theological aesthetic foundation of theodramatic action. We learn morality by aesthetic evaluation. Good actions are possible in this worldly context, but they are always mixed among the flaws of human beings and finitude.

\footnote{Ibid., 414.}
Take, for instance, Balthasar’s discussion of the genres of drama, classically divided into comedy and tragedy. Balthasar denies any clear demarcation between these categories. If stage drama reflects existence, then each is inadequate. Drama in this regard is like death: “Death is an event that is given meaning from many angles, but this partial meaning can never cover the entire phenomenon.”

Both genres denote an adherence to meaning. Even a nihilistic “drama” relies on the absence of meaning to make the meaningful point that there is no meaning. Balthasar points out that in order for something to be “tragic” there must be a sense that it “ought not to be.” Comedies, though generally regarded as lacking the gravitas of tragedy, reflect life just as truthfully: “Laughter is as much a part of life as weeping.” The enjoyment of “higher comedy,” as Balthasar defines it, comes from its “fundamental resonance of existence” which “the spectator can feel attuned to…with a good conscience.” Comedy is not mockery; higher comedy works because the audience laughs with and not at the characters. We laugh because we recognize truth in the ridiculousness of life. The third category, the “tragi-comic” combines the two genres in order to better reflect the plurality of existence: “Whether a situation seems more comic or more tragic can be simply a matter of lighting.” Balthasar maintains that the best playwrights do not limit themselves to any genre.

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292 Ibid., 424.
293 Ibid., 433.
294 Ibid., 436.
295 Ibid., 438.
296 Ibid., 450.
Shakespeare’s plays reflect life so well because he defies the boundaries of comedy and tragedy (as his numerous “problem plays” testify). At the same time, says Balthasar, Shakespeare “has an infallible grasp of right action” and “is utterly certain that the highest good is to be found in forgiveness.” This moral orientation makes his plays exceptionally useful when it comes to examining how the good can appear in the finite world and how Christians can perform good actions. In his appeal to Shakespeare, Balthasar focuses on the theme of justice. Trial scenes encourage the audience “to make a decision as to whether, in this particular course of events, the right thing has been done; or whether…it has not been done.” There must be uncertainty as to how things will play out. The audience participates by judging the judgment—by offering a moral appraisal of the decision. This assessment relies on a transcendent orientation. The audience cannot weigh the decision without appealing to a sense of right and wrong. Justice will always appear fallible even while relying on the existence of absolute justice to give it weight. For our purposes, looking to Shakespeare teaches us that learning to act transethically is fraught, painful, and bound to fail in at least some respects, but not impossible.

Balthasar appeals to perhaps the most problematic of Shakespeare’s plays: The Merchant of Venice. Though sometimes castigated as anti-Semitic because of the villainous Shylock, the play presents complex Christian and Jewish characters. Portia, the rich heiress of Belmont, disguises herself as a lawyer at the play’s conclusion in order to

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297 Ibid., 478.
298 Ibid., 452.
299 Ibid., 458–461.
save Antonio. Who, asks Balthasar, “is not moved by Portia’s speech on that mercy that is more than justice?”

Who can deny the connection of mercy and grace: “The quality of mercy is not strain’d / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” (MoV IV.1.173-174). Yet only moments later Portia “shows herself to be satanically cruel,” by robbing Shylock of his forfeiture, his justice, his property, and his faith. Balthasar argues that Portia “leads the Jew, Shylock, by the nose”; she knows he will reject any pleas for mercy. We could also read this scene differently from Balthasar and take Portia’s speech as genuine attempt to convert the moneylender. Hugh Short suggests that Portia extols mercy not in order to make Shylock’s defeat that much more devastating, but as an attempt to teach “true Christian charity.” In this reading, we should take Shylock’s final lines “I am content” (IV.1.394) at face value. He has learned charity, even if it has been a harsh lesson. If Shylock is not truly content, Short explains, then the harmonious and humorous final act is “a lie, and a vicious one at that.”

Even employing Short’s rosier interpretation, we can agree with Balthasar’s conclusion that The Merchant of Venice is “an extreme case of the problems involved in earthly justice.” Supposing Portia truly intends to convert Shylock and supposing he truly converts, the problem of earthly justice remains. Whether one views the “mercy” Shylock receives as sadistic or true, he does not receive justice. The depth of Shylock’s characterization makes this failure even more apparent. Portia’s speech is moving, but

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300 Ibid., 463-462.
301 Ibid., 463.
302 Ibid., 462.
304 Ibid., 211. Though, pace Short, Shakespeare gives the audience good reason to doubt the appearance of harmony in Act 5. Here, Lorenzo and Jessica, whose elopement was the immediate cause of Shylock’s wrath, open the final act by comparing their love to that of famous doomed and/or spurned lovers like Troilus, Thisbe, Dido, and Medea (V.1.4-15).
who is not also convinced by Shylock’s appeal to a common humanity: “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” (MoV III.1.53). In regard to the brutal pound of flesh forfeiture that Shylock demands, Antonio seems to be—to put it bluntly—asking for it. When Shylock questions why he should lend money to a man who has spit upon him, Antonio responds: “I am as like...To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too” (I.3.128-130). Shylock is a villain, but Antonio is no hero. Neither Balthasar nor Shakespeare rejects earthly justice. Still Portia calls into question our ability to embody Christ in the world. If we accept Balthasar’s “satanically cruel” reading, then we must make sense of a Christian who can speak the gospel beautifully one moment, and then forget its import the next (something history, as well as Shakespeare, has proven is a real possibility). If we take Short’s reading, then we must deal with a Christian who successfully employs the threat of extreme violence to teach charity. Merchant highlights these problems without providing a concrete solution. Balthasar writes, “[It] warns us against all simplifications, against transposing absolute justice into the relations between human beings.”

Balthasar does not deny that Merchant has an orientation to absolute justice. Indeed, because of its orientation, the problems of Merchant become shockingly clear. So too does the impossibility of performing a purely good action within the world. Like learning to tell art from kitsch, Shakespeare’s nuanced picture of earthly justice helps us to distinguish it from absolute justice. Rather than discouraging, Merchant compels us to recognize flawed actions in order that we may perform actions that hew more closely to the good.

Balthasar also appeals to another one of Shakespeare’s problem plays, Measure for Measure, to illustrate the difficulties of flawed justice and mercy. Here we receive

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306 Ibid.
more insight into how Balthasar justifies his use of Shakespeare: “This is a Christian mystery play, no matter whether or not the poet intended it as such, no matter how many comic and tragic elements are mixed in with it.” Some might say that Balthasar does violence to Shakespeare by ignoring his intentions. For Balthasar, however, a playwright can convey a “Christian” message without intending to do so explicitly. Shakespeare had the remarkable genius to be able to read human existence and to represent it accurately on stage. His plays have Christian resonance because the cross is universal.

Ben Quash argues that Balthasar ignores the complexities of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. Quash admits that Balthasar is not alone in his interpretation of the play as a drama of providence and redemption, but he contends that Balthasar inserts resolution where the play leaves ambiguity. Consider the conclusion of Balthasar’s interpretation: “Everyone, the guilty and the innocent, must go through judgment in solidarity—*Shakespeare* underlines the fact that the guilty and the innocent are interchangeable—for only in this way can they all receive mercy.” Quash comments: “The problems of the play resist such simplification.”

Does Balthasar’s analysis—especially his claim that the guilty and innocent are “interchangeable”—simplify anything? Quash criticizes Balthasar for ignoring the fact that the “virtuous” characters orchestrate a bed trick to bring down the self-righteous and corrupt Angelo and wonders how we ought to judge Isabella, who “suddenly helps engineer something which she has until then been resisting on her own behalf at the

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307 Ibid., 470.
308 Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 140–144.
309 Ibid., 141.
311 Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 141.
Quash perhaps puts too much emphasis on the role of sexual morality here. Shakespeare uses sex in *Measure for Measure* to explore the problems of rigid moral systems and their hypocritical champions. How do we interpret Isabella, who refuses to sleep with Angelo outside of marriage, but helps another woman to do just that? Isabella tricks Angelo into doing what her brother Claudio has also done, a crime for which she consistently pleaded mercy on Claudio’s behalf. Moreover, in sleeping with Mariana, Angelo only consummates a betrothal that, it is made clear to the audience, he should have consummated anyway. The Duke’s judgment forces Angelo to consider his fate under his own measure of justice. Isabella once again begs mercy, but this time for Angelo. Quash may correctly critique Balthasar for making some sweeping claims (Balthasar does, admittedly, preface some interpretations by stating “*with a slight exaggeration* we can say that…”), but Balthasar does argue that *Measure for Measure* demonstrates the impossibility of perfect justice in the world. Balthasar only simplifies things if mercy is simple, which neither he nor Shakespeare suggest. If anything, Balthasar’s final summation raises questions about justice and mercy: “the greatness of this play…is that all the characters undergo the whole seriousness of judgment.” What of justice? Can we do nothing but hope for mercy? Claudio and Angelo receive mercy even though they deserve punishment. These questions hardly suggest a simplistic view of human existence.

Balthasar’s discussion of “the struggle for the Good,” reflects the horizontal experience of a moral life. It is unavoidably confounding. Even when one has accomplished some good it will always contain certain “flaws” or “cracks” that testify to

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312 Ibid., 141–142.
314 Ibid.
how short it falls of the absolute good. Some actions are better than others, but even the most virtuous finite action is flawed and corruptible (though not necessarily corrupted). Striving for the good is a struggle. Whatever we accomplish will inevitably fall short, but this failure does not discount the good achieved. Flawed, corruptible, earthly justice participates in absolute justice.

In fact, Balthasar’s description of the struggle for the good should preempt concerns that the tranethical could be used to justify anything and everything. On the contrary, the tranethical gives us hope that even flawed, corruptible justice has value—that it is capable of reflecting, even in some dim way, absolute justice. The tranethical provides the necessary encouragement and rationale to continue the struggle. Judging whether or not the right decision has been made in *The Merchant of Venice* or *Measure for Measure* necessitates accounting for characters that are both compassionate and cruel like Portia, or puritanically pious and deceitfully conspiratorial like Isabella. These tensions help us to tease out the right action, to appreciate that even if the most faithful are inconsistent, the good provides the light to make these inconsistencies clear. Despite human failures, the good shines through all human actions just as beauty radiates through all beautiful forms. We learn how to act tranethically by examining lives, and we adjudicate these lives by viewing them in light of the good.

The “tranethical” and the “struggle for the Good” must be understood in the proper context. A tranethical consideration supports a polyphonic ethics because it recognizes the significance of actions in terms of the horizontal and the vertical. The vertical significance is identifiable, if not completely comprehensible. The distinction is important. Rendered too simplistically, a tranethical approach could seem to support
relativism or anarchism. Likewise, the “struggle for the Good,” in showing the impossibility of achieving absolute good might give way to fatalism. Both, in other words, could mistakenly be read as dismissing or devaluing earthly concerns and events. Balthasar does not aim to dismiss finitude, but to explain it accurately in terms of its infinite horizon.

iii. Thinking Eschatologically to Act Transetically

The context that prevents such misinterpretations is Christian eschatology, which Balthasar discusses in the final volume of the *Theo-Drama*. Balthasar explains that the Trinity stands as “the last horizon of the revelation of God in himself and in his dramatic relationship with the world,” so long as it is looked at from “the theocentric, not the anthropocentric perspective.” Human beings are not the stars of the theo-drama; it is God’s drama. Consequently, we should not mistake eschatology for futurism. Fulfillment does not lie simply at some later time. The manner of God’s coming surpasses the limits of earthly time: “This Omega also implies the Alpha; it is what is present, first and last, in every ‘now.’” God is always coming toward us. Thinking eschatologically means thinking beyond time, just as thinking transethical means thinking beyond the worldly. The transethical and the “struggle for the Good” do not dismiss temporal, earthly concerns but consider them in light of their fulfillment in the *eschaton*.

Christians must recognize the place of the world in the life of the Trinity. Balthasar appeals to the Scholastic argument that creation must come from a trinitarian God and argues that all creation reflects, mirrors, or recapitulates God’s triune nature.

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316 Ibid., 57.
Medieval thinkers like Bonaventure use the terms *exitus* and *reditus* to describe the creation and fulfillment of creatures. Balthasar appeals to this cosmology and specifically to Bonaventure’s category of *expressio* to describe the Word and creation, drawing two conclusions from this view of creation. First, since all things come to be through the Word and so exist in the Word, all things have the inclination to self-transcendence just as the Word grounds itself in the Father and submits to the Spirit. The *expressiones* can only be understood in reference to their source and as such can only fulfilled by returning that source:

> Just as the Divine Persons are *themselves* only insofar as they go out to the Others…the created essences too are *themselves* only insofar as they go beyond themselves and indicate their primal ground…and their vocation of self-surrender.

Second, God is an “ever-greater” mystery even to Godself. Here again we must attempt to adopt a theo-centric perspective. Triune life is eternally dramatic because “the divine processions that give rise to the fellowship of Persons are not subject to temporal limitation but are eternally operative.” This point has enormous significance for the way we conceive human relationships. Balthasar observes:

> If human love is enlivened by the element of surprise, something analogous to it cannot be excluded from divine love…the vitality and freedom of eternal love in the realm of Divine Being constitutes the prototype for what love can be.

Surprise, the same sort we experience in aesthetic perception, is an essential component of action. The Trinity, as the center of creation is not a “single unmoving point” but an “event.”

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317 Ibid., 64–65.
318 Ibid., 75.
319 Ibid., 76.
320 Ibid., 78.
321 Ibid., 77–78.
322 Ibid., 79–80.
This doctrine affirms the polyphony of theo-dramatic ethics while also providing it with an orientation: trinitarian love. In light of the divine processions, we see concepts like “potential,” “the Other,” “space,” and “time”—anything that necessitates distance—are positive. Balthasar explains that the relationship between the Divine Persons is one of ever-greater self-surrender. Nothing in the finite realm surpasses the distance that exists between the Persons; every instance of distance, surprise, and love that exists in creation has a place in the Trinity. Balthasar refers to the connection Heidegger and Scheler make between death and the possibility of morality; death *qua* end allows a finite life to bear a particular meaning. In death one can put a particular “stamp” on one’s existence.\(^{325}\)

Balthasar explains that Christ’s death undergirds all death. Indeed, the Son’s death “is redemptive only insofar as it manifests the ultimate horizon of meaning, which is God’s all embracing trinitarian love.”\(^{326}\) The Christian life bears the mark of Christ’s death, which is both a deed (accomplished in trinitarian love for us) and a teaching (exemplifying trinitarian love for us).\(^{327}\) The mark of a Christian life, then, “is to be found much less in the direction of the ecstasy of love than in the everyday taking up of our cross.”\(^{328}\) We must, accordingly, adopt an eschatological understanding of trinitarian love in order to understand how a finite Christian life fits within it.

Trinitarian love considered in this eschatological context provides the archetype of Christian life. Balthasar explains that in the *communio sanctorum*, “everyone is utterly open and available to each other...on the basis of the unfathomable distinctness of

\(^{323}\) See also: Ibid., 89.
\(^{324}\) Ibid., 91.
\(^{327}\) Ibid., 327.
\(^{328}\) Ibid., 338.
each.”329 This community comes together in *communio* around Christ’s availability: the cross. Balthasar envisages a community, in imitation of and in participation with the trinitarian life, in which persons come together not despite their differences but because of them. The ideal Christian community is one of ever-greater openness, which means ever-greater diversity and ever-greater surprise. The more this is true of the community, the greater its freedom and the greater its participation in the Trinity: “God’s will, embracing the entire, infinitely diversified heaven, is so generous that it draws into itself all the fullness of redeemed human freedoms…eternal blessedness must involve genuine creative activity.”330 Embracing the incomprehensibility of the Trinity testifies to the dynamism, vitality, and plurality of the world. A polyphonic approach to ethics comes closer to expressing the Trinity than any single set of rules or principles. The paradox is that we must aim at the absolute good by way of some earthly good without mistaking that earthly good for the absolute.331

Continuing this eschatological denouement, we must re-interpret finite problems in light of the Trinity. For instance, what are we to make of Paul’s description of suffering as a “slight momentary affliction” (2 Cor 4:17)?332 It seems callous. Balthasar reminds us, however, that the weight of earthly suffering—even the most unendurable, horrific suffering—will never outweigh eternal joy.333 If it did, then creation would not be “good.” The present reality of suffering can blind us to the fact that eternal life in the Trinity is not the continuation of earthly life. Life in the Trinity is “perpendicular to it; it is the manifest face of a totality that, for the present, is accessible only in veiled

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329 Ibid., 485–486.
330 Ibid., 486.
331 Ibid., 497.
332 Ibid., 498.
333 Ibid.
The Son endured the pain on the cross in total congruence with his person. Enduring pain and forsakenness as an expression of love and obedience has a place in trinitarian life. Balthasar admits, though, that we cannot comprehend exactly how this relationship works.\textsuperscript{335}

The transethical once again provides clarification. Balthasar admits that the connection between earthly life and eternal life is obscure. We might say something similar in regards to the role of the transethical; although the exact connection between horizontal action and vertical significance is obscure, a connection exists. This conception of the good calls for a transethical approach because the good embraces a plurality of creative expressions. Indeed, Balthasar affirms the inherent goodness of multiplicity when discussing the problem of evil. Evil, he says, does not add drama or depth to the world. Rather, evil as nothingness only has expression— if we can even call it “expression”— in the suffering that it produces. Consequently, there is nothing profound about evil.\textsuperscript{336} Notions of grand cosmic battles between good and evil misjudge the magnitude of this conflict. Balthasar stresses that it is not this contest that creates the drama: “It is not evil that makes the world more interesting but the multiplicity of the good, freely brought into being.”\textsuperscript{337} Once again, the import for theo-dramatic ethics, which is to say the import for Christian life, is the impossibility of defining any single form of finite life as the only form of finite life. Christians cannot make this determination nor should they even attempt it. Balthasar explains, “The infinite possibilities of divine freedom all lie \textit{within} the trinitarian distinctions… the effect of this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 499.
\item \textsuperscript{335} Ibid., 502.
\item \textsuperscript{336} Ibid., 503.
\item \textsuperscript{337} Ibid., 503–504.
\end{itemize}
is that the conduct of *theologia* and *oikonomia* leaves room for a diversity in ways of speaking.\textsuperscript{338} Thinking transethically is thinking eschatologically; it shows that moral formation grounded in beauty is necessarily polyphonic.

Balthasar’s eschatology undergirds the notion of the transethical. At least, the transethical only makes sense if there is an ultimate goal towards which things strive. Without the Absolute, drama has no significance. Likewise, the “transethical” can only be “trans-” if there is something besides the ethical guiding one’s actions. Unlike worldly ethical systems, a transethical consideration recognizes that no finite action ever perfectly expresses the good. At the same time, if an account of moral formation wants to take seriously the doctrine of the Trinity and creation, then it must remain open to the transethical and so to Christian formation as polyphony.

*IV. Conclusion*

The question this chapter asks is whether Balthasar’s theology provides a basis for Christian formation. Balthasar offers an account of action that is grounded in beauty, and his theological aesthetics show that the experience of beauty contains an objective and a subjective side. In apprehending the objective expression of transcendent beauty, the viewer is subjectively transformed. Consequently, I argue that Balthasar’s conception of beauty is necessarily formational (given the transformative effect of aesthetic experience) and moral (given that we receive specific content). His theological dramatics, grounded in and arising from his theological aesthetics, shows that there is no single way for a Christian to act. Christians can perform good actions in a variety of ways. In fact, a variety of actions best expresses a faith grounded on beauty. This polyphony better

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 508–509.
expresses the mysterious reality of Christ, the cross, and the Trinity. Rather than radical or unorthodox, Balthasar’s approach is thoroughly inclusive of the tradition. He does not privilege any single theological summation (e.g. soteriology) referring to things that surpass complete human comprehension (e.g. the nature of Christ, God, etc.) but takes seriously the fact that God remains beyond human comprehension. Once we realize that ethics is grounded in aesthetics, we realize that we learn ethics aesthetically. An aesthetic ethics must be a theo-dramatic ethics. The ethics implicit in Balthasar’s theology by virtue of its orientation to God expects and embraces polyphony in the forms of Christian life.
CHAPTER II: THE ORCHESTRA: PERFORMING THEO-DRAMATIC ETHICS

I. Introduction

We may now feel somewhat adrift. In the first chapter I described the morality implicit in Balthasar’s theology. His theological aesthetics show that the perception of beauty must bear fruit in one’s life and actions. His theological dramas then describe how one lives and acts in response to beauty. Retrieving beauty for theology entails a morality (an account of action) with a beautiful character. We encounter this beauty on earth, so our moral formation reflects these experiences. Since beauty is a transcendental property of being, though, this morality must take both the mundane and the transcendent into account. I argue that Balthasar’s tranethical theological dramas provides a basis for Christian formation. This “theo-dramatic ethics” manifests as polyphony, in which diverse forms of life share the same transcendent center.

Though descriptors like “polyphony” affirm our freedom to shape our own lives it may still feel like an aimless freedom. On the one hand, we might worry that theo-dramatic ethics is too narrow. In this case, our descriptions of beauty would become the center of our morality rather than beauty itself. Instead of gaining insight from lives or experiences (or revelation) we would focus more on fitting those experiences into our aesthetic or dramatic categories. There would be no true formation, no growth. Saints like Francis or Bonaventure could not expand our perception of natural beauty. Our method would set the limits on what we allow ourselves to perceive. Instead of revelation guiding our method, our method would subsume revelation. On the other hand, we might worry that an ethics based on beauty is too broad. If we can find beauty everywhere, then we
could base morality on anything. We could, for instance, justify eugenics by appealing to the “beauty” of the human form. We would be open to so much content that the particular form of Christ would fade from view; our morality would be contentless and we would end up with an ethics of autonomy like the kind Hart castigates, in which anything that expresses “freedom of choice” is considered “intrinsically ‘good.’”

Demonstrating theo-dramatic ethics in practice will help address these concerns. Theo-dramatic ethics is a method guided by specific, concrete content: beauty. We talk about absolute beauty, but we only ever encounter it in individual, concrete beautiful forms. We never see absolute beauty \textit{qua} absolute beauty. Like beauty, we never encounter theo-dramatic ethics unmediated. We only ever see theo-dramatic ethics in the individuals and communities practicing particular forms of it. We can sketch it in abstract terms, as I did in the first chapter, but theo-dramatic ethics does not exist in the abstract. Theo-dramatic ethics is not a method that controls content; it does not have categorical imperatives or a concept of utility that can be defined and then applied to any situation nor does it set Christians loose to construct contradictory moralities out of whatever random experiences of “beauty” they happen to articulate. Instead, we see the various performances of theo-dramatic ethics converge in light of the apprehension that beautiful forms express the Christ-form. In the chapters that follow I will examine some particular embodiments, but before we reach that point we must parse out how these different practices can manifest and exist together in the finite world. If the previous chapter was about the symphony and the following chapters are about individual instruments, then this chapter is about the orchestra. More specifically, it is about the need for an orchestra.

\footnote{Hart, \textit{The Beauty of the Infinite}, 434.}
By demonstrating the practice of theo-dramatic ethics I hope to mitigate the concerns noted above. To address the first (method subsumes content) I will compare theo-dramatic ethics to narrative theology, appealing to Francesca Aran Murphy’s critique of narrative theology in *God Is Not A Story*. I will show how theo-dramatic ethics avoids subsuming content to method by recognizing beauty as the foundation of ethics. To address the concern that theo-dramatic ethics is too broad to be useful, I will illustrate its practice through Balthasar’s own theology, specifically his appeal to the tradition as a source of instructive beautiful forms of life, the necessary polyphony of the secular institutes in *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels*, and the tranethical lives in *Tragedy Under Grace*. I discussed these three features abstractly in chapter one. They follow directly from theo-dramatic ethics’ foundation on beauty, seeing them in practice shows how and why theo-dramatic ethics avoids the potential pitfalls of a morality based on beauty: it narrows our vision such that our method subsumes the content of revelation or it is so broad that we cannot hold onto any particular content.

**II. The Difference Between Narrative Ethics and Theo-Dramatic Ethics**

*a. Narrative Theology and its Implications for Christian Ethics*

Can you imagine a drama without a narrative or a narrative without drama? The two are different, of course, but we often—perhaps always—find them together, so when it comes to talking about theological dramatics, narrative theology is an obvious conversation partner. One does not have to look hard to see the overlap. Though Murphy

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2 David Ford addresses biblical narratives under the category of "theodrama" in *The Future of Christian Theology*; Samuel Wells describes drama as the natural progression of narrative in *Improvisation*, 45.
criticizes narrative theology in *God Is Not A Story*, she still considers it to be the natural counterpart of theological dramatics.

I use narrative theology to help articulate theo-dramatic ethics, though we could compare narrative ethics and theo-dramatic ethics from a number of different angles. I will focus on how both narrative and theo-dramatic ethics attempt to let the content of revelation guide its form. Juxtaposing the two draws attention to the way that basing morality on beauty actually helps theo-dramatic ethics avoid the danger of method subsuming content. After a brief overview of narrative theology and its implications for ethics, I will look to Murphy’s *God Is Not A Story* to show how the two approaches differ in their expression of revelation. However many similarities they share, they differ significantly in this regard. Though Murphy’s presentation of narrative theology is mostly negative, I do not intend to pigeonhole narrative theology as the evil twin of theo-dramatic ethics. Her comparison of narrative and theological dramatics helps us to see what theo-dramatic ethics offers that narrative does not. Showing what happens when we make narrative absolute, as Murphy does, allows us to see the limits of narrative. We should not mistake this recognition as a dismissal of narrative theology. All methods have limits. But theo-dramatic ethics does not have the same limits as narrative.

The simplicity of the term “narrative theology” belies the variety of approaches it actually encompasses. We should understand it “less as a name for a unified and coherent theory than as a collective label for a number of diverse theological concepts of narrative.” Indeed, L. Gregory Jones describes narrative theology as “not so much a distinct position” as “a variety of ways in which theologians have argued for the

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1 David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (Routledge, 2010), 600. The term itself was coined by Harald Weinrich and Johann Baptist Metz.
significance of narrative for theological reflection.” Alexander Lucie-Smith says: “A narrative theology is one that starts not with abstract first principles, but with a particular story; it is inductive rather than deductive.” Hauerwas writes: “Narrative is neither just an account of genre criticism nor a faddish appeal…it is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions.”

Michael Goldberg defines “narrative theology” as one that makes central the view that “all of our convictions, nonreligious as well as religious, are rooted in some narrative, and that frequently, our more serious disputes with one another reflect rival narrative accounts.” In these definitions we see how narrative theology responds to the Enlightenment’s focus on objectivity. Murphy says that Kantian ethics and the historical critical study of the Bible had distorted the “curves and ovals” of Christian doctrine into “right-angles.” The narrative turn in theology began, or at least gained traction, with Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr. Both appeal to Scripture as a narrative, though in opposite ways (Barth reads it as God’s story; Niebuhr reads it as ours). Narrative theology most commonly refers to the “Yale School,” most notably the work of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei and their predecessors Julian Hart and Paul Holmer. These figures focus on Scripture as a narrative, grounded in and maintained by a particular

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6 Hauerwas and Jones, *Why Narrative?*, 5.  
community and tradition. Moreover, community and tradition rely upon Scripture’s narrative to maintain their identity.

Stephen Crites, for example, argues that narrative explains the experience of temporal life. Like musical performance, human life and identity must be performed over a period of time. Crites explains that the human consciousness consists of memory, the present, and anticipation (past, present, future). Each of these dimensions has a narrative quality: we recollect particular events from memory as a narrative of significant events; we plan for the future by imagining potential narratives; and we form our present identities by holding these past and future narratives together in “dramatic tension.”

Stories shape our lives. Christian life, accordingly, has a narrative shape.

MacIntyre makes a similar argument in *After Virtue*. He notes that whereas modernity tends to fragment the human being (e.g. a man’s virtue as father as fundamentally unrelated to his virtue as a scholar), whereas virtue ethics considers the human being as a whole. Actions and behaviors only makes sense with reference to an agent, that agent’s historical-social context, and the historical-social context of the performed action. In other words, we must understand the circumstances leading up to the action, the circumstances of the action itself, and the goals of action (beginning, middle, and end). Narrative is “the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions.”

For example, the significance of sitting at a lunch counter changes depending on its narrative: does the sitter want lunch or civil rights?

Narrative, in this conception, is the basis for Christian ethics. Hauerwas and David Burrell argue that morality depends on narrative. The “standard account of

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10 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 208.
morality” (i.e. rationalist or Enlightenment morality) presumes an objective moral agent and focuses on moral decisions. Kant, for example, offers the categorical imperatives, which any rational human being can use to address any moral quandary. In the standard account, first one learns the rules, then one applies the rules when one encounters a moral quandary. Morality is simply a tool one pulls out to fix a discrete problem, like a hammer that sits in the closet until you need to hang a picture.

Hauerwas and Burrell offer three reasons why the standard account falls short. First, it presupposes that the moral agent knows what a moral quandary looks like. “Should I help the wounded man on the side of the road or not?” and “Should I wear a white dress shirt or a Bugs Bunny shirt today?” are both quandaries, but they are not necessarily both moral quandaries. Are you wearing the Bugs Bunny shirt to the gym or to a funeral? The “morality” of the quandary may change depending upon the circumstances. One must possess a narrative before making this determination. Second, the standard account fails to account for moral notions. Why, for instance, do some argue that abortion is morally permissible while others argue that it is morally forbidden? A rationalist approach cannot mediate between these opposing positions. We can make rational arguments in support of both and both rely on underlying narratives. Even supposing that a rationalist ethics can tell us how we ought to treat human persons, it does not help us to define who or what determines a human person. Third, the standard account promotes disinterest in its attempt to offer “objective” moral judgments. Hauerwas and Burrell point out that if one seeks to promote certain moral values one cannot also promote disinterest. A moral agent must have an interest in promoting these

values and can only do so by building up moral character in a particular narrative. Only those who have a moral character can make a moral decision. Even if you only ever use a hammer occasionally, you must first know what a hammer is, what it does, and in what circumstances it might be needed; one must possess a “hammer narrative” before one can use a hammer. Hauerwas and Burrell do not oppose rationality. They oppose the standard account that does not account for the fact that rational decisions depend upon narratives.

The necessity of narrative for morality also undermines the idea of “Christian ethics.” To be a Christian means to embody the Christian story, the story found in Scripture, the story lived out and passed down in the Christian church. Hauerwas, with Samuel Wells, explains that “Christianity is not principally something people think or feel or say—it is something people do.” The term “Christian ethics” assumes that one can separate Christian action from what it means to be a Christian. In Against the Nations Hauerwas explains that Christians come together around a particular history, set of beliefs, and experiences. “Christian” ethics only makes sense within this context, for “the church does not have a social ethic…but rather the church is a social ethic.” The more universally appealing the church tries to become by watering down the Christian narrative, the more it loses hold of the teachings that make “Christian ethics” appealing to the wider world in the first place.

Nothing I have said so far about narrative and ethics necessarily contradicts anything that theo-dramatic ethics might say. Both theo-dramatic ethics and narrative

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12 Ibid., 163–173.
theology reject the distorting effects of rationalist abstraction. Both draw the means to describe revelation from revelation itself (i.e. scripture as narrative; revelation as drama); both affirm the need to take into account subjective experience and individual formation; and both embrace diversity within the use of their respective categories. Part of my goal in this chapter is to show that narrative ethics and theo-dramatic ethics are different without being at odds with one another. How we judge an action, for instance, depends upon the narrative behind it. Christian actions depend upon the Christian narrative. This dependence remains true even in a theo-dramatic approach.

b. Murphy’s Criticism of Narrative Theology: God Is Not A Story

i. Narrative Lacks a Transcendent Orientation

Francesca Aran Murphy lauds narrative theology’s desire to protect the “curves and ovals” of revelation from rationalist renderings of doctrine.\(^\text{15}\) She thinks it correctly rejects rationalist theology’s attempt to ground theology on objective, a-Christian facts and arguments. For example, historical criticism’s focus on authorial intention and its hermeneutic of suspicion can produce readings of Joshua that only care about whether archaeological evidence proves or disproves the invasion of Canaan. Narrative theologians, on the other hand, argue that focusing only on objective, empirical facts misses the point. Scripture is a theological-spiritual text by and for believers, so we should stop examining it like geologists examine rock strata. Narrative theology takes the Bible at its methodological word and describes God as God appears in Scripture.

\(^{15}\) Murphy, God Is Not a Story, 1.
Nevertheless, Murphy criticizes narrative theology for placing method above content. She divides narrative theologians into three groups: story Barthians (Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, David Ford, and the Yale School), grammatical Thomists (Herbert McCabe, David Burrell, Fergus Kerr, and Denys Turner), and story Thomist (Robert Jenson). Whether they appeal to Thomas or Barth, all, Murphy argues, give primacy to method over content. They reduce God to the way we talk about God. As a result, narrative theology makes God’s existence superfluous to theology.

In *God Is Not A Story: Realism Revisited*, Murphy explains why theodramatics accomplishes what narrative can only purport to do. Her thesis is that in supplanting the content of theology with a theological method, narrative theology fails to accomplish its goal of “reinstating the imaginative and biblical basis of theology.” Murphy explains that early modern philosophers “sought a foundation for metaphysical truth in an act of knowledge.” This epistemology—grounding metaphysics on human thought—poses a danger to theology because it confounds revelation with human cognition. For example, “If we say God is revealed through imagination…all we may be seen to be doing is deifying imagination.” Narrative theologians ostensibly reject this foundationalism, but Murphy argues that they cannot quite free themselves from its grip. What Scripture should reveal, she explains, is the “image of doing.” We can marvel at the image, knowing that it cannot contain all of God’s action. Narrative theology, however, offers the “doing of an image.” This reversal turns the image into something to be done rather than something

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16 Ibid., 11.
17 Ibid., 23.
18 Ibid., 31.
19 Ibid., 32.
20 Ibid., 23.
21 Ibid.
to be marveled at. Narrative theologians succumb to foundationalism by placing our experience of Scripture above the content of Scripture.

Murphy argues that narrative theology places epistemology over reality. She points out that we cannot “do” an image until we know that the image exists in reality and not just in our minds. Narrative theologians overreact to the Enlightenment desire for objectivity by constructing a purely subjective method; instead of seeing God through Scripture, narrative theologians have abstracted an imaginary God from it. The problem is that “narrative theologies substitute a methodology for the personal love of God.” If we make God’s existence superfluous, our “love” for God will only be self-love. Murphy dedicates three chapters to three especially pernicious implications of supplanting method for God: 1) it undermines the personalizing effect of the church, 2) it leads us to intuit God’s existence rather than encounter it, and 3) it exacerbates the problem of evil by placing it on the same level as good.

First, in relation to the church, if we place the effect of Scripture above the content of Scripture, then being a Christian is nothing more than being part of a worldly community. While a community-focus may not sound bad, Murphy points out that it makes the church arbitrary. Rather than a community gathered around the truth, the Church’s interpretation of Scripture becomes the totality of Scripture; the community gathers around itself rather than around God. Murphy, however, argues that the Church should conceive of itself as in a dialogue with God. She cites various images from Scripture to support this point (e.g. the nuptial imagery in Paul and Revelation). More

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23 Murphy, God Is Not a Story, 45.
24 Ibid., 23.
25 Ibid., 49.
fundamentally, she points to the purpose of revelation. If the Church claims to gather around the truth, in response to the truth, then it must properly conceive of itself dialogically rather than monologically: “Mary Magdalene did not meet up with a text, but with a person.”

Second, Murphy argues that intuiting God’s existence reduces God to human imagination. She writes:

> If our language about God does not draw upon the positively given and acknowledged, it chases its own tail—the language follows from a linguistic stipulation, not from an existential given. That is why narrative theology has a tendency to identify content with method, that is, to equate God with a story.

Grammatical Thomists try to intuit God’s existence from Thomas’ five ways. They use the “why proof,” which asks: why is there something rather than nothing? The question is supposed to lead us intuitively to God, because there must be a reason why. Murphy responds that Thomas’s five ways in actuality provide Christians empirical rather than intuitive evidence. Christians know by faith that only in God is there no distinction between existence and essence (“I am that I am.”). The why proof presumes the world is contingent. Contingency, Murphy points out, is not intuitive. An atheist like Bertrand Russell can easily say: “The universe is just there.” We might respond that Russell lacks a sense of poetry or mystery, but we would be hard pressed to call him irrational. For the believer, Thomas’ five ways offer empirical support for this belief. For the non-believer, they offer an argument for the world’s contingency. In either case, Thomas’ argument relies on an existent creation and an existent God. Similarly, story Barthians adopt Anselm’s ontological argument and, says Murphy, end up with a God who exists

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26 Ibid., 63.
27 Ibid., 91.
28 Ibid., 100.
because human beings are capable of thinking of him.\textsuperscript{29} But we cannot intuit creation or God into existence. Thomas and Anselm rely on existence, not intuition, to make their arguments.

Third, a depersonalized and imaginary God cannot address the reality of suffering and evil. We experience evil and suffering in the world as a fact. If God is not a given but something we intuit or prove, then we must do the same for suffering and evil. For the realist, “only if we already know that God exists and transcends nature can we assume that someone is bringing good out of evil, and thus that goods ultimately outweigh evils.”\textsuperscript{30} Since narrative theology focuses on how we know God, it cannot get past the logical problem of how a good God can coexist with evil. Scripture becomes a melodramatic, Manichaean conflict between good and evil: “Constricted to the space of a secular aesthetics which pits divine and human freedom against one another, Scripture cannot be other than a melodrama.”\textsuperscript{31} A God who only exists in intuition cannot bring good out of evil. Narrative theologians, with their circular reasoning and monological communities, cannot intuit their way out of the fact that evil exists in the world. They fail to address evil just as they fail in regards to the Church and God’s existence because they turn theology into a one-sided endeavor closed off from revelation. Narrative theology lacks a transcendent orientation and this absence seems to be Murphy’s primary criticism of narrative theology.

There is the question, though, of whether Murphy provides just reading of all the narrative theologians she criticizes. William Placher, for example, calls Murphy’s

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 116.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 146.
charges against Hans Frei “unfair.”

Clive Marsh suggests that narrative theology might simply be “wrestling” with questions of language and transcendence “in a contemporary (even postmodern) way.”

But even if Murphy overreaches with her specific attacks, she does at least identify a potential danger of narrative approaches. In his review, for instance, Mathew Levering suggests that God is Not a Story “is actually not about narrative theology, but rather is an extended argument for the need for a better theological appropriation of the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar among English-speaking theologians.”

We do not need to agree with Murphy that all narrative theologies lack a transcendent orientation in order to see the value of identifying narrative’s weaknesses.

Though we might disagree with her judgments regarding specific narrative theologians, God is Not a Story helps us to see the potential misuses of narrative. There is an inherent limitation to “narrative.” God is not a story, after all. Stories and narratives rely on time, which God transcends. So not only is God not a “story,” but there is no story that could ever fully describe God. Murphy compels us to ask what might happen to our understanding of God if we only talk about God in terms of “story.”

**ii. Theo-Drama v. Melodrama**

Throughout God Is Not A Story Murphy appeals to movies to illustrate the one-sided nature of narrative theology. She refers to narrative theology as “movie-like” and

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“movieish.” By “movie” she refers to films that aspire to be the “movie version of melodrama, that is, to ‘closed romantic realism,’ called ‘closed because these films…create worlds that do not acknowledge that they are being watched and the actors behave as if the camera isn’t there.’”36 Both movies and narrative theology share a “technologizing” methodology that replaces reality with an artificially focused, self-contained, self-involved world. Christ in narrative theology is like a screen actor to an audience: we watch him, identify with him, and even sympathize with him, but always as passive spectators. We never respond to or enter into dialogue with Christ as if he were a real person.37

Movies and narrative theology are both melodramatic. In melodrama we are presented with a clear-cut battle between good and evil, in which the confrontation drives the plot toward either romanticized victimization or poetic justice. Star Wars is the preeminent example of a movie melodrama according to Murphy. The stakes of the conflict in melodrama are enormous because there is nothing beyond the conflict. The victor decides the tenor of the universe: melodramatic worlds have no transcendent orientation. Dramatic genres like tragedy and comedy, on the contrary, are oriented to transcendence. Tragedy “reaches out, beyond the evils suffered here below” to the higher realm and so allows us to see what went wrong.38 Comedy, the happy ending, “prefigures the eschatological enjoyment of a paradisial feast.”39 Tragedy and comedy do not ignore worldly realities. They situate worldly realities in the context of transcendence. The transcendent backdrop, accordingly, determines whether an event qualifies as tragic,

36 Ibid, citing Mark Cousins.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 144.
39 Ibid.
comic, or both. Narrative theology, like melodrama, offers a story that lacks transcendence. It offers a modalist God: “The narrative Trinity seems to have no being in itself, no autonomy from humanity.”40 Just as we cannot encounter movie characters outside the movie, we cannot encounter the Trinity outside the story.

Murphy promotes theo-drama as a method that achieves narrative’s aims without succumbing to its weaknesses. This possibility, of course, relies on the *analogia entis*: “Theo-drama is possible because God *expresses* himself in creation as he *is* in eternity.”41 Whereas melodrama is “a secular or horizontal genre, a genre of endless progressions and digressions within a *single*, univocal frame,” theo-drama (like tragedy and comedy) takes into account transcendence, both the horizontal and the vertical.42 Just as melodrama “absolutizes” progressions and digressions, narrative theology absolutizes the concept of narrative, which limits consideration to the narrative. For Murphy, narrative theologians turn revelation and Scripture into idols.43 We do not see the eternal God in them; we only see ourselves. There is nothing beyond the effect the story has on us. We can never visit a movie world because there is nothing real behind the screen. Theo-drama, on the other hand, offers us an icon of the transcendent.

*iii. Making Narrative Absolute*

Murphy argues that narrative theology, by making narrative absolute, cannot help but place method over content. Narrative theologians responded to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on objectivity by overcorrecting and shunning objectivity altogether. Instead of

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40 Ibid., 270.
41 Ibid., 319.
42 Ibid., 323.
43 Ibid., 328.
returning theology to its biblical roots, however, they unintentionally denied God’s transcendence. This God is nothing more than Christians’ understanding of their story. As a result, narrative theology lacks openness to the objective reality of revelation—there is no room in narrative theology for freedom or beauty. There is no room for transcendence. For Murphy, narrative absolutizes a single concern, whereas theological dramatics remains open to the infinite.

Murphy’s critique of narrative theology illustrates what happens when method determines content. We are left with a closed, one-sided theology that lacks an orientation toward transcendence. We can see, consequently, why theo-dramatic ethics must maintain a radical, even if unsettling, openness to revelation. It must allow content to guide method. Theo-dramatics ethics, because it is based on beauty, does not limit revelation to human measures. Turning “drama” or “theo-drama” into a narrow category would necessitate absolutizing either the subjective or objective. Affirming both requires an openness born of humility: I never know what I am going to encounter, and I can never control the Other.

An ethics that makes narrative absolute lacks a transcendent orientation. For Hauerwas, our actions as Christians arise directly out of our being Christians. Murphy argues that what we do must be based on an actual, existent God. If we remove or disregard this aspect, then whatever we do, we do aimlessly. In fact, William Carter Aikin criticizes Hauerwas’ approach as idolatrous, contending that for Hauerwas narrative transforms the Christian community rather than the grace of God acting through the narrative.\(^4^4\) Whether or not Aikin offers a fair reading of Hauerwas, Murphy would

certainly agree that narrative theology could lead to an idolatrous form of ethics. Her point is that without metaphysical realism Christian theology becomes vapid: the Church cannot be anything significant unless it is dialogical; talk about God’s existence is only significant if it is about a real thing; and the problem of evil can only be dealt with if we acknowledge God’s actual existence. Christians can only make sense of God and themselves if they see God through Scripture and not merely in Scripture. We can only respond to a real existent God. Ethics is no less arbitrary coming from narrative rather than rationalism if it lacks a transcendent orientation. Narrative theology, as Murphy describes it, is not oriented to the good but to a particular reading of the good. I do not intend to dismiss all narrative approaches to ethics or even to say that all carry a fatal taint. Rather, Murphy’s work suggests that narrative ethics lack the ability to fully respond to revelation because it lacks metaphysical robustness, especially the *analogia entis*. Narrative, at least for Murphy, is too narrow to make sense of transcendent content, which is why it ends up controlling content.

III. In Support of Narrative

a. Narrative Theology as the “Tenth Trend”?  

In *TDI*, Balthasar lists nine trends that attempt but fail to free theology from the “sandbank of rationalist abstraction.” He explains that these trends absolutize certain ideologies or concerns (e.g. event, orthopraxy, political theology) and thereby fail to find a balance between the horizontal and the vertical dimensions. But he insists that each trend has value nonetheless. In fact, Balthasar says the trends’ individual concerns,

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whether history or politics or action, only gain traction when they converge in the theo-
drama. Murphy’s argument suggests that narrative theology is another trend, stuck on the same sandbank: by absolutizing the role of narrative it cannot maintain the balance between horizontal and vertical—everything collapses into the horizontal act of reading.

Movies, and movieish theology, make narrative absolute by promoting plot at the expense of characters. Rather than characters with personalities that reflect real human emotions, we meet characters who act as little more than plot devices. Murphy writes: “we don’t truly ask ‘why’ in a movie because, here, story is more important than, and has absorbed the main engine of why questions, characters.” A narrative that prompts us to ask “What next?” rather than “Why?” has no room for characters, persons, or freedom.

We should not, however, define narrative by its misuses. Some narratives prompt us to ask “What next?” but many others prompt us to ask “Why”? In a mostly laudatory review, Edward Oakes notes that God Is Not a Story relies on an unnecessary “binary opposition of narrative to drama.” He points out that Balthasar’s account of drama acts as an “overarching category” in order to “bring out the best in other theological modalities.” While Murphy focuses out what she thinks some narrative theologians have done wrong, narrative itself should not share in their condemnation. It is not narrative, but the misuse of narrative leads to the problems Murphy describes. The misuse of narrative, rather than narrative generally, is the “tenth trend” that attempts but fails to free theology from the sandbank of rationalist abstraction.

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46 Ibid.
47 Murphy, God Is Not a Story, 107.
49 Ibid.
When we do not make it absolute narrative plays a crucial role in theology. Its significance stems from its near omnipresence in human life. Consider this oft-cited reflection from Roland Barthes:

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation…under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society…Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.\(^{50}\)

If we want to engage the world, then we must engage narrative. Narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan argues that a good definition of narrative must be “fuzzy.”\(^{51}\) A narrow, pithy definition would exclude things that we want to call narrative, while an all-encompassing one would defeat the purpose of defining it at all. We must affirm the unity of narrative while also acknowledging that it applies to vastly different things. Ryan’s fuzzy definition includes eight criteria categorized into four dimensions: spatial, temporal, mental, formal and pragmatic. Different genres stress different dimensions:

With their detailed construction of an imaginary world, science fiction and fantasy locate interest in the spatial dimension [of narrative]…while the mental dimension, by insisting on the motivations and emotions of characters, rules over tragedy, sentimental romances, detective stories, comedies of errors, and, in the nonfictional domain, narratives of personal experience.\(^{52}\)

We can, as Barthes points out, find narrative in just about everything but not in the same way.

Narratives have the capability of expressing innumerable human experiences.

Michael Root, in arguing for a narrative understanding of soteriology, explains that


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 31.
particularity can have general appeal without being subsumed in generality. *Moby Dick,* for instance, is both particular and general in its ability to speak to us: “If Ahab’s obsessive quest for the white whale did not in some way resemble more widely shared human quests, it would be simply opaque.”53 Ahab is a particular character. He lives in a culture and works a job that few modern readers, if any, can relate to. Nevertheless, his narrative conveys something universal through its particularity. Narratives—good narratives—last because they express something universal. We might even go so far as to say that narratives are good when they reveal the truth.

Narratives, like beauty, should be formational. Crites, for instance, says that narrative helps us to make sense of temporal existence. We do not live in the past or in the future, but the way we conceive of both (memory and anticipation) forms who we are in the present. The narrative quality of experience lies in the fact that every moment and every action possesses a dramatic tension between the recollected past and the anticipated future. Crites argues: “narrative alone can contain the full temporality of experience in a unity of form.”54 Stories have formational value because we live stories; we do not live principles. Indeed, according to MacIntyre, the human being is a “story-telling animal.”55 Virtues, actions, life, traditions all have narrative shape. Stories themselves have direct, formational effect:

It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance…that children learn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what

54 Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” 78.
55 MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 216.
the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.\textsuperscript{56}

For MacIntyre, we can only make sense of moral notions if we recognize the unity of human life. MacIntyre does not argue that the fairy tales we hear as children wholly determine who we become as adults. His point is simpler: nobody comes from nothing. Our social origins represent our moral starting points. We have the ability to affirm, reject, or transcend these starting points, but we all start somewhere. Better though, MacIntyre argues, that we start with stories. Even if we later reject our childhood bedtime tales, at least we will have been given a structure with which to understand life.

G. K. Chesterton insists that fairy tales teach us how to view the world more accurately than rationalist, materialist, scientific “laws.” For Chesterton, the mere fact of existence should inspire astonishment and wonder. So Chesterton writes, “Tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green.”\textsuperscript{57} The wonder in fantasy stories—stories that focus on plot rather than characterization—recalls the wonder of the real world. Murphy worries about movieish theology that sacrifices character for the sake of plot. Plot itself is not bad, but making plot one’s sole concern is what leads to idolatry. Jeffrey Morrow argues that C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien wrote fantasy literature in order to display an orientation to transcendent beauty similar to what Balthasar describes in \textit{The Glory of the Lord}. Morrow identifies imagination as the common thread running through all three authors. Imagination, he says, is the receptive ability to see the deeper reality of an object of

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} G. K. Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 96.
beauty and the active ability to co-create. Chesterton, Lewis, and Tolkien all understand that fantasy points us towards beauty through the way it piques our imaginations. Fantasy, at least as Chesterton and Morrow describe it, has resonance only if one shares Murphy’s realist position. The wonders of Middle Earth or Narnia grip us because their roots lie in our world.

Just because some may turn narrative into an idol does not mean that narratives necessarily lack a transcendent orientation. Narrative theologians do not destroy the splendor of narratives any more than aesthetic theologians destroy the splendor of beauty. Narrative is moral and formational in the same way that beauty is moral and formational. A narrative is simply another beautiful form.

*b. The Value of Movies for Theology*

Murphy makes extensive use of movies to illustrate how narrative theology takes a wrong turn. Most of the time her examples work very well (e.g. Alec Guinness in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* to explain Robert Jenson’s modalism). Other times, she seems to almost disparage movies; “movieish” theology is bad theology, according to Murphy. Movies themselves, of course, are not the problem just as narrative is not the problem. Consequently, articulating the value of movies for theology will help us to see the value of narrative for theo-dramatic ethics.

Movies, in Murphy’s interpretation, embody the end result of narrative theology: a self-contained world that an audience passively absorbs rather than a real, existent world with which it can dialogue. Both movies and narrative theology, Murphy claims,

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mistake the experience of narrative as ontological. For example, in the film *Don Jon*, both the male protagonist (Jon) and love interests (Barbara) confuse their individual experiences watching movies for reality (online pornography Hollywood romantic-comedy-dramas respectively). Both mistake their subjective viewing experiences as expressing the whole content of sex and romance. As a result, he cannot experience sexual intimacy because he can only think of sex as a private (i.e. individual) activity. She, similarly, only desires the aspects of Jon that fit her picture of a superficial romantic hero. Jon and Barbara’s misuse of movies demonstrate Murphy’s fears regarding movieish narrative theology: a self-centered, circular ontology rather than a dialogue with real, existent beings. Both Jon and Barbara want reality (real sex, real romance) to match the faux-reality they encounter in movies. When it does not, they react with frustration, resentment, and denial. *Don Jon*, in the end, is a movie about the danger of watching movies. Murphy, of course, uses the medium itself as an embodiment of narrative theology.

We can watch movies, however, without mistaking that experience for reality. The characters of *Don Jon* treat movies as idols, but idols do not make themselves. Film theorist André Bazin argues that the “real presence” or absence of the human actors does not define the difference between the stage and the cinema, but the relation of the audience to the “décor.”

A stage exists within the audience’s world, creating an imaginary space within the world in which drama can take place. Since it exists in the world, the stage’s décor (props, backdrop, etc.) does not create a world, it only alludes to the world. Drama proceeds from the stage when actors are on it because only the actors

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are real, but film, Bazin explains, offers the audience a “mask” into another world.\textsuperscript{60}

Being photographic, the viewer regards cinema as “real.” The power of a photograph lies in the fact that it produces an exact copy of a real, existent thing. While the photograph does not offer the thing itself, Bazin says that it has an aesthetic power unlike any other visual art because, in some sense, it is the object it depicts.\textsuperscript{61} A film décor creates a world, maybe not the real world, but a world nonetheless. As a result, drama in cinema does not rely on the presence of human actors. We can respond to a film’s décor because it offers us something “real,” whereas a stage’s décor only offers us an allusion. Bazin’s point is that we cannot use the same measure to judge film that we use to judge theater. A good play often translates poorly to film and the parts of a film that make it good often cannot be replicated on stage. Audiences respond differently to each. In theater the audience does not identify with the hero, whereas in film the audience does. Murphy worries about the power of movieish theology’s faux-reality to replace our sense of reality. But film only poses a threat to theater if we think of it as theater.\textsuperscript{62} Movieish theology is only dangerous if it is the whole of theology. The same is true of aesthetics. If we stop at aesthetic consideration, we are left with aesthetic theology. If we follow a beautiful form to dramatics and logic, we have theological aesthetics.

Movies, as beautiful narrative forms, have the ability to direct our gaze toward the transcendent. Terence Malick’s \textit{The Tree of Life} offers a narrative that would be

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 117.


\textsuperscript{62} Bazin thinks that cinema and theater can aid one another. Cinema can mine theater for material, theater can benefit from cinema’s popularity, and both can refine their techniques through this exchange. These benefits rely on each medium appreciating the particularities of the other: “The best translation [of theater to cinema] is that which demonstrates a close intimacy with the genius of both languages and, likewise, a mastery of both.” Bazin, “Theater and Cinema,” 126.
impossible to achieve on the stage. The film opens with a quotation from Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth...when the morning stars sang together?” (Job 38: 4, 7). We then see a family learn that a son has died. In the midst of this grief, the visual narrative shifts billions of years into the past. The audience witnesses the big bang, the formation of the earth, the rise and fall of the dinosaurs; the film depicts the history of the universe from the beginning of time to the beginning of the family with which it began. *Tree* asks the viewer to interpret a single human loss against the enormity of creation. Only the faux-reality offered by film could place human drama in the context of a cosmic drama. When film presents drama without human beings, it forces the audience to consider the possibility of drama beyond the realm of human experience. It helps us to see the “theo” side of theo-drama. Narrative, especially film, has the ability to convey non-human drama that the stage does not.

We can use narrative without making it absolute. It has the potential to express beautiful forms. Murphy’s argument warns us of the dangers of narrative made absolute, but our brief examination of narrative reveals that we can use it without making this mistake. Narrative in film can help us understand our reality, even if some may mistake it as reality. In every case, the narrative comes to fruition in the response that it demands. Whether we use or misuse narrative depends upon whether we seek to receive or to control beauty.

c. The Difference Between a Story and a Symphony

Murphy argues that narrative theology lacks a transcendent orientation because it is like a melodrama, “a horizontal genre, a genre of endless progressions and digressions
within a single, univocal frame."\textsuperscript{63} When we apply this horizontal frame to God, we essentially disregard the vertical aspect of revelation. The problem with narrative theology, for Murphy, is that it has room for only one method; it lacks the openness and flexibility that characterize theological dramatics. While she overreaches with her specific condemnations, she is correct in identifying the limiting potential of narrative. The misuse of narrative—the absolutizing of narrative—limits our gaze to a single narrative, a single story. (The way we think about God subsumes the revelation of God). While this use is a misuse, it is also a real limitation of narrative. Narrative is horizontal and singular, temporal and monological.

The difference between narrative ethics and theo-dramatic ethics is the difference between a story and a symphony. In Murphy’s reckoning narrative can only account for the horizontal dimension, while dramatics is open to the horizontal and the vertical. As we have seen, however, narratives can express transcendence just as well as any earthly form. Why, then, bother with theo-dramatic ethics? Both stories and symphonies can be beautiful. They are not, however, the same. A story, as Murphy points out, is indeed horizontal and univocal. Narrative is bound by time. It is inevitably linear, with a beginning, middle, and end. So-called “nonlinear narratives” are only nonlinear in presentation; the effect presumes that the audience will reorder the narrative chronologically. Of course, symphonies are bound by time as well. The difference is that the temporal constraints of stories also make them necessarily monological. Only one voice can be heard at a time. Symphonies, on the other hand, allow for polyphony. Multiple voices sound together, and are made richer by their simultaneous performance. Counterpoint, in which two independent melodies played together enrich one another, is

\textsuperscript{63} Murphy, \textit{God Is Not a Story}, 323.
simply impossible with narratives. Two stories, considered together, might together tell a bigger story, but we cannot hear them simultaneously. Of course we need not reject narratives. After all, a musical score is a sort of narrative.

Theo-dramatic ethics allows for diverse exemplars to appear on stage and to perform at the same time without disharmony. It not only allows us to hold together multiple narratives at the same time, it allows us to bring them together into a harmonious whole. We can see this already in the various Christian forms of life. The religious and the laity both perform the Christ-form as part of the same church at the same time, though they do so in very different ways. Theo-dramatic ethics allows for polyphony without pluralism.

IV. Demonstrating Theo-Dramatic Ethics Through Balthasar’s Theology

We come, finally, to our discussion of the orchestra. The body made up of all these different performances. Balthasar does not impose an overarching category onto revelation. Murphy advocates his theological dramatics for its openness to transcendence. She criticizes narrative theology for replacing content with method. The grammatical Thomist or story Barthian does not, in the end, encounter God but only the way human beings think about God. If the content ultimately lies beyond human comprehension, then a human method will never completely grasp it. We may, however, remain receptive to revelation. Theology may embrace any number of methodological tools so long as they remain in service to our receptivity. Narrative leads Christians astray when it sets limits on the content of revelation. Balthasar, on the other hand, applies drama as the best category to describe our response to beauty because receptivity precludes squeezing
revelation into a predetermined system. Drama is iconic, giving us an open window to transcendence.

After all, when we ground moral formation in beauty we renounce any pretense of control over revelation. The lack of control may be unnerving. Perhaps this is why we feel adrift; we must wait for beauty to come to us. The desire for control undoubtedly motivates some narrative theologians to push narrative further than it can go (in rejecting a purely objective approach, they end up with a purely subjective approach). But affirming Christ, affirming beauty, demands that we accept this lack of control. In practical terms, this acceptance alters the very shape of moral formation: how we learn the Christ-form, the various ways in which we embody it, and how we reconcile the call to embody an infinite-finite form as finite beings. The way to mitigate our fears (either that theo-dramatic ethics is a method that determines content or that it is too broad to guide anything) is through a demonstration of the response to beauty in Christian life, thought, and action. In what follows I will show how the very features that cause worry actually prevent theo-dramatic ethics from succumbing to these weaknesses. I will draw on Balthasar’s theology to illustrate how being formed by beauty affects: 1) the way we engage the tradition; 2) the way it manifests as polyphony; and, 3) the transethical character of beauty-based lives.

a. Balthasar’s Use of Interlocutors: Learning from Beautiful Lives

Balthasar relies a great deal on interlocutors. Throughout the trilogy he employs other theologians to construct his own theology. In TD1 he cites every major playwright in Western history. Balthasar was superhumanly erudite. Henri de Lubac considered him
to be one of the most cultured men of the twentieth century. Kilby considers his use of cultural illustrations to be confusing since it is often difficult to differentiate between Balthasar’s arguments and the arguments of his interlocutors. However much consternation, approbation, or confusion Balthasar’s references may cause, they form a crucial part of his argument.

In the first chapter I argued that perceiving beautiful forms is the beginning of moral formation. Through encountering beauty we are formed and in being formed we respond to the moral content of that form. We learn beauty, and consequently the good, through its particular embodiments. So far I have discussed this formation primarily in abstract terms. But theo-dramatic ethics does not exist in the abstract in the same way that a rationalist approach to ethics does. We do not learn from absolute beauty, but from particular forms of beauty. We may worry that such a broad base would lead to a chaotic or even contradictory morality, but learning morality from beauty does not necessarily lead to either. When we learn morality from beauty, we learn the Christ-form. No matter how diverse the sources may seem, when we learn beauty we learn Christ. We see this approach reflected in Balthasar’s use of interlocutors.

Balthasar describes formation as something that occurs by contemplating other forms of life. He argues that “love alone” makes Christianity credible. This love is not abstract; the concrete manifestation of love makes God’s glory credible. Christ died on a real cross, not an imaginary one. Balthasar does not reject abstraction, but it only takes place after concrete love convinces us. He writes, “It is not dry manuals (full as these

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may be of unquestionable truths) that plausibly express to the world the truth of Christ’s Gospel, but the existence of the saints, who have been grasped by Christ’s Holy Spirit. And Christ himself foresaw no other kind of apologetics.”

David Moss, working from the above quotation, explains that Balthasar appeals to the saints because their lives represent the clearest expression of theology. Danielle Nussberger, explaining the importance of receptivity to the Christ-form, notes, “We can look with Balthasar at Therese and Elizabeth and see what all Christians are called to be: transparent icons of Christ.”

Teology begins with the concrete.

Balthasar does not distinguish his theology from lived faith; theology includes both the contemplation and the action carried out by the individual Christian. Cyril O’Regan argues that one could think of Balthasar’s entire theological project as an attempt to render a correct “remembering” of the Christian tradition as the saints have lived it out. Tradition is not static. We learn from tradition to the extent that we engage it dynamically. The tradition is like a cathedral, “defined by multiple heterogenous spaces through which the worshiper moves.” Speaking in abstract terms may help us to communicate more quickly (just like any other form of technical shorthand), but we must not idolize it by turning into an abstraction. The work of theology occurs at the particular level and it is at this level that we see the Christ-form most clearly.

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71 Ibid., 1:11 On page 113, O’Regan also offers this explanation of the importance of remembering the plural tradition correctly: “In a quite obvious sense, ‘misremembering’ deepens forgetfulness by putting out of action the memory of tradition, unraveling its rich tapestry, and by ignoring the polyphony of its voices which admit of no reduction to a unitary vision.”
Balthasar illustrates his theological abstractions by referring to beautiful forms. The second and third volumes of *The Glory of the Lord* do not continue his abstractions, but provide commentary on the theological aesthetics of various clerical and lay authors. He accounts for this commentary as a necessary next step in his project: “The next task of a theological aesthetic is, then, to lend to these abstract propositions historical colour and fulness.” Balthasar reiterates this sentiment in *TDI*: “The reason why the *Aesthetics* has taken up so much space is that it always had to show the encountered reality *at work*—as theo-praxy.” We cannot do theology as a purely abstract exercise. Limiting theology to abstract propositions isolates it from subjective evidence. Balthasar engages theologians on their own terms without reducing their theologies to some lowest common denominator. Since we cannot define beauty, Balthasar demonstrates it.

For this reason Balthasar does not choose his interlocutors haphazardly. They meet specific criteria to adequately express the Christ-form. First, a theology must have “intrinsic excellence” meaning that it recognizes God’s glory as the center of theology. Second, they have a certain “historical significance” that makes them more visible and more visibly influential than lesser known saints or theologians, whose significance is no less real but less accessible. Balthasar notes that given “the very richness of God in Christ,” we should expect Christian experiences and explications of revelation “to occur in the most diverse ways.” Since we only perceive beauty through particular beautiful forms, it comes as no surprise that Balthasar turns to particular theological aesthetics to support his case.

75 Ibid.
While Christian theology is recognizable, it is never complete. In the volumes on clerical and lay authors, Balthasar discusses each figure separately, admitting that we can make interesting connections between them but warning against fashioning an overarching synthesis: “Such dialogues form together no overall system; for how should man be able to attain an overall perspective…All that develops is a full orchestra, whose various instruments blend well with one another.” The more beautiful forms we perceive, the greater our understanding of beauty. The more we understand beauty, the more we realize that beauty is an ever-greater mystery. We cannot sum up beauty with a single, perfectly beautiful finite form.

Although Balthasar’s frequent references, digressions, and discourses with other theologians may tax our patience, they are never excessive. Each reference drives home Balthasar’s argument that no theology or collection of theologies can ever sum up God’s revelation. His own appeal to a plural tradition demonstrates that theology cannot restrict the revelation that it purports to express. Balthasar’s commentaries are only “excessive” in that they illustrate the excessiveness of God’s revelation. Theology can approach expressing this excessiveness through an unlimited and unending variety of forms:

A link seems possible between the content [Inhalt] of all theology (grasped in the breadth of the adumbrations of its formal object) and the form of expression [Ausdrucksform] of any individual theology. The content is already itself the divine expression: the divine glory proclaimed in mundane terms; and the forms of expression are subject, on their side, to the laws of free, human power of

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76 Ibid., 22.
77 O’Regan explains that Balthasar’s use of patristic and medieval negative theology reveals his commitment to a plural and dynamic tradition: “These interpreters do not simply pass on (traditio), but in and through interpretation reveal new facets of the phenomenon of Christ and thus ‘give back’ (redditio). This giving back is what makes the tradition ever new. The tradition is an open-ended process of continual excavation, perpetual quarrying of what has not been said, what has not been said adequately about the exigent reality of love and forgiveness which governs all Christian response and makes it possible,” O’Regan, The Anatomy of Misremembering, 1:135.
fashioning. They are seen to be essentially not finished ‘styles’ ready to hand, but a style which develops in the creative process of giving form to this unique content. In so far as the content itself is already the expression of God, theology is the expression of an expression, on the one hand an obedient repetition of the expression of revelation imprinted on the believer, and on the other a creative, childlike, free sharing in the bringing-to-expression in the Holy Spirit—who is the Spirit of Christ, of the Church and of the believer—of the mystery which expresses itself.\footnote{Ibid., 28, my emphasis; Balthasar, Herrlichkeit, 2:25–26.}

How do we express an expression that exceeds our understanding? The most accurate expression of an inimitable expression is one that points to this inexpressible quality.

Human beings, Balthasar notes, have the freedom to craft the form of a particular theology so long as this form pays homage to the uncontrollable content.

Theo-dramatic ethics does not intend to imitate Balthasar’s methods rigidly. His appeals to theologians, saints, authors, and artists testify to Balthasar’s understanding that we cannot place limits on God: Si comprehendis, non est deus. If we seek to embody the Christ-form, then we must consent to the Christ-form. This consent, moreover, entails that the Christ-form determines the forms of our lives. Given that we cannot fully comprehend the Christ-form, we cannot place limits on the forms these subsequent methods, styles, or lives may take. This polyphony leads to the concerns I identified at the beginning of the chapter: if everything fits under theo-dramatic ethics, then why bother? Could it not justify any and every form of life?

The key is that theo-dramatic ethics does not act without an orientation. It learns morality from beauty and manifests it as polyphony. Balthasar explains that the objective content of revelation entails that Christians have “fixed points” to orient their theologies: 1) the incomprehensible unity of the “form of revelation”; 2) “the teaching of the Church” which provides basic “ground rules” and, 3) “the commissions or theological
charisms” which give individuals authority to express their unique interpretations.⁷⁹ We learn aesthetically from the first two points: the form of revelation itself and the teaching of the Church, which helps us to understand what we perceive. These points maintain the unity of Christian forms of life while the third point acknowledges the plurality that will result from individual charisms.⁸⁰ Balthasar’s choice of clerical and lay authors in GL2 and GL3 follows these criteria. However much they differ in form, they all spring from the same center: Christ.

Christ prevents them from contradicting one another. These forms converge because they consent to beauty rather than to their own arbitrary wills. Christ is the ultimate norm and measure. Christ is why and how theo-dramatic ethics is not anything and everything. Because we learn the good through particulars, we can only learn it by appealing to Christ or to those forms of life that mediate and express/re-express the Christ-form (the ultimate form of life). The more forms we know, the greater our understanding of Christ (and how to embody the Christ-form). Each unique form witnesses to the ultimate inexpressible beauty of Christ in its uniqueness. We learn better, in other words, by listening to the whole orchestra and not just the strings.

Following Balthasar’s lead, theo-dramatic ethics looks to various figures and forms of life that offer particular embodiments of Christ. These embodiments, by consenting to beauty, converge. Theo-dramatic ethics, therefore, does not leave us adrift with only the hope that we might stumble across beauty. Centuries of beautiful lives and theologies lay before us.

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⁸⁰ Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 68.
b. Polyphony in *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels: Being Formed into an Orchestra*

i. *Why the Secular Institutes?*

Just as we learn better by looking to multiple embodiments of the Christ-form, the Church performs its mission better by embracing multiple forms of life. In *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels* Balthasar promotes the secular institutes, communities of lay people living by the evangelical counsels (virginity, poverty, and obedience). Balthasar explains that the modern laity occupies an unsustainable position. Lay people live in a vicious circle of unwillingness and inability to participate in the apostolate. The problem stems, in part, from the difference between clerical life and lay life. The laity lives in the world while the clergy lives outside it. The distance between the two has made the clergy’s experiences and insights irrelevant to the laity, and Balthasar blames the current distance on the secularization and specialization of society.

Today the clergy are the only Christians who live the evangelical counsels and so the misconception has arisen that only clerical life can embody the Christ-form. For example, Balthasar observes that “If a student of medicine, of law, of the science or the arts, of engineering, or of architecture wants to realize the perfect imitation of Christ in his life today, no other path is open to him other than to abandon his job and study another discipline, namely, theology.”

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83 Ibid., 87.
thought, precludes a perfect imitation of Christ. The modern Church, he worries, has become homogenous. Hobbled by abstract and unpersuasive theology, it lacks the ability to speak to every circumstance of life. In the early and medieval church, most theologians received a general or universal education (e.g. Augustine, Origen). As a result, their insights had relevance to most areas of life (or at least were assumed to have relevance and authority). With the modern age of specialization, however, theologians lost their broad appeal. Ever since, theologians (almost exclusively clerics) are now seen as “religious professionals” whose competence is restricted to their occupational skill-set. A priest can tell an engineer or a lawyer how to be a Christian, but not how to be a Christian engineer or a Christian lawyer.\textsuperscript{84} We would not expect, after all, a lawyer to tell a priest how to be a lawyerly priest. Modern clergy cannot provide insight to the laity because they live an entirely different form of life.

The secular institutes have the potential to restore polyphony and thus relevance to the Church. In this work Balthasar offers a demonstration and defense of the polyphony that results from basing formation in beauty. Examining Laity illustrates how the Church incorporates a plurality and why it must embrace this inevitable polyphony.

Balthasar takes heart from Provida Mater Ecclesia (1947), Primo Feliciter (1948), and Cum Sanctissimus (1948), which gave the secular institutes the official recognition and support of the church.\textsuperscript{85} The specialization of the clergy and subsequent separation from the laity has led to the false notion that clerical religious life is the only way for us to embody the perfection of the Christ-form. This misunderstanding puts the Church’s mission to the world in grave danger. For Balthasar, the secular institutes offer

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 46–47.
\textsuperscript{85} Sara, “Secular Institutes According to Hans Urs von Balthasar,” 316.
the laity the chance to live the counsels in the world. They have the potential to represent
the perfection of Christ in occupations besides “religious professional.” They also
communicate the same truth as the old knightly religious orders (which Balthasar perhaps
recalls a bit too romantically): “To provide the Christian people with the direct and
irrefutable evidence that perfection is not alien to the world but is something possible and
necessary everywhere.” The secular institutes have the potential to revivify the Church
and its significance to the whole world because they directly challenge the mistaken
notion that there is only one way to imitate Christ.

The guiding principle of the counsels, a “life held in readiness for God,” comes
from Christ. His existential act is “his permitting himself to be sent from the Father,”
such that “he does, not his own will, but the will of his Father, and all his individual tasks
are specifications of this fundamental act.” Participation in the form of Christ follows
from consent: “All one can do…is to allow oneself to be brought into this state.” The
norm behind every life of the counsels is a “readiness for total and unconditional
availability.” While the evangelical counsels offer specific directions—virginity,
poverty, obedience—they converge in our fundamental willingness to dedicate our entire
lives to God. Nothing is held back. The actual form that our lives take only coalesce after
this radical consent has been given. In other words, the particulars—cloistered monastery,
mendicant, secular institute—arise secondarily. Giving the whole of one’s life to God,
after all, prohibits prior decisions about what that life will look like.

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87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 29.
89 Ibid., 19.
90 Ibid., 23.
91 Ibid., 28.
92 Ibid., 29.
ii. Polyphony, Not Pluralism

A life held in readiness for God, in unconditional availability, does not set limits on what God might require. Neither Balthasar nor theo-dramatic ethics promote polyphony for the sake of polyphony. Balthasar rebukes the clericalization of the old religious orders for the same reason that Murphy criticizes narrative theology; it replaces the gospel with the way some Christians have read the gospel. But the ultimate paradigm of life is the paradigm offered by the gospel: “It is the gospel, not the old Orders, that represents the absolute and unique standard for measuring the idea of the special Christian following of Christ—in all the variations of the one state of the counsels.”

Method threatens to overtake content. We do not seek polyphony for its own sake, but we cannot deny polyphony without denying the gospel.

At the same time, polyphony does not allow us to lose sight of the Christ-form. Accepting polyphony follows necessarily from belief in the Incarnation: “It is impossible that God, who is essentially infinite, wholly other, and incomprehensible, should enter into the web of human concepts…in such a way that he can be grasped and comprehended.” We cannot reduce God to any single definition, expression, practice, or action. Neither can we explain away contradictions as “pluralism.” Pluralism, as Balthasar uses the term, refers to the position that contradictory opinions have equal claim to the truth and that all opinions have equal authority. Pluralism, he writes, “destroys the particularity and the universal comprehensiveness of God’s revelation in

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93 Ibid., 142–143.
94 Ibid., 177.
Jesus Christ” and destroys the role of an official church that Christ established.\textsuperscript{95} We must learn to distinguish “false pluralism” from “genuine plurality.”\textsuperscript{96} In \textit{A Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen}, Balthasar points out that the Church has always embraced plurality.\textsuperscript{97} Difference does not indicate contradiction. The plurality of the Church and Scripture is “contrasting, but \textit{not contradictory}.”\textsuperscript{98}

The polyphony of a theo-dramatic ethics, like the polyphony of the secular institutes is “plural, but not pluralistic.”\textsuperscript{99} Balthasar identifies three facts that help to prevent contradiction: 1) the Incarnation is God’s Word made flesh; 2) Scripture was inspired by the Spirit; and, 3) Christ established “an office,” led by the Spirit, in order to maintain the purity of this doctrine.\textsuperscript{100} Genuine plurality coheres when each instance “adequately” expresses the mystery of the Christ-form.\textsuperscript{101} Forms of life that start from a position of unconditional availability will not be contradictory because the same Spirit commissions them all. In \textit{Truth is Symphonic} Balthasar uses “maximality” to describe the main criterion of dogma: “The expression must cause the act of God’s love for us to appear more divine, more radical, more complete and at the same time more unimaginable and improbable.”\textsuperscript{102} Dogma does not arbitrarily constrain theological expression; rather, it points toward the ever-greater mystery and it prevents one from following limiting, misguided paths. Dogma contains the whole of revelation, but it does

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 269.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 270.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{A Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen}, trans. Michael Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 43.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 46.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Cyril O’Regan, “Balthasar: Between Tübingen and Postmodernity,” \textit{Modern Theology} 14, no. 3 (1998): 331.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Balthasar, \textit{Truth Is Symphonic}, 65.
\end{itemize}
not explicate revelation wholly.\textsuperscript{103} Christianity lends itself to plurality, both in its teachings and its forms of life.

The secular institutes embody this plurality by applying the counsels to various states of life. Balthasar explains that the secular institutes remind us that “solidarity with the world is a natural task” for every Christian.\textsuperscript{104} The need for the secular institutes arises from the demands of the present age and the inability of religious professionals to meet these demands. Balthasar laments that the only professional role available to one who wants to embody Christian perfection is that of a priest or a theologian. Priests and theologians stand apart from the laity. A lawyer or an engineer has no good reason to listen to what a priest has to say about law or mechanics. Interdisciplinary discussion does not overcome the gap either; there is no middle ground, no neutral territory. Even a priest who has also been trained in a secular profession cannot bridge the gap. Balthasar explains: “The layman will remain uncomfortable and will have a perhaps unspoken objection to this competence on the part of the theologians, as long as the latter have not come to know the lay profession from within, as it is concretely lived and practiced.”\textsuperscript{105}

True or not, the priest-professional appears to have divided loyalties. The “priest” role remains separate from the “professional” role. The only thing that the roles share is the coincidence of existence in a single individual.

The secular institutes aim to cultivate holiness from within secular professions. Secular institutes do not impose a static form onto individual professions but draw particular forms from the contours of particular lives and circumstances. Balthasar stresses that the secular institutes offer more than a “watered down” version of religious

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{104} Balthasar, \textit{The Laity and the Life of the Counsels}, 27.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 93.
The member of a secular institute follows the counsels differently, but not to a lesser degree. In a secular institute the counsels are “adapted to [one’s] proper conditions of life.” These adaptations are not compromises; different circumstances come with different challenges. A member of a secular institute must follow the demands of his/her profession rather than attempt to ape the practices of religious orders. Consider, for example, how a physician might live the life of the counsels. In terms of chastity, Balthasar rejects old, hypersensitive notions of modesty that say a vow of chastity should prevent a physician from performing pelvic examinations or witnessing childbirth.

Balthasar says that the secular institutes must “look utterly unabashedly at questions about sexuality, love, and marriage, and not negatively hush them up.” Christians must have flexibility to deal with unique circumstances rather than constrain themselves to pointless prohibitions. Similarly, the counsel of obedience will have to balance the rootedness necessary to perform certain professions and the unconditional availability required by obedience. The physician possesses a degree of autonomy that the cloistered monk does not. This autonomy does not undermine obedience so much as it reflects the total obedience of carrying out the profession. So too, the practice of poverty must take into account the needs of one’s profession. A cardiac surgeon whose profession requires specific tools, facilities, and transportation cannot follow poverty the same way a Franciscan friar follows it. The contours of each profession determine how one practices the counsels from within it.

106 Ibid., 104.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 105.
109 Ibid., 104.
110 Ibid., 106.
111 Ibid., 249.
112 Ibid., 108.
The laity can learn from those in the secular institutes in a way that they cannot learn from priests and theologians. The mission of the secular institutes sends Christians into the world. Regarding the purpose of the institutes Balthasar writes, “There is today no more direct way to bear holiness into the spheres and the professional jobs of the laity than this combination of the lay state with state of the counsels.”\(^{113}\) Consecrated laity live and work within the world. Since they have time to devote to prayer and contemplation, their forms of life better demonstrate what it means to be a “Christian lawyer” or a “Christian engineer.” The secular institutes demonstrate to those who do not or cannot follow the counsels (e.g. married Christians) what it means to embody Christ in the secular world and thereby enable them to embody better the Christ-form in their own lives.\(^{114}\)

The praxis itself—the living itself—is a necessary part of formation in the secular institutes. Its exemplary value comes from that fact that it is a particular formation: “When it has been displayed in life, it can then be reflectively and theoretically understood and recorded.”\(^{115}\) In their polyphonous forms, the secular institutes have transformative as well as exemplary value. The consecrated layperson, says Balthasar, “would learn how to assess the secular situation on the basis of the full experience of the ‘state of perfection.’”\(^{116}\) This person would have the unique ability to harmonize Church teachings with the realities of secular life. This person would then be better equipped in terms of knowledge and authority to share these insights with the rest of the Church. A

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 99.  
\(^{114}\) Ibid., 160.  
\(^{115}\) Ibid., 99.  
\(^{116}\) Ibid., 95.
physician living the counsels, for example, is able to provide insight into questions regarding the beginning and end of life.

The proliferation of consecrated laity throughout the world would also open up the possibility of “transforming the structures [of the world] from within.”¹¹⁷ Most Christians do not occupy significant positions of power, authority, or specialization, but “countless” laity in various other positions or communities “form the indispensable background that makes it possible for gifted and responsible individuals to emerge.”¹¹⁸ The secular institutes, like every other Christian mission, act as yeast for the world.

The secular institutes are both temporal and eternal. The goal of living the counsels is to make “the whole of one’s life a pure expression of the life of Christ.”¹¹⁹ When one perceives a secular institute, one should see the form of Christ. While they derive their specific shapes from their temporal circumstances, they receive their relevance from Christ, who transcends time and thus gives them eternal relevance.

Balthasar does not use the term “transethical” here, but it correctly characterizes his view of the secular institutes. In fact, transethical applies not only to the secular institutes, but also to every embodiment of the Christ-form:

Because [the life of the Church] is more than natural, it is not subject to the morphological laws of history. This is why we see in her the miracle that the earlier great foundations of Orders, all of which were necessary and modern in their own period and were given by the Holy Spirit then with the intention of being an answer to the pressing concerns of their own present day, nevertheless do not get old, are not superseded, and are not overtaken and left in the shade by those Orders that are modern today…They are ways of living out the gospel, the imitation of Christ; they are ultimately ecclesial forms of the continued Incarnation of the Word, and this is reason enough for them to retain their exemplary value for all subsequent generations.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 156.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 263.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., 99.
¹²⁰ Ibid., 125.
Balthasar does not claim to comprehend how these forms retain their exemplary value, only why they do. If we recognize the Christ-form in a religious order or a secular institute, then we cannot deny its continued relevance without also denying the eternal relevance of Christ. We affirm the eternal relevance of old embodiments just as we remain open to “ever new embodiments.”\textsuperscript{121} Since we cannot fully comprehend Christ, the interaction of infinite and finite, we cannot imagine all the possible ways of embodying the Christ-form. We can, however, recognize and remember the ways in which the Christ-form has been embodied.

Balthasar describes this transcendent plurality as a melody. New forms “do not supplant earlier ones, but rather aid them, and inspire them, as the last note of a melody to be played explains the previous notes and makes clear the unity of the whole melody.”\textsuperscript{122} Balthasar does not claim that we can know the whole melody. We perform our part in this melody with great struggle and contemplation. Even though we recognize the presence of a melody, “It is only at the end of time that the entire melody…will be complete and thus fully comprehensible.”\textsuperscript{123} New forms do not simply repeat or rephrase old forms. The gospel remains the ultimate paradigm, so, “It is the task of the present day to grasp as purely as possible the note that must be played today.”\textsuperscript{124} Fortunately, hearing what has been played so far can help us to play our parts. Balthasar says we would do well to look to the past. We might ask whether we have the poverty of the Franciscans or the obedience of the Jesuits.\textsuperscript{125} Looking to the past helps us to get a better sense of the

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 126.  
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 142.
tune. For in these old forms, Balthasar says, we see “the richest and therefore the unsurpassable expression of the life of the counsels in the order of ecclesial representation.”\textsuperscript{126} The tradition gives us expressions of the life of Christ. The more forms we see the more we realize what it means to hold one’s life in readiness for God. Even though the particular traits of each form were created in response to specific historical circumstances, these traits have eternal, imitable value because they have a transethical orientation.

c. The Transethical in \textit{Tragedy Under Grace: Practicing Theo-Dramatic Ethics in Finitude}

We affirm the polyphony of the secular institutes because they share same transcendent orientation. In fact, every form of Christian life possesses eternal relevance for the same reason: Christ is the concrete universal, the interaction of infinite and finite freedom. Since we are finite, however, we can never perfectly embody the Christ-form, so we imitate Christ in many different ways. We embrace polyphony because no single finite life fully embodies the Christ-form, even as each truly embodies it. We celebrate rather than lament plurality because it reveals that the Christ-form is beyond our comprehension.

Balthasar describes Christ’s accomplishment as “transethical” because it surpasses our comprehension.\textsuperscript{127} If we only measure Christ in terms of the ethical, then we only encounter a human Christ. We reject everything that makes the Incarnation significant. No ethical measure fully describes the significance of Christ; Christ is transethical. His accomplishment transcends the world. Accordingly, those who embody

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
the Christ-form are also “transethical.” The difficulty with imagining transethical lives is that what makes them “trans-” ethical lies beyond human comprehension. We do not need to comprehend the full transethical significance of a life to recognize that it has transethical significance. After all, we recognize the Christ-form without fully comprehending it. We can see it in the saints, the church, the secular institutes, and in every beautiful form.

Recognizing the theoretical necessity of the transethical does not get us any closer to recognizing what it looks like in practice. After all, Balthasar says that it “is removed from all external statistical reckoning” and that “every attempt to deduce it from the Church’s visible, institutional forms…is doomed to fail.”\textsuperscript{128} Tina Beattie worries that the transethical requires “uncritical fidelity” to the hierarchical Church.\textsuperscript{129} After all, calling a life or an action transethical admits that something about it lies beyond earthly comprehension. We can, theoretically, justify any action by claiming that it makes sense transcendentally. Yes, bombing this village is wrong ethically, but it is right in the transcendent sense. Or we could justify any ethical failure. Yes, the Church is corrupt, but in the transcendent sense it is still doing God’s work. We could even justify inaction. Yes, innocent children are suffering, but my refusal to help is right eschatologically. Each of these misuses sees the transethical as an action or attitude that floats above the world, unconnected and undisturbed by its turmoil. They would use it as a conceptual “get-out-of-jail-free” card.

Balthasar does not separate the transethical from the ethical; rather, the transethical includes the ethical. Transethical actions (like the Incarnation) occur on

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Beattie, \textit{New Catholic Feminism}, 121.
earth. Although their significance transcends earthly measures, they do not ignore the earthly. To call a life “transethical” is to recognize that it has transcendent significance for the here and now. The tranethical is more than the ethical, which is why the ethical cannot contain it. In order to illustrate this still-abstract concept, I appeal to a work in which Balthasar inspects portraits of tranethical lives, *Tragedy Under Grace*. These lives illustrate the demands and difficulties of orienting earthly actions toward the transcendent.

*i. History through a Cruciform Lens*

In *Tragedy Under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West* Balthasar offers theological commentary on the works of German writer Reinhold Schneider.\(^{130}\) Though Balthasar appeals to Schneider’s historical works, it is Schneider’s theology of history that he finds most valuable. For instance, in regard to Schneider’s book on England, Balthasar says, “No matter how one may wish to evaluate the details of Reinhold Schneider’s assessment of the history of England, even if one were to find it substantially mistaken or misleading at some point, or even *in toto*, this does not mean that his intention is refuted as something impossible,” namely, the intention to exemplify guilt in history.\(^{131}\) The “details” have secondary importance for Balthasar because he does not look to Schneider’s works for history *par excellence*. Nichols explains that Balthasar seeks “to exploit what Schneider could offer as materials for a theology of

\(^{130}\) Schneider was a German poet and novelist who lived during the first half of the twentieth century. Balthasar’s exposition in *Tragedy* details the increasing prominence of religious, and specifically Catholic, themes in Schneider’s work over the course of his career. Aidan Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Theology Beyond the Trilogy* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 313.

mission, and notably in the sphere of the world.**132** Balthasar wrote and dedicated *Tragedy* to the secular institutes because Schneider’s works presume the transcendent orientation of Christian life.

Balthasar sees strong affinities between the secular institutes and Schneider’s account of Christian existence. In the preface to the second edition, Balthasar notes:

> What fascinated me most in this work was the omnipresent drama of the encounter between two missions that are equally original and yet stand in deadly mutual conflict: the mission of the one who is entrusted with the task of administering the earthly realm and the mission of the saint as the real symbol of the kingdom of God that descends into the world.**133**

Schneider’s works often recount meetings between kings and popes or popes and saints. They hold up nobility—both spiritual and worldly—as the clearest embodiments of earthly and divine missions. In these encounters, Balthasar recognizes something true for all Christians as he explains, “The inescapable quality of this encounter appeared to me as a guiding image, an image to be retained at all costs, for the secular institutes” because “their fundamental aim is to combine the radicalism of the gospel with total, active involvement in secular work, enduring in their own selves the conflict described here.”**134**

Schneider illustrates on a large scale what we all experience on a small scale: the conflict between the demands of the gospel and the demands of the world. The two missions are omnipresent in Christian life. Both have validity and both stand, at least occasionally, in conflict. Admittedly, others have trod this path. Schneider stands out because in his work these demands collide. He presents Christianity as a history of this perennial collision.

The way Schneider views history through a cruciform lens attracts Balthasar. Schneider does not limit his histories or his biographies to worldly measures. In

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134 Ibid.
individual figures he sees “parables” of theological ideas, but Balthasar specifies that
Schneider does not write about Carlylean Great Men, individuals as the movers of
history. In fact, Schneider takes the opposite approach. Balthasar explains that for
Schneider, “Leaders are justified, not by their personality, but only by their mission and
their humility in the presence of a truth that they themselves are not.”¹³⁵ They are
justified by their transparency; we can see the truth through their lives.

Schneider recognizes the importance of holiness in history. When he writes about
kings and saints, he takes this factor into account.¹³⁶ The modern historical critic might
contend that including the holiness exceeds the historian’s capabilities, but for Schneider
the historical fact of the Incarnation demands that we include the transcendent in our
considerations of history. Both saints and kings strive for holiness, which for the
Christian is more than a personal opinion, and its presence affects their actions and
characters. If we want to understand these figures, we must take holiness into account.
Schneider understands this necessity because he understands that Christ is the center of
history. History is cruciform. In terms of history, therefore, “Every worldly event must be
measured against the central event of the Incarnation of God.”¹³⁷ In terms of Christian
life, “Christianity in its essence is also the bringing to bear of Christ’s influence on
history.”¹³⁸ Historians can (and should) forego debating its presence or absence, but
Christians cannot ignore the role of holiness, that is, the role of grace in history.

*Tragedy Under Grace* demonstrates the transethical by examining lives formed
and performed according to an orientation to transcendence. Balthasar does not use the

¹³⁵ Ibid., 17.
¹³⁶ Ibid.
¹³⁷ Ibid., 24.
¹³⁸ Ibid.
term “transethical” in this work, though he does evaluate and laud Schneider for his attempt to account for the transcendent. Schneider’s histories, at least as Balthasar reads them, show that we can only understand the character and significance of these lives if we recognize their transcendent orientation. If Christ is the central event of history, then history itself has a transcendent orientation. Balthasar argues: “Because true history comes into being through the irruption of the transcendence of God, only sensitivity to the transcendent (which is given only by lived faith) can interpret history.”¹³⁹ Tragedy recounts some of the ways this indissoluble unity between the mundane and the transcendent has played out in Western history—often with a great deal of conflict. Balthasar admits that no work of history can relate every past person or event to God; no finite being can see, comprehend, or intuit the whole picture. Nevertheless, he says: “It must at least be attempted inchoatively, because it corresponds to the truth of real history.”¹⁴⁰ The truth it corresponds to is the truth that God has entered into history. We recognize when a life has transethical significance, but in saying that a life has “transethical significance” we also admit that it has significance beyond that which we can measure. Balthasar explains that Schneider does history under the principle that gratia supponit naturam. Grace comes into history and has an effect on it. In Schneider’s portraits we see the effect of Christ on history, namely the presence of the gospel within secular work.

Balthasar shares Schneider’s view that one cannot understand Christ, Christian life, or history only in worldly terms. Even the Christian king commissioned with the administration of the earth ought not to forget the transcendent orientation of Christian

¹³⁹ Ibid., 26.
¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
life. In particular, Balthasar argues that secular power should be formed by an orientation towards the vertical. These transethical actions take place within the world, as an engagement with the world even if their ultimate significance transcends it. In *Tragedy*, actions oriented to transcendence do not float above the world unconnected. They make use of worldly means in order to witness to the divine. Balthasar’s commentary on Schneider helps to demonstrate what it looks like for a moral formation to be “transethical.”

**ii. Transethical Secular Power**

*Tragedy* is a picture of how secular power should take its form from the transcendent. Balthasar uses Schneider’s portrait of Philip II of Spain to show that even secular power can take its form from the gospel. In Philip, Balthasar sees a leader who recognizes the proper orientation of earthly office: “Philip must be misunderstood by all who do not live out of faith as he does.”\(^{141}\) Here he reiterates the idea that leaders are justified by their transparency, that is, by what they represent. Regardless of the many extravagant misuses of the office, kingship is more than a vehicle for personal aggrandizement. Thinking in ethical rather than transethical terms mistakes transparency for opacity and so would fundamentally misunderstand Philip. The king represents the earthly mission, which comes from God. Philip understood this: “His existence is the end of psychology, because the force out of which he lives and constructs lies beyond his soul.”\(^{142}\) Like Christ, the king is what he represents.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{142}\) Ibid.
The king, then, serves as a counterpart to the saint. Balthasar calls attention to the similarities that Schneider draws between the two: “The link between palace and monastery can be understood: the prince himself is one who has died, and his inner life is related to that of the monks.”¹⁴³ Both king and monk die to themselves in order to give themselves fully to God. The king-form, therefore, stands above any individual king just as the Christ-form stands above any individual Christian.¹⁴⁴ The office forms the king and not vice versa.

The life of the king is a life of service directed by and toward the gospel. Balthasar challenges the tendency to reject earthly offices as inimical to the gospel. Instead he argues that since earthly power is necessary and legitimate, it is properly oriented to transcendence. Philip offers an imitable king-form because he directed his actions toward the divine. Balthasar writes,

Philip’s mystery was to set the profane in order on the basis of the sacred, letting the reflected splendor of prayer fall on all secular business and understanding the service of the state and of justice as responsibility in the presence of the God who is close at hand and accompanies all that the king does.¹⁴⁵

Schneider understands, says Balthasar, that the “concrete situation” includes both temporal good and eternal salvation—both guilt and redemption.¹⁴⁶ Neither king nor saint escapes this situation. More importantly, neither king nor saint should ignore this situation in their engagement with the world. Both work towards the same goal but in different ways. Both Philip II and Teresa of Avila:

Impose on the world an ordering from above; it is not forbidden for the king to have his origin as high as that of the saint—he is allowed to turn his palace into a monastery and a place of perpetual prayer—and the saint is not forbidden to root

¹⁴³ Ibid., 57.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 60.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 61.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 62.
his own working as deeply in the world as the king does…The king is not ‘more turned toward the world’ than the saint, nor is the saint more ‘turned away from the world’ than the king.\textsuperscript{147}

Balthasar does not argue for a return to the unquestioned divine right of kings or to all the excesses and horrors that have accompanied such unbridled power. Some may rightly question his and Schneider’s somewhat rosy picture of Philip. We can affirm these concerns without rejecting Balthasar’s theology of kingship. As Nichols explains, Balthasar’s purpose is to show that “secular power, like art, can transcend itself in the direction of grace.”\textsuperscript{148} The possibility of transcendence, Balthasar explains, lies in Schneider’s understanding that \textit{gratia non tollit naturam}.\textsuperscript{149} We can say that Philip’s faith (or his orientation to transcendence) impressed a form onto the world, namely, “His politics was the outward form of his faith; his whole state was faith that had become form.”\textsuperscript{150} Not even Constantinianism disarms the gospel of its power to shape history.

\textit{iii. Transethical Action in History}

In \textit{Tragedy} we also see that transethical actions take place within the world. Balthasar argues that action within history does not necessarily incur guilt. Guilt, for Balthasar and Schneider, refers to particular, historical guilt—the guilt brought about by wrong actions.\textsuperscript{151} England, according to Schneider, has incurred a fair amount of guilt: William’s conquest, the Tudor’s separation from Rome, Cromwell’s murder of Charles.\textsuperscript{152} These three wrong actions represent “a betrayal of unity.”\textsuperscript{153} Balthasar notes

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\item \textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 66.
\item \textsuperscript{148} Nichols, \textit{Divine Fruitfulness}, 320.
\item \textsuperscript{149} Balthasar, \textit{Tragedy Under Grace}, 70.
\item \textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 72.
\item \textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 98.
\item \textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 99.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Nichols, \textit{Divine Fruitfulness}, 323.
\end{itemize}
\end{small}
that Schneider comes close to dualism here, “asserting…that collaboration in the earthly kingdom means that one becomes guilty out of necessity; in such passages, to be guilty seems to be a quality attaching to action within history.”\footnote{154} Balthasar points out, however, that both Christ and Mary acted in history without incurring any guilt. He opposes the same misconception that he opposes in \textit{Laity}: that the Christian must leave the world in order to follow the gospel. If eschewing the world were necessary, then grace would destroy nature. If we believe, on the other hand, that \textit{gratia supponit naturam}, then we can act in the world without undermining the gospel.

Balthasar explains that even though sin has cast a shadow over natural law it has not made the social structures built on it inherently evil.\footnote{155} They might be coercive, but not evil. Action in history does not necessarily incur guilt. Balthasar does not suggest that it is possible for a guiltless king to bring about the kingdom of God. We must recognize that “the social structures here on earth can never give a complete meaning and value to human existence,” but at the same time, “their earthly and natural character must necessarily remain open to a realm of grace.”\footnote{156} If earthly action were completely depraved, then it would be inimical to the gospel. There have been times, though, when earthly power has been used faithfully to promote the gospel. Balthasar reminds us that some monarchs have also become saints.\footnote{157} We can act in history without incurring guilt, even if we will not thereby immediately bring about the kingdom.\footnote{158}

Still, we do not overcome the question of violence, the “burning concrete question” that Schneider poses: “Concrete history applies force, but the gospel forbids the
use of force.”\textsuperscript{159} The dilemma for Schneider lies in the seemingly unavoidable conclusion that one cannot act in history without disobeying the gospel. Does not the final word of earthly power—violence—prove that we must contradict the gospel in order to rule effectively? Balthasar was not a pacifist. He does not even lean toward pacifism as Schneider does. Foregoing for the moment whether or not Balthasar convincingly defends the use of violence, I want to point out the way he defends it as an illustration of the transethical.

Balthasar confronts Schneider’s burning question by upholding both parts of the dilemma. Concrete history applies force and the gospel forbids the use of force. History (not to mention the Old Testament) testifies to the necessity of force. The gospel commands its rejection without exception. Balthasar could reconcile the two, as Niebuhr does, by positing a social versus individual ethic or a temporal versus an eternal ethic, but he does not. Instead, he affirms both the necessity of force and the prohibition of violence.\textsuperscript{160} For Balthasar, the fallen natural law will use violence, but this violence can be oriented to the good. Earthly power structures ought to have an orientation to grace. Balthasar states, “The immediate decisions on which the good and ill of the people depend cannot be made without looking at a perspective that goes beyond this world.”\textsuperscript{161} The ability of social structures to perform good actions follows from an implicit or explicit orientation to transcendence.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{160} Though, like Niebuhr, Balthasar does not think we should conflate individual and social requirements. He states: “Although the words of the Sermon on the Mount relating to individual behavior are clear, they do not speak unambiguously of the order of the state and its requirements, at least not according to traditional exegesis and praxis,” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 126.
Christians face a dilemma between the necessity of violence and the gospel’s prohibition of it, but this contradiction does not arise as a matter of course. Balthasar points out that slavery was once considered acceptable, even inevitable, but now is universally condemned.\textsuperscript{162} The New Covenant is the “yeast” of history, continually leavening the world until the eschaton.\textsuperscript{163} The world is not necessarily or unavoidably inimical to the gospel. It can allow Christian social ethics to be practiced without compromise so long as the “natural necessities of history have brought the human conscience to the point where a Christian requirement finally appears practicable.”\textsuperscript{164} The Church stands between the individual saint and the non-Christian people, “between both, sharing intimately in both and interested in both…the conscious point of exchange between the spirit of the gospel…and the spirit of today’s humanity.”\textsuperscript{165}

We cannot, however, presume that we can overcome the demands of the world. We act within the world and so within the fallen social structures of finitude. Balthasar explains Christian existence:

For the responsible Christian, all this means, not a relief from his burden, but an additional burden. It would be simple if he were able to flee from the law of responsibility for people and culture in the world to the exclusive law of grace, the powerlessness and defenselessness of the Cross. He must stand between both and do the will of God.\textsuperscript{166}

Allowances, not contradictions, have to be made. Balthasar explains that we must take into account the refraction that occurs when God’s divine order is cast onto the fallen, worldly order.\textsuperscript{167} The Christian, in attempting to avoid contradicting either order stands as

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 128. Balthasar admits, however, that the condemnation of immoral practices has not led to their total abolition. An observation upheld by the many forms of slavery that persist in the world.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 131.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 127.
close to the point of refraction as possible. That point is the cross. Balthasar does not
deny that actions incur guilt. He denies that inaction is guiltless. After all, no Christian,
not even the saints, live apart from the guilty: “There is no more distinction made under
the Cross between guilty and innocent, since the One who is most innocent of all pays the
penalty for all guilt.”

Even formed toward the vertical, our actions take place in the
horizontal. We cannot, as Balthasar notes, flee from the world. We look toward the
kingdom but we do not fool ourselves into thinking that we exist apart from the fallen
world. Standing under the cross, then, demands that we pursue the good in the world,
using the available means of the world.

Balthasar defends the use of violence as one manifestation of this temporal
refraction of the spiritual order. A good action may still contradict the gospel in some
ways. All finite actions, after all, are imperfect. What makes it “good,” though, is the way
it embodies the Christ-form in the world. Philip II did not bring about the kingdom of
heaven on earth. He did attempt to shape his secular power into a sacred form. This
action is good—imperfectly good—by reason of its orientation to transcendence. Thus,
“St. Louis may well defend his kingdom in his time with sharp weapons and go into
battle against the Moors.” Just as we imperfectly embody the Christ-form in our finite
lives, we imperfectly govern the earth using finite and imperfect power structures.

This situation, Balthasar explains, is what makes the gospel’s demands radical. If the command to non-resistance made sense in purely worldly, ethical terms, then it
would not have transcendent significance. The commands to turn the other cheek and to
love one’s enemies would be no more than common sense. We do not, however, obey

168 Ibid.
169 Ibid., 130.
170 Ibid., 131.
these commands because they make sense to the world. We obey them in obedience and witness to the gospel and so as a witness that the gospel’s significance transcends human comprehension. The gospel is radical because it commands nonresistance in a world that uses force. For Balthasar, we cannot totally escape the demands of the world while we live in the world. Fleeing defeats the purpose of Christian life. We must embody the gospel’s demands in our actions so far as we are able. We should be able to see the Christ-form through our worldly actions. The transethical does not remove our actions from the world; the transethical is the way we perform Christian actions in the world.

iv. Transethical Forms for the World

In Tragedy we see the transethical in actions that use worldly means to bear witness to the divine. We can see this picture most clearly in Balthasar’s discussion of the church in Schneider. The church is the presence of Christ in history. Grace perfects nature, but “The light is not empty and abstract: it is the holy God, whose Word became flesh in order to bestow on the kingdom of light truth and presence in the world.”

Balthasar explains that the Church contains a double hierarchy: 1) subjective holiness, exemplified by the saint, and 2) objective holiness, of which the pope is the exponent. These two hierarchies are not identical, but they do converge: “Both stand at the incomprehensible point that is simultaneously within history and above history.” Both only make sense in the both/and of history.

We can only appreciate the transcendent orientation of subjective holiness through the saint’s interaction with the world. Balthasar explains that saints, like beautiful

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171 Ibid., 185.
172 Ibid., 185–186.
173 Ibid., 186.
forms, only represent the divine through their particular human missions. The transcendent character of their actions does not manifest in an abstract way, but in particular times and places. Often their commission entails suffering and struggle. Saints suffer and “burn in a social sense” for the mission of the Church, but also because of the failures of the Church. Though we ought to look to the saints for insight, we often either ignore them or reject them. Balthasar refers to Christ and Pilate, Becket and Henry II, and More and Henry VIII. These interactions are tragic in multiple ways (in a physical sense for the saint, in a spiritual sense for the ruler). Tragedy does not impede saintliness nor does it deny the concrete role of the saint in history. The saint is “the personal exponent of the Church,” in the sense that “the saint is not the one who steers the state but is the conscience of the king—that would put into practice the transcendental ethics that does not use two different sets of weights when measuring.” Transethical actions do not fail in the transcendent sense, even if they appear to fail in the earthly sense. When the saint “fails” in the earthly sense, the suffering that saint endures makes the Christ-form that much clearer. When we become more attuned to this view, we see historical “failures” as victories (and vice versa). Neither Christ, Becket, nor More failed.

Similarly, the transcendent orientation of objective holiness becomes clear despite the worldly failures of the Church. Balthasar says that while the office of the papacy never fails, the office-holder will always fail for the simple reason that he is not Christ. Still, the pope should never embrace this inevitably as lessening the office’s demand for perfection. Balthasar explains that the question motivating Schneider is: “Can earthly

174 Ibid., 192.
175 Ibid., 194–195.
176 Ibid., 197.
177 Ibid., 206.
power be administered without guilt in the service of heavenly power and powerlessness?” In disagreement with Schneider, Balthasar says, “Yes.” But the Church cannot confuse herself with the heavenly kingdom nor can it totally divest itself of secular power and methods, for this would be “betraying her commission to the world.” For example, Balthasar argues that the use of violence can be accepted on the basis of earthly laws and necessity. Nevertheless, “The spiritual dimensions must always necessarily suffer when the secular sword is used.” No matter how necessary or how just the conflict may seem, “The idea of a weapon in the hands of Jesus Christ is absurd.” We cannot embody the Christ-form through the use of weapons and violence. When Christians resort to violence the resultant spiritual suffering will eat away at the Church “until it breaks out openly one day like a full-blown ulcer.” When this ulcer bursts, the Church will understand the incompatibility between its actions and the gospel. Balthasar says that this happened in the past with slavery and is happening now with war. The spiritual suffering results from the transcendent orientation of the Church’s actions. Balthasar explains, “In her union with the secular sword, she is made to feel most painfully the contradiction between the order of original sin and the ordering of Christ.” Tranethical actions do not free one from earthly responsibilities or consequences. More often than not they lead to suffering. Although the saints suffer, “The Lord did not send his disciples in his omnipotence to all peoples so that they might suffer and perish there but so that the peoples might see their light and come to

178 Ibid., 210.
179 Ibid., 211.
180 Ibid., 214.
181 Ibid., 213.
182 Ibid., 214.
183 Ibid., 215.
conversion. Even Christians suffer for the sake of the gospel, not for the sake of suffering itself.

Even if an action in some way contradicts or compromises the gospel it may still bear fruit by virtue of its transcendent orientation. For Balthasar Christians have a responsibility to use the horizontal means available to them to carry out their missions. Transethical actions are not necessarily perfect actions: some Christians embody the Christ-form more perfectly than others even as no one embodies it perfectly. Personal failures do not compromise or contradict the Christ-form itself. In a sense, the justification of violence that Balthasar offers in *Tragedy* simply calls for consistency. We strive to imitate Christ knowing that he is inimitable. So why demand perfection when it comes to violence? Can we deny the historical fact that violence (especially when used in defense) has led to favorable or at least preferable outcomes? Balthasar argues that an action formed toward the divine, however imperfectly, can have significance that transcends its horizontal failures. Whatever other failures they may possess, actions oriented toward transcendence have at least one redeeming quality: their orientation to transcendence. Rather than locate the source of this good in the violent act, is it not better to find it in the act’s orientation to transcendence?

Balthasar’s commentary on Christian existence culminates with the image of the fortress-castle of Marienburg. As the headquarters of the Teutonic Order, Marienburg stood at the eastern border of Christendom. For Balthasar it represents the literal and spiritual form of the west to the formless east. In this outpost on the fringes of Christian civilization Balthasar finds a form with direct applicability to the modern world: the knight. It may seem strange that Balthasar chooses a militant image as the pinnacle of

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184 Ibid., 220.
Christian existence. The crusading knight does not immediately strike the modern reader as a form of life worthy of retrieval. Christians today, for good reason, avoid reveling in the glories of the crusades. Balthasar does not promote Marienburg or knightly orders “in a spirit of historical nostalgia,” nor does he excuse the horrors that militant Christians have wrought. He hopes instead to retrieve a theology of knighthood since “the basis of secular knighthood is a spiritual knighthood.” The justification of popes and kings lies in what they represent. The same holds true for the knight: “The foundations for this are laid by men who choose as the law of their life the form of representation as the form of Christ, in order to give the world the form of Christ on the basis of this lived form.”

In regard to the secular institutes, for example, all the modern professions lay open to be impressed with the form of Christ. In the secular institutes Balthasar sees new knightly orders ready to provide the form of Christ to the formlessness of modernity.

Providing the Christ-form to the world defines the heart of Christian existence. Balthasar rejects the ideas that the “West” refers to something traditional and closed. Marienburg does not defend the boundaries of civilization; it carries civilization into the wilderness. Balthasar explains, “The knightly idea is open: Christian existence lives on the basis of mission and loses its raison d’être if it loses its mission.” The knight:

is not himself (as the bourgeois is): he is the image of Another. He does not strive on his own behalf (like the bourgeois), but on behalf of the will and for the

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185 Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 332; Sara makes a similar point: "It would be a mistake to denigrate this ideal as a mere romanticism or elitism," Sara, “Secular Institutes According to Hans Urs von Balthasar,” 330; In reference to the discovery of the America’s, Balthasar remarks on the failure of the West: " the split between doctrine and life that was made by each of the conquerors in their thirst for booty, resulting in a terror--forever indelible--on the part of the people with whom they came into contact…The ousting of the Europeans from the lands they once conquered, which we witness today, is a paltry atonement for the guilt they incurred," Balthasar, *Tragedy under Grace*, 252.

186 Balthasar, *Tragedy under Grace*, 247, my emphasis.

187 Ibid., 247–248, my emphasis.


glorification of Another. He defends the form but never the boundary (like the bourgeois), for his innermost reality is the fact that he is sent by his Lord out beyond all boundaries.\footnote{Ibid., 248.}

Francis was a knight, as was Ignatius, Newman, and Teresa.\footnote{Ibid., 248-260.} All who bear the Christ-form are knights. For Balthasar “knight” describes the relation of the Christian to the world. The knight does not seek to gain the world; the knight renounces the world and in so doing engages it as the form of Christ. The new knight, Balthasar remarks, will not wear a sword, but will still stand ready to bear the Christ-form to the world.\footnote{Ibid., 255.}

Balthasar’s theology of knighthood offers one of the clearest illustrations of a transethical form of life. The actions of the knight should reflect the cross. Consequently, an action must come from a transcendent disposition. Balthasar writes, “In Christ’s sacrifice, the internal gift of himself is antecedent to the external Passion…Without the internal Cross, the external Cross would be meaningless.”\footnote{Ibid., 259.} We cannot overemphasize the importance of this relation for understanding a transethical action. One must act without any assurance of worldly success.\footnote{Ibid., 261.} The transethical does not give us a “pass” to perform whatever actions we think will achieve worldly ends be they selfish or selfless. For Balthasar, of course, sometimes these actions will require the use of violence. Nevertheless, behind every action must lay that internal gift, that initial and fundamental renunciation of oneself in service to one’s mission. Transethical actions, visible or invisible, flow from a life formed toward God. Every transethical action bears testimony to the divine. Though the ultimate significance of these actions remains hidden to us, this

\footnote{“But the internal Cross would not be what it is if it were assured of more than the fact of its mission, that is, if it were certain of victory in the sphere of the world,” Ibid., 261.}
is only the result of our finitude: “In this transient world, it may seem that the wind has blown [these testimonies] away, but all testimony is eternal in God.”

V. Conclusion

The concerns regarding theo-dramatic ethics raised at the beginning of this chapter revolve around the lack of control implicit in basing moral formation on beauty. Attempting to seize control of the content of revelation leads us to place method above content. The only way to make theo-dramatic ethics more predictable and less worrisome would be to give it authority over beauty. Thankfully, we have a direction toward which we can orient our formations: Christ. These formations exist together in a vast orchestra. Each has a unique part to play, but all of these parts are found in the same score. In beginning to demonstrate what theo-dramatic ethics looks like in practice I highlighted those features that follow its foundation on autonomous, objective beauty: learning morality from beauty, response as polyphony, and transethical actions. Demonstrating these features also mitigated the concerns raised at the outset. Our discussion of these features, however, is still abstract. The next step is to put them into practice.

195 Ibid., 265.
CHAPTER III: PERFORMING THE VISIO PACIS

I. Introduction: Performing Theo-Dramatic Ethics

At last we come to the concrete practice of theo-dramatic ethics. In chapter one, I discussed its broad themes by drawing principally upon Balthasar’s trilogy. In chapter two, I demonstrated how this moral formation holds together the objective and subjective dimensions of morality. Now I will describe a few of those particular performances. Underlying my approach to these topics is the goal that theo-dramatic ethics shares with Balthasar’s theology of knighthood: to offer the Christ-form to the world. In Tragedy Under Grace, Balthasar cites Marienburg as an image of form at the boundary of formlessness. “Formless,” here does not indicate the complete lack of form as if the world is a void, nor does it imply that the Christ-form destroys and replaces the world. Rather, “formless” refers to the world’s need for the Christ-form: gratia supponit naturam. Balthasar’s spiritual knights embrace their mission to the world: “[They are people] who choose as the law of their life the form of representation as the form of Christ, in order to give the world the form of Christ on the basis of this lived form.”

Before all else, the spiritual knight strives to express the Christ-form.

Each chapter begins by appealing to a theologian who articulates how the Christ-form relates to a particular sphere of life.² I look to these figures as archetypes. Bonaventure, for example, is neither the only nor the final word on what Christians believe about the natural world. He stands out, nonetheless, by articulating the theological significance of the natural world in a way that is both intellectually

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² Here I have in mind the criteria of “intrinsic excellence” and “historical significance” that Balthasar offer as his own criteria in The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 2, 13.
compelling and affectively moving. Bonaventure supplies a gripping account of an orthodox belief, showing how our receptivity to Christ includes receptivity to the natural world. Augustine, similarly, provides a compelling vision of Christian society. These archetypes apply beauty to moral formation and add depth to the symphony of Christian tradition through unique theological performances.

Theo-dramatic ethics engages these figures for their formational, rather than informational, value. As archetypes, they are high points in a plural tradition. I will not ignore their concerns or purposes in order to mine their theologies for nuggets of wisdom that, out of context, support my own pre-determined conclusions. Augustine does not deal with Christian pacifism in the American empire and Bonaventure does not say anything about modern factory farming. At the same time, neither will I approach these figures as relics—interesting remnants of bygone ages to be dusted off as intellectual curiosities but lacking any relevance for modern believers. By calling them archetypes, I recognize that they are part of a living tradition. Cyril O’Regan, for instance, explains the importance of tradition for Balthasar by remarking that “traditions of discourse and practice both envelope and invest us, and by so doing empower us in providing an overall orientation.” According to O’Regan, the “ever new” relevance of the tradition lies in its formational quality: “Interpreters do not simply pass on (traditio), but in and through interpretation reveal new facets of the phenomenon of Christ and thus ‘give back’

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3 Lewis Ayres argues that some modern theologians mis-appropriate pre-modern theology by granting them authority only if they can be made to address modern philosophical (i.e. Kantian/Idealist) concerns. See: Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 384–429.

We do not respect historical theologians by imprisoning their relevance in the past.

We also lose the formational value of these figures if we bend them to fit our modern concerns. Kevin L. Hughes, for example, points out that binary readings of the Catholic tradition fail to be “fully Catholic” by failing to understand its plurality. He takes to task the modern penchant for setting Bonaventure and Thomas at odds. They are used, he explains, as ciphers for binary divisions in modern Catholic theology: conservative v. liberal, Communio v. Concilium. Hughes proposes that actually reading their works (i.e., taking into account the purpose, content, and context) does not substantiate the fantasy of the conservative, anti-intellectual Bonaventure fighting tooth and nail against the progressive, intellectual, Aristotelian (in just the good ways) Thomas. Recognizing the complexities of both theologians promotes a positive approach to the tradition’s diversity. Bonaventure and Thomas did not oppose one another, but neither did they say exactly the same thing. Hughes writes: “These two approaches are complementary in the sense that neither is reducible to the other, but both are necessary to give an adequate account of the phenomenon.” The plurality of our tradition is complementary rather than contradictory. Hughes concludes that Bonaventure and Thomas should “remind us of the communal character of the Catholic tradition, a tradition that depends on plural and complementary insights to discern, explore, and protect adherence to faith in the one true God.” For both O’Regan and Hughes, a living,

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5 Ibid., 1:135.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 394.
9 Ibid., 397.
plural tradition has an indispensable role for theology. The question is not whether the tradition is relevant—it is—the question is whether we appeal to it correctly. We must let traditional theologians, even archetypes, speak for themselves. Turning them into sock puppets of our modern battles destroys the formational value of the tradition. We do not need to parrot their conclusions, but we must respect their complexity and autonomy if they are to inform our own theological, spiritual, and moral discernment. I look to these figures for their insights into particular topics and for the way these insights can form Christians today.

The formation offered by Augustine and Bonaventure must always precede the formulation of specific actions (or reactions). Spiritual knights offer Christ to the world through the form of their lives. The way they offer Christ is variable, but their commitment to Christ is not. Balthasar’s theology of knighthood makes the importance of this sequence clear: “Knighthood changes its form, depending on whether Christians and the world are willing or unwilling to receive the imprint of its spirit; but it does not change its soul.”

A knight can only offer the Christ-form to the world by first committing to Christ. The knight does not ignore the world. Ultimately the “soul” of knighthood (i.e. the Christ-form) dictates the final form, but it does so mindful of one’s circumstances. Different spheres of life call for different embodiments of the Christ-form just as different maladies call for different medicines. The specific form of a knight reflects and responds to needs of a specific location. Of course, embodying the Christ-form must not be reactive. Balthasar explains this somewhat paradoxical facet of a knight’s mission: “One who begins by seeking synthesis with the world will gain neither

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11 Regarding Balthasar’s acceptance of a “version” of Schneider’s nonresistance: “Nonresistance must not be reactive; it must be theological,” Long, *Saving Karl Barth*, 202.
Christ nor the world, but the one who lets go of the world for the sake of Christ will receive it back in the mission he receives from Christ.”\(^{12}\) Each of the following chapters, accordingly, will only address the relevant modern circumstances after outlining the formational value of the Christ-form as conveyed by the tradition.

Each chapter will conclude by sketching numerous forms of life that follow from being formed by beauty. These perspectives and actions may be implicitly or explicitly theological, Christian, or secular. I will show how theo-dramatic ethics can draw from a variety of sources because, so long as they are all receptive to beauty, they all converge in the theo-dramatic ethics.

**II. Formed by Augustine: Peace as the Christ-form**

Christians have long appealed to Augustine as a source for political theology. These theologies often paint a bleak picture. Eric Gregory criticizes the “conventional contribution” of Augustinian politics for presenting “a demythologized notion of original sin as a basis for anti-utopian foreign and domestic policy.”\(^{13}\) Gregory thinks Augustine has more to offer than pessimism. I argue that Augustine forms Christians to be political by performing a society oriented towards a vision of eternal peace. This formation then enables Christians to shape their embodiment of the Christ-form to their earthly political circumstances. In particular, I will address how this formation affects Christian attitudes toward violence and nonviolence.

Pacifists have often been at pains to show that Christianity offers more than prohibitions. Indeed, the word “pacifism” itself comes from the Latin word *pacifico*,

which means, “to make or conclude a peace.” It refers to the ending of a conflict, reconciling, appeasing.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Pacifco} combines the noun \textit{pax}, “peace,” and the verb \textit{facere}, “to make, to do.” The etymological origin of “pacifism,” then, suggests that we think of \textit{paci-facio} as the positive making, building, or doing of “peace.” Augustine offers us a moral formation oriented to eternal peace and consequently a politics focused on the positive building of peace. The \textit{visio pacis} offers us a way to articulate how positive building of peace follows from embodying the Christ-form.

Again, we can only see this vision when it is performed in particular circumstances. The work of William T. Cavanaugh provides an account of the political situation facing modern Christians. He argues that the nation-state excludes religion from politics and only produces political unity through a monopoly on violence. His demythologization of the nation-state helps us to put the problems of modern politics in aesthetic terms. Cavanaugh suggests that the root problem is idolatry. The nation-state has a reflexive political vision; its gaze is fixated on itself. This image views human relations as inherently violent. Augustine’s positive vision of peace and community (the city of God formed by \textit{visio pacis}) enables Christians to see the nation-state as a failure of aesthetics, a negative moral formation.

Finally, I will suggest a few of the many possible ways that Christians might express a moral formation guided by \textit{visio pacis}. The rescue of Jewish refugees by the people of Le Chambon during World War II, Martin Luther King Jr.’s civic-minded nonviolence, and Roberto Goizueta’s work on aesthetics and liberation theology all illustrate potential actions that follow from a moral formation based on \textit{visio pacis}. Each

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{A Latin Dictionary}, eds. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879; rpt 1955), s.v. “\textit{pacifico}.”
relates to the nation-state in a different way, but all three reveal that when formed by *visio pacis* we should not define our politics in terms of prohibiting violence. Rather, we should strive to guide our whole existence by *visio pacis*. If we make this our primary concern, then peaceful, nonviolent actions will follow as a matter of course.

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*a. The Role of Beauty in Augustine’s Theology*

The role of beauty in Augustine’s politics is not always obvious. Sense experience does not play a primary role. But his theology recognizes that revelation overpowers us. Augustine uses aesthetic categories to articulate this understanding of revelation. Indeed, according to Balthasar, “No-one has praised God so assiduously as the supreme beauty or attempted so consistently to capture the true and the good with the categories of aesthetics as Augustine in the period during and after his conversion.”\(^\text{15}\) Augustine’s theology is “beautiful,” says Balthasar, because it gives “the glory of God’s revelation” the “central place in its vision.”\(^\text{16}\) Augustine spends a great deal of time examining the theory behind aesthetics. He dedicates whole works to the topic. In *De pulchro et apto* he grapples with the question, “Do we love anything but the beautiful?”\(^\text{17}\) In *De musica* he examines *numerus*, the sense of rhythm or proportion, as “the foundational principle of reality.”\(^\text{18}\) Augustine’s works on aesthetics have received a great deal of scholarly attention.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{17}\) *Confessions* 4.13.20 (NPNF 1:74).

\(^{18}\) O. V. Bychkov, *Aesthetic Revelation: Reading Ancient and Medieval Texts After Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 221. In a footnote, Bychkov explains that *musica* refers to more than “music.” Augustine also discusses poetry, architecture, and math—those things pertaining to number.

\(^{19}\) Other works frequently cited being *De ordine, De vera religione*, and *Confessions*. Bychkov identifies a variety of foci in scholarship on Augustine’s aesthetics: “the nature and criteria of beauty...;
What is important for our purposes is the way Augustine’s appreciation of beauty extends beyond his “aesthetic” works. Oleg Bychkov laments that even with the vast swath of scholarship on Augustine, few scholars appreciate “the centrality of aesthetics in Augustine.”  

Even in works not dedicated to aesthetic topics Augustine “uses observations about aesthetic experience to solve other philosophical and theological problems.”  

Augustine uses aesthetics, for instance, to explain why “monstrous races” do not detract from the beauty of the universe: “God, the Creator of all, knows where and when each thing ought to be…[whereas] He who cannot see the whole is offended by the deformity of the part, because he is blind to that which balances it.”  

“Seeing the whole” connects physical sight with intellectual reflection. Aesthetic experiences can explain theological problems because those experiences have a revelatory, transcendent quality. For Augustine, says Bychkov, in making aesthetic judgments we ascend from the sensible to the transcendent. 

Throughout his theology, Augustine attends to the “ascent from aesthetic experience” and the “revelatory nature” of aesthetic experience.

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Ibid., 216 n16.

Ibid., 229.

Augustine, The City of God 16.8 (NPNF 2:315). From this point forward, I will use the Latin title, De civitate Dei, when citing this work.

Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation, 216. Bychkov, though careful to avoid putting Augustine’s conclusions in Kantian terms, affirms the similarities in the ways each says aesthetic judgments rely upon the “transcendent,” a word he is careful to parse (240, 267).

Ibid.
Balthasar emphasizes the connection between this theological “seeing” and love in his interpretation of Augustine. Augustine, like most ancient thinkers, assumed that we love what is beautiful. Balthasar stresses that this love of beauty is more than a shallow attraction to shiny baubles. Balthasar cites Augustine’s tractates on the Gospel of John, in which he writes of Christ: qui et foedos dilexit, ut pulchros faceret. Christ, beauty, clothed himself in ugliness for our sake. By loving us Christ makes us beautiful. In loving him, we grow more beautiful. Only in this love can we see the greater spiritual beauty behind Christ’s ugly physical form: “A person must love Christ and have pure eyes to see his inner spiritual beauty.” Moreover, since “the love of Christ is the manifestation of the all-creative divine love” the love of beauty is the love of the Trinity. The act of loving beautiful things, then, is participation in Trinitarian love. As D. C. Schindler comments in reference to the Confessions, “Our love for beauty always comes ‘late,’ because beauty moves us before we can move ourselves.” Beauty grasps us by loving us: “He, the beautiful one, first loved us.” We only see beauty when God loves us and we love God.

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25 Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 2, 95; Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation, 217. Augustine, Balthasar points out, recognizes that cognition itself relies upon a type of seeing; there is something “fundamentally self-evident to the eye of the mind” (107). In making judgments we rely on preferences, which imply an objective order. Augustine understands that “the only way in which finite mind can make judgments is in the ‘light’ of absolute mind” (109). This is truth, which is convertible with beauty.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.


It is for this reason that Balthasar draws attention to the role of seeing in Augustine. “Seeing” refers to the way God’s love makes divine truths self-evident. Truth does not change, but our awareness of truth does: “Truth in any area exists only when a person looks up from below and penetrates to the one true, living God.”33 When Christ clothes himself in ugliness, he does not feign ugliness. His ugliness is not an illusion. But Christ is only ugly from a certain point of view. Correct understanding depends upon the orientation of our vision. For Augustine, Balthasar elaborates, we either direct our seeing “upwards towards truth (caritas)” or “downwards from truth towards appearance (cupiditas).”34 Christ only looks ugly if we look downwards. This is what Bychkov has in mind when he says that scholars fail to see the centrality of aesthetics in Augustine. We cannot dissociate his theological aesthetics from the rest of his theology. They provide, as Bychkov puts it, “support for his project of apologetic or fundamental theology.”35

Balthasar reads De civitate Dei as a history of these two ways of seeing. Indeed, he argues that we must read De civitate in terms of vision if we are to understand it correctly. Augustine boils down every variety of human society into a fundamental “yes” or “no” to God. Augustine writes, “There are no more than two kinds of human society, which we may justly call two cities…the one consists of those who wish to live after the flesh, the other of those who wish to live after the spirit.”36 Those who live according to the flesh live “according to man” (secundum hominem).37 They follow their own wills and earthly desires. Since God created human beings to do God’s will, to live “according

33 Ibid., 142.
34 Ibid., 143.
35 Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation, 266.
37 De civ. 14.4. All citations of the Latin text refer to the Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 47 and 48.
to man” is to live according to a lie.\textsuperscript{38} Those who live according to the spirit, on the other hand, live according to God because they do God’s will. At the end of book fourteen, Augustine defines the two cities in terms of love: “Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self.”\textsuperscript{39} Human societies have always had to make this choice. Balthasar notes, “The \textit{civitas Dei}, has existed in essence from the time of Abel; what occurs in Christ is only that it moves out of the shadow into the sunlight.”\textsuperscript{40} To live according to the love of God is to be granted a higher vision. Christ makes it easier to see the city of God.

\textit{b. The Pessimistic Reading of Augustine’s Political Theology}

\textit{i. De Civitate Dei as “Political”}

The extent to which \textit{De civitate Dei} is political depends upon one’s definition of politics. Jean Bethke Elshtain remarks that since Augustine never offers a straightforward political treatise his politics must be “teased out” of his theology.\textsuperscript{41} He does not pontificate on forms of government, constitutions, or political theory.\textsuperscript{42} But his theology certainly has implications for politics. Thomas W. Smith, for example, argues that Augustine’s goal is eminently practical: “Augustine seeks to reorient his readers’ loves…This transformation will be reflected in the different way one relates to created

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{De civ.} 14.4.  
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{De civ.} 14.28.  
\textsuperscript{40} Balthasar, \textit{The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 2}, 103.  
goods, including one’s politics.” After all, when Augustine praises “the glorious city of God,” he does not refer to something imaginary, but to something real.

Matthew Levering’s reading can help us begin to articulate how a Christian politics can hold together the earthly and the transcendent. Levering reads Augustine’s account of history as both linear and participatory: linear in that it refers to the onward march of earthly, temporal events, participatory in that it describes our relationship to the transcendent. In history, Levering writes, “Following Christ is not an otherworldly effort to escape from the body, but neither does following Christ have primarily this-worldly goals.” Our participation in the transcendent has a direct bearing on the way we comport ourselves in history. We only understand the full significance of linear actions in light of this participatory dimension, so Augustine can describe the city of God as “glorious” both now “as a stranger in the midst of the ungodly” and in eternity, “in the fixed stability of its eternal seat.” As a “stranger” the city of God is imperfect, but we call it “glorious” because its linear actions follow from its participation in God.

We only understand the political implications of De civitate Dei in light of the participatory dimension. History plays out as a conflict between those who embrace the participatory and those who deny it. Given the participatory dimension’s orientation to transcendence, we cannot limit the political implications of the De civitate Dei to a single, mundane political form. Reading it in terms of “seeing” allows us to appreciate the interplay of these dimensions.

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44 *De civitate* I.preface.
46 *De civ.* I.preface.
47 Levering, The Theology of Augustine, 130.
A theo-dramatic interpretation, in recognizing the place of beauty in Augustine’s theology, offers a more positive interpretation of Augustine’s politics than has often been the case. At least, it offers a more positive reading than “realist” and “secularist” interpretations of Augustine’s politics. They do not interpret Augustine so much as they dragoon him into defending modern political presumptions. Taking into account their misconceptions, especially the way they misinterpret Augustine’s support of violence, will allow us to better see the political implications of reading Augustine’s theology in terms of “seeing.”

ii. Two Pessimistic Readings: Realist and Secularist

Reinhold Niebuhr’s reading of Augustine as a “realist” is one of the most influential modern renderings of Augustine’s politics. Niebuhr defines realism as “the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power.”\(^{48}\) Augustine is a realist, says Niebuhr, because he draws attention to these factors in his sketch of human society, especially in his identification of self-love as the cause of social ills.\(^{49}\) For Niebuhr, De civitate Dei is “an adequate account of the social factions, tensions, and competitions which we know to be well-nigh universal on every level of community.”\(^{50}\) He contends that this pessimistic appraisal of social life is most clear in Augustine’s account of the earthly city, where he recognizes that peace and order are only possible because they are “established by a dominant group within some level of

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\(^{49}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 121.
community; and that this group is not exempt from the corruption of self-interest merely because the peace of society has been entrusted to it.”\(^{51}\) Self-love is the motivation behind every social power relation, even peacemaking. In order to maintain peace, consequently, the earthly city is willing to get its hands dirty. In Niebuhr’s eyes, politics is inherently immoral.\(^{52}\)

What saves Augustine’s realism from turning into cynicism or nihilism, says Niebuhr, is the “leavening” effect provided by the city of God.\(^{53}\) Unrestrained self-interest is self-destructive. The love underlying the city of God tempers the self-love that governs the earthly city: “The loyalty of a leavening portion of a nation’s citizens to a value transcending national interest will save a ‘realistic’ nation from defining its interests in such narrow and short range terms as to defeat the real interests of the nation.”\(^{54}\) Together the two cities accomplish more than either could alone. In short, Niebuhr views Augustine’s “realism” as a socio-political version of good cop/bad cop. The earthly city threatens and uses violence: the city of God restrains the earthly city from becoming too violent. The city of God does not just make use of the earthly city; it needs the earthly city because self-interest is the only way to get anything done.

Niebuhr’s realist interpretation, however, relies on a selective reading of Augustine. D. Stephen Long contends that Augustinian realism “misreads Augustine as Machiavelli.”\(^{55}\) By overemphasizing the role of original sin, Niebuhr forces Augustine’s theology to fit a political mold that owes more to Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Weber than

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\(^{51}\) Ibid., 128.

\(^{52}\) Niebuhr makes this argument at length in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

\(^{53}\) Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 134.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 137.

to Augustine.\textsuperscript{56} Their accounts of politics, Long writes, assume that “we must get our hands dirty in order to be political, which assumes that activities such as lying, deceit, manipulation and violence inescapably set the contours for politics.”\textsuperscript{57} Machiavelli, Hobbes, Weber, and the realists like Niebuhr who follow them, all presume that there is a “single politics” and that it must be violent.\textsuperscript{58} Augustinian realism assumes that Augustine is working with a pessimistic vision of politics and the world. He is not.

In order to read Augustine as a pessimist, Long contends, Augustinian “realists” must obscure major aspects of his thought. Long cites the way Paul Ramsey omits a crucial caveat in Augustine’s argument when citing De civitate Dei 19.17. Long writes, “[Ramsey] makes it appear that there is only one way to be political in this life, and it is for the Heavenly City to make common cause with the earthly city and use the means it deploys.”\textsuperscript{59} Augustine’s text, however, does not support Ramsey’s interpretation. While Augustine promotes the free interaction between the cities, he does “so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced” and “so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness.”\textsuperscript{60} Rather than a single politics that governs both the city of God and the earthly city, Long argues that Augustine maintains two politics. However much they share, the two cities are still oriented to different ends, and each city reflects its orientation in the way it comports itself.

Augustinian realists, Long argues, only see Augustine through the lens offered by modern politics, a lens was crafted from the thought of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Weber. For a more positive and more accurate interpretation, Long suggests we ought to draw

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 237.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
our definition of politics from Augustine himself, as Robert Dodaro does. Contrary to
the realist understanding, this understanding of politics reveals that the city of God is not
based on “deceit and violence,” but on a community united in the love of God. Long
shows that there is greater depth and positivity to Augustine’s thought than realists
presume. Augustinian realism is not simply a pessimistic reading of Augustine; it is also
a shallow one.

Jean Bethke Elshtain agrees that realist interpretations rely on a distorted vision of
Augustine. She contends that realists only read those parts of Augustine that support
realism (selections from books one, two, fifteen, and nineteen of De civitate Dei). Instead
of Augustine, they get “Augustine Lite,” who can be “numbered among the pessimists
and charged with being one of those who stress human cruelty and violence with a
concomitant need for order, coercion, punishment, and occasional war.” Elshtain
counters that the real Augustine has a much more complex, not to mention positive,
political theology. Although Augustine expresses pessimism about human society (like
his affirmation in De civ. 4.4 that the difference between emperors and pirates is one of
scale, not type), realists fail to read these remarks in light of Augustine’s “insistence on
the great virtue of hope and the call to enact projects of caritas.” Augustinian realism
does not come from Augustine. Rather, it is the attempt to turn Augustine into a modern
political realist by excising his commitment to love and hope.

Like Augustinian realism, the secularist interpretation also conflates Augustine
with modern politics. The progenitor of this view, R. A. Markus, argues in his Saeculum:

61 Ibid., 231.
62 Ibid., 239.
63 Elshtain, “Augustine,” 36.
64 Ibid., 47.
History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine that Augustine imagines a realm in which politics stands apart from the church as “a pluralistic, religiously neutral civil community.” For Markus, the church looks no different than any other group in civil society; its unique significance lies in the eschaton. Oliver O’Donovan, however, contends that there is no neutral space between the two cities. The self-love of the earthly city is not neutral, but “a terrible moral unity.” Though the two cities may share earthly peace, this is a condition of order, not an institution.

Remember that Augustine says every human society falls into one of two categories: those united by the love of God and those united by the love of self. Given this dichotomy, it is difficult to imagine how the earthly city could be morally neutral. Barry Harvey notes that in Augustine’s time the term *saeculum* is not the counterpart to “religious” that the term “secular” is today. In Latin, “*saeculum* did not designate a space or realm separate from the religious or sacred, but a time.” In this sense, both church and world are “secular” as Markus argues, but the city of God stands apart within the *saeculum* because it is “the social configuration that concretely signifies to the world its destiny in the age to come.” Making the church just another institution in civil society by insisting that it only has eschatological significance “serves only to vacate the

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66 Markus writes, “For the Donatist’s sociological interpretation of the Church’s holiness and apartness [Augustine] substituted an eschatological one. The Church was holy not because it was here and now the congregation of the holy, the unspotted or elect, but because as a community it had an essential relationship with the heavenly city. Only in that community, as finally constituted by God’s predestining choice, will the elect be gathered together to form a community free from all contamination” Ibid., 178.
68 Ibid., 59.
69 *De civ.*, 14.1.
71 Ibid., 70.
historical Christian community of any real significance.” Whatever similarities the use of earthly peace might have with the goals of secular civil society, Augustine has no room for a morally neutral city.

Both realist and secularist readings fail to see Augustine. Or, rather, the modern lens they use to look at Augustine distorts their vision. Instead of allowing his vision to form theirs, they impose their vision on him.

c. The Positive Turn in Augustinianism

i. Recentering Augustine’s Politics on Love

More recent works on Augustine tend to stress the positive aspects of his political theology. Jean Bethke Elshtain offers what could be called a positive realist reading. Elshtain does not shy away from the sinful realities of the world nor from the distasteful choices Christians may have to make. (The subtitle of her 2003 book is “The Burden of American Power in a Violent World”). At the same time, Elshtain calls out the pessimism of Niebuhrian Augustinianian realism. In Augustine and the Limits of Politics, she challenges the position (one she initially agreed with) that Augustine was a “dour, late antique Hobbesian.” What they ignore and what needs to be recovered is Augustine’s emphasis on love.

It is not that Elshtain denies what Augustine says about the sinful reality of the world; she merely thinks that he is more pro-love than anti-sin. Yes, Augustine

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72 Ibid., 69.
74 Jean Bethke Elshtain, Augustine and the Limits of Politics (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 19. Here Elshtain begins the second chapter addressing this interpretation head on: “Augustine is usually numbered among the pessimists.”
75 Ibid., 36.
“repudiates utopian possibilities” and offers a “via negativa” when it comes to political life. But the negative way is not the same as pessimism. His “ethic of caritas,” she notes, is “not moralistic self-abnegation but an abundant overflowing of the fullness of life.” Caritas “chastens” and “tempers” human politics, which can express both love for neighbor and lust for domination. With the civitas dei Augustine offers us “a reference point that is also, potentially, a resistance point.” Christians yearn for “a more authentic representation of earthly peace” and even wage wars to get it because they have a vision of perfect peace. Even the “bad” stuff—the onerous actions that Augustine permits—only makes sense in light of caritas.

Oliver O’Donovan also highlights the positive aspects of Augustine’s political theology, affirming that Augustine contributes to political thought, though not in the modern, narrow sense of political. Augustine describes the two cities—the two forms of human society—in terms of their ends. Different ends lead to different “moral characters.” Book 19 is “an essay to demonstrate that moral philosophy must be social philosophy.” “Realist accounts,” O’Donovan writes, frequently read the two cities as “ideal moral communities,” not actual, historical communities. O’Donovan rejects this reading. The two cities are truly “moral communities” for Augustine. Israel and the

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76 Ibid., 90–91.
77 Ibid., 36.
78 Ibid., 41.
79 Ibid., 99.
80 Ibid., 105.
81 O’Donovan, “The Political Thought of City of God 19,” 49.
82 Ibid., 52.
83 Ibid., 56.
84 Ibid.
church may not be identical with the city of God, but “the history of the heavenly city is that of the faithful in Israel and of the church.”

O’Donovan says that the city of God subverts earthly political systems. Admittedly, the difference between a pagan emperor and a Christian emperor is only “modest,” but citizens of the city of God live differently: a Christian household is governed by compassion rather than *libido dominandi*.

Different loves lead to different lives. For Augustine, “The practice of the Christian household is in fact subtly subversive of those institutions in that it reasserts the primal equality of every human being to every other.” Though the city of God will never “transform” the earthly city, “there is…a significant transvaluation of the structures of society.” Like Elshtain, O’Donovan emphasizes the importance of love in Augustine’s political theology. Both offer a measured but more positive account of Augustine than either the pessimistic realism of Niebuhr or the abstracting secularism of Markus. The biggest difference, however, is that they try to read Augustine’s politics through Augustine’s own lens rather than a modern one.

**ii. Optimistic Augustinian Politics**

Eric Gregory and Charles Mathewes call for positive, constructive applications of Augustinian political theology. In *Politics and the Order of Love*, Gregory champions the convergence of Augustinianism and liberalism. Insisting that they complement rather than contradict one another, Gregory offers his own “reconstruction of Augustinian

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85 Ibid., 57.  
86 Ibid., 62–63.  
87 Ibid., 68.  
88 Ibid.
liberalism” by examining three varieties.\textsuperscript{89} The first and most popular, Augustinian realism (in the vein of Niebuhr), overemphasizes sin and consequently sees the purpose of politics as primarily about limiting the effects of sin.\textsuperscript{90} The second, Augustinian proceduralism, adopts John Rawl’s notions of fairness as the best expression of Augustine’s politics. Gregory does not completely disagree, but he does take umbrage with the way this approach undercuts the contribution of Christian love. Indeed, Gregory thinks that both realists and proceduralists give short shrift to love. He prefers instead the “Augustinian civic liberalism,” embodied by figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., because it puts the emphasis on love as the key to human society and civic virtue.\textsuperscript{91} This variety of Augustinianism allows us to chart a middle course between an “otherworldly or sectarian” politics that overemphasizes love and a “zealously persecutorial” politics that uses sin to legitimate violence.\textsuperscript{92}

Gregory focuses on citizenship, not statecraft.\textsuperscript{93} Why is a loving citizen a good citizen? Augustine’s “otherworldly” love empowers and motivates liberal citizenship.\textsuperscript{94} It gives us a goal that directs our use of earthly institutions and it makes us perfectionists without promising impossible perfection.\textsuperscript{95} Gregory stops short of calling Augustine a liberal, but he does conclude, “We might say that Augustinians ‘use’ liberal politics as an expression of their loves, but they do not ‘enjoy’ it.”\textsuperscript{96} Augustine may not have been a liberal, but good Augustinians should be good liberal citizens.

\textsuperscript{89} Gregory, Politics and the Order of Love, 2.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 107–125.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 319–320.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 381.
Charles Mathewes, in *A Theology of Public Life*, also offers a variation of Augustinian citizenship, though one less concerned with defending liberalism. His work is neither an “apology for democracy” nor a world renouncing “apocalyptic jeremiad.” He is no less committed, however, to Christian participation in modern American life. Mathewes thinks that Christians can and should participate in “public life”—a purposefully broader category than “politics”—and they should do so as Christians. Christianity, as a religion and an identity, is ”fundamentally public.” The problem is that accommodationism constrains this participation; the secular world sets the terms for how religion contributes to public life. Consequently, Christians have no adequate way to express Christian politics.

Mathewes turns to Augustine’s account of the self for a solution. This rendering, says Mathewes, sees the individual “as an active agent within a community in a continual process of conversion towards or away from the divine Trinity.” Our conversion calls us to engage rather than withdraw from the world. It is an ascetics; we must learn to suffer “in the right way” such that we “cultivate dissatisfaction” with the world. Augustinian engagement takes the form of *caritas* expressed through the virtues of faith, hope, and love. The fact that our love comes from outside the world actually allows us to “love the world as much as we want” and these “transcendental longings” give us the ability to criticize the world—to hold it accountable for its failures. Augustine does not
have a politics; he has a theology with implications for public life. Politics is insignificant outside of a theological context.\textsuperscript{105} Given that engagement with God stands as the eschatological horizon of our actions, Augustine provides us with a way between otherworldly escapism and apocalyptic complacency. Mathewes wants a theology of citizenship in which faith and civic engagement reinforce one another.\textsuperscript{106}

In \textit{The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times}, Mathewes details how this citizenship relates to the use of just war. Augustine was no pessimist, but he was “profoundly ambivalent” because he appreciated that life is a combination of joy and tragedy.\textsuperscript{107} He abided by a “true realism” that “recognizes both the power of love and the inescapability of force, and insists on the reality of both.”\textsuperscript{108} For the Augustinian, says Mathewes, slaying an enemy is an act of love. Just war, accordingly, is obligatory rather than exculpatory. Exculpation implies choice and thus the possibility of avoiding war. Obligation, on the other hand, acknowledges that war is unavoidable: “War is done out of the compulsion of love…[the] recognition of our implication in the violence of the world.”\textsuperscript{109} Exculpation also provides a clear conscience. The just warrior, however, is a “mournful warrior.”\textsuperscript{110} Our obligation to wage war reveals to us our own sinfulness. Mathewes does not take this reality lightly: “[The use of violence] should trouble, humble, even perhaps break our wills, make us wish we were other than who we are.”\textsuperscript{111} This only makes sense, of course, because God is love. When we strive for a love that lies

\begin{footnotes}\footnote{105}{Ibid., 20.}\footnote{106}{Ibid., 160.}\footnote{107}{Charles T. Mathewes, \textit{The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 10.}\footnote{108}{Ibid., 167.}\footnote{109}{Ibid., 172.}\footnote{110}{Ibid., 168.}\footnote{111}{Ibid., 177.}\end{footnotes}
beyond the world, we recognize the necessity of violence in our engagement with the world.

Gregory Lee questions a presumption that Gregory and Mathewes’ rely on. Lee suggests that both rely upon Markus’ secularism for their “liberal appropriations” of Augustine.\footnote{Gregory W. Lee, “Republics and Their Loves: Rereading City of God 19,” Modern Theology 27, no. 4 (2011): 574.} Gregory, after all, wants to combine Augustinianism and liberalism. He readily admits that his goal is to retrieve Augustinian liberalism, not Augustine.\footnote{Gregory, Politics and the Order of Love, 2.} Mathewes wants to create a theology of citizenship in order to answer the question “What has Washington to do with Jerusalem?”\footnote{Mathewes, A Theology of Public Life, 1.} He opposes an absolute acceptance or rejection of the nation-state: “The liberal nation-state can legitimately request of citizens a genuine degree of commitment, and the Christian faith should allow, and indeed encourage, its adherents to offer that commitment.”\footnote{Mathewes, The Republic of Grace, 182.} He too acknowledges that Christians perform many public acts (e.g. fasting) that defy modern political categories.\footnote{Mathewes, A Theology of Public Life, 160.} Still, in their emphases on civic participation, both presume a positive “third sphere for pluralistic political cooperation.”\footnote{Lee, “Republics and Their Loves,” 574.} Lee says we must ask whether these approaches “grapple sufficiently with the fact that Augustine’s primary metaphor for the church’s relation to the world is not citizenship but captivity.”\footnote{Ibid.} Both Gregory and Mathewes desire an Augustinianism beyond pessimism or secularism. Lee asks whether the modern sense of citizenship can fulfill that desire.

Acknowledging the centrality of beauty in Augustine’s thought, as Balthasar and Bychov suggest that we do, leads to a similarly positive account of Augustine’s political
theology but with a greater focus on how Christians express this vision rather than on how they conform to the sinful world. My theo-dramatic interpretation will focus on the vision underlying and motivating Christian actions in the world.

Robert Dodaro does something similar in *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* by reorienting Augustine’s politics on his vision of the heavenly city. Dodaro seeks to redress the modern “compartmentalized approach” to Augustine’s thought.\(^{119}\) Studies assume that they can focus on individual aspects of his thought—the political, the Christological, the scriptural, the ethical—without attending to the connections between them. Dodaro argues that this method is artificial and misleading. Augustine does not separate his thinking about the political from his thinking about Christ or scripture. Dodaro does not claim to offer a comprehensive synthesis of Augustine but aspires to reorient our approach to Augustine. If we want to ask what Augustine says about the “just society,” then we must also ask what he says about “Christ, human knowledge, the church, and scriptural hermeneutics, as well as political thought and ethics.”\(^{120}\) To talk about Augustine’s politics is to talk about his understanding of Christ.

Dodaro begins by explaining Augustine’s claim that Rome was never a true commonwealth. There is only a true commonwealth where there is true justice and there is only true justice where there is true piety.\(^{121}\) Since Rome did not worship the true God, it did not possess true piety and so could not possess true justice. We only possess virtue through Christ. Augustine considers Christ to be “the only completely just man ever to

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\(^{120}\) Ibid.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 215.
have lived.” So with regard to society, “Without Christ’s grace no society can be just.” Our Christian formation explains Augustine’s vision of the just society.

The heavenly city, rather than the earthly city, should define Augustine’s politics. Neither Gregory nor Mathewes would deny the ultimate significance of the heavenly city, but, as Lee suggests, their versions of Augustinianism place the emphasis on engagement with the earthly city. Dodaro, on the other hand, explains Augustinian engagement in terms of the heavenly city. Focusing on the heavenly city, the perfect performance of virtue, alters our understanding and performance of virtue on earth. Our hope for the heavenly city teaches us that earthly happiness is not an end in itself. The point of Christian society is not to create heaven on earth. Instead, the “primary objective” for the Christian ruler is to assist “subjects to love God in the truest way possible.” No earthly society will ever be perfectly just. Even the political exemplars to which Augustine appeals—Peter, Paul, David—are imperfect. Augustine points to them not for their political acumen, but for their “heroic virtue,” their moral orientations. Their “attention is fixed on the heavenly city,” that vision of perfect peace and justice. Civic engagement is not an afterthought, but it is secondary. Christians engage the earthly city in order to embody the heavenly city.

Though my approach is most similar to Dodaro’s, engaging beauty allows us to embrace the best of all these positive interpretations. Given the cloud of stuffy pessimism

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122 Ibid., 73.
123 Ibid., 78.
124 Dodaro appeals to Book 8 of De trinitate in which Augustine explains that “the mind perceives justice to the degree that the form of justice which Christ’s example presents to the mind becomes an object of desire, and is both known and loved” Ibid., 74.
125 Ibid., 208.
126 Ibid., 209.
127 Ibid., 210.
128 Ibid., 217–218.
129 Ibid., 218.
that has surrounded Augustine since the early twentieth century, these arguments come like a blast a fresh air. Whatever weaknesses they may have, they all offer something positive. Elshtain and O’Donovan underscore the importance of love in Augustine’s politics. Gregory and Mathewes concentrate on political engagement. Dodaro resituates Augustine’s politics on the heavenly city. Locating beauty as the center of Augustine’s politics allows us to continue this invigorating turn without bowing to the presumptions of modern political categories. We learn to see the cities correctly. As a result, we see that Augustine’s politics is more about peace than about violence.

*d. Augustine’s City of God: Formed by a Vision of Eternal Peace*

If we read *De civitate Dei* in terms of vision we see the two cities as the political performances of different moral formations. As moral formations, the cities are historical even if they are not institutional. Augustine warns his readers not to equate borders of the cities with the borders of earthly institutions (e.g. the church or Rome). We can never draw definitive boundaries in history: “These two cities are entangled together in this world, and intermixed until the last judgment effects their separation.”130 They are both “in this world.” Still, it is not always clear who belongs to which city: “Among [the city of God’s] enemies lie hid those who are destined to be fellow-citizens,” and, conversely, “As long as she is a stranger in the world, the city of God has in her communion…some who shall not eternally dwell in the lot of saints.”131 The image of two cities “mystically” or “allegorically” (Latin: *mystice*) illuminates the difference between those who live

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130 *De civ.*, 1.35.
131 *De civ.*, 1.35.
“according to man” and those who live “according to God.” Elshtain explains that we cannot “conflate specific earthly conflagrations with his dominant metaphor.” At the same time, Augustine clearly equates the history of the two cities with history in general: the “career of these two cities” spans “this whole time or world-age, in which the dying give place and those who are born succeed.” The two cities share the same space and time. We must look to their ends to distinguish their political expressions.

The city of God is defined by its transcendent orientation, which affects the earthly form of its actions. So long as they exist in history the two cities are subject to the vicissitudes of history: “Both alike either enjoy temporal good things, or are afflicted with temporal evils, but with diverse faith, diverse hope, and diverse love.” William T. Cavanaugh argues that Augustine presumes a complex political space. Most modern political thought, Cavanaugh explains, presumes a single, neutral space for political activity. For Augustine, on the other hand, “There is no division between earthly goods and heavenly gods, secular and sacred; there is no sphere of activities that is the peculiar responsibility of the earthly city.” The city of God does not exist as a static place on earth. Cavanaugh writes, “The city of God is not so much a space as a performance.” We will have trouble separating the performances, though, because as Augustine says, they are “entangled” and “intermixed.” The earthly city performs a tragedy and the city of God performs a comedy, but they perform at the same time. Borrowing Samuel Wells’ concept of “overacceptance,” Cavanaugh explains that the comedy of the city of God

132 De civ., 15.1.
133 Elshtain, “Augustine,” 42.
134 De civ., 15.1.
135 De civ., 18.54.
137 Ibid., 59.
138 De civ., 1.35.
embraces and reinterprets the tragedy of the earthly city.\textsuperscript{139} We recognize the victory in martyrdom, for instance, because “the city of God is the story enacted in history of the way that God has taken the tragedy of human sin and incorporated it into the drama of redemption.”\textsuperscript{140}

In order to perform the city of God, we must see its ending. The two cities are “formed” [\textit{fecerunt}, from \textit{facio} meaning “to make, build”] by either the love of God or the love of self. These loves do not always lead to different actions. As Levering observes, “Viewed in terms of linear history, the two cities do not appear all that different…But viewed in terms of the participatory dimension of history, the two cities are polar opposites.”\textsuperscript{141} It is to this dimension that Augustine turns in book 19, where he discusses the “ends” of the two cities.\textsuperscript{142} For the Christian, the supreme good is “life eternal.”\textsuperscript{143} Christians must reject any notion that we can obtain true happiness on earth. Living in finitude, eternal happiness on earth is necessarily impossible. Even the virtues, those habits that make for the best life, “are all the more telling proofs of [life’s] miseries in proportion as they are helpful against the violence of its dangers, toils, and woes.”\textsuperscript{144} If we do not see beyond the earthly, then the virtues, which are incapable of dispelling earthly woes, offer only a fool’s hope for happiness. True virtues do not claim to produce eternal happiness but “profess that by the hope of the future world this life, which is miserably involved in the many and great evils of this world, is happy as it is also

\textsuperscript{139} Cavanaugh defines overacceptance as “the improvised reframing of the action of a drama in light of a larger story one wants to tell” Cavanaugh, \textit{Migrations of the Holy}, 65; Wells defines it as “accepting in light of a larger story…a way of accepting without losing the initiative” Wells, \textit{Improvisation}, 131.

\textsuperscript{140} Cavanaugh, \textit{Migrations of the Holy}, 66.

\textsuperscript{141} Levering, \textit{The Theology of Augustine}, 137.

\textsuperscript{142} “That for the sake of which other things are to be desired, while it is to be desired for its own sake” \textit{De civ.}, 19.1.

\textsuperscript{143} \textit{De civ.}, 19.4.

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{De civ.}, 19.4.
safe…As, therefore we are saved, so we are made happy by hope.”¹⁴⁵ Though we cannot obtain eternal happiness now, we can be happy in our hope for it.

Thinking of the two cities as theatrical performances also puts the focus on the way their ends shape their actions. We all know how comedies and tragedies end, or at least we know the contours and the tone of comedies and tragedies. The ending allows us to make sense of the actions leading up to it, even the seemingly incongruous ones. We know Friar Laurence’s and Juliet’s desperate plan to fake her death and reunite her with Romeo will somehow fail just as we know that despite all the ado Benedick and Beatrice will somehow end up married. The drama is how we get to the ending. The two cities are political exemplars because their moral performances express their ends. The city of God does not have a different stage or different props. It only has a different ending, but the ending makes all the difference.

Performing the city of God, however, does not guarantee earthly happiness. The limitations of earthly existence leave us open to misery. We face a world in which:

On all hands we experience these slights, suspicions, quarrels, war, all of which are undoubted evils; while, on the other hand, peace is a doubtful good, because we do not know the heart of our friend, and though we did know it to-day, we should be as ignorant of what it might be to-morrow.¹⁴⁶

We never know who will betray us. We never have any guarantee that those in whom we have placed love and trust will not someday spit upon that love and trust. In many ways, in fact, it would be safer to forgo society and companionship. Solitude is the only certain protection against betrayal. Yet, it is in one another that we find the way to true happiness. The city of God is a social performance.¹⁴⁷ Rather than forego society we must

¹⁴⁵ De civ., 19.4.
¹⁴⁶ De civ., 19.5.
¹⁴⁷ De civ., 19.5.
direct our use of earthly circumstances “to that end in which we shall enjoy the best and greatest peace possible.”¹⁴⁸ Our actions can bring about earthly happiness because they draw their shape from the true form of happiness, “eternal peace.”¹⁴⁹

Augustine describes the end of the city of God as “peace in eternal life, or eternal life in peace.”¹⁵⁰ He defines peace as “the tranquility of order” and order as “the distribution which allots things equal and unequal, each to its own place.”¹⁵¹ Civil peace is well-ordered concord between citizens, and the peace of the heavenly Jerusalem, the “celestial city,” is “the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God.”¹⁵²

Not all things, however, desire peace correctly. Wars are waged for the sake of peace. Thieves make peace with one another in order to thieve more effectively. Even vicious animals and the mythical giant Cacus desire some type of peace.¹⁵³ Peace sought by depravity is still peace, but it is a lesser peace. Pride, for instance, leads some to love “unjust peace” over the “just peace of God.”¹⁵⁴ Unjust peace reflects the tranquility of order, even if it is only through the pain of having lost tranquility.¹⁵⁵ Eternal peace, though, is the perfect tranquility of order. Right actions are more ordered to God, and so closer to peace, than wrong actions. In charting the difference, Augustine demonstrates the significance of seeing correctly.

¹⁴⁸ De civ., 19.10.
¹⁴⁹ De civ., 19.10.
¹⁵⁰ De civ., 19.11.
¹⁵¹ De civ., 19.13.
¹⁵² De civ., 19.13.
¹⁵³ De civ., 19.12.
¹⁵⁴ De civ., 19.12.
¹⁵⁵ De civ., 19.13.
The specific image that guides the city of God is Jerusalem, the “vision of peace” [visio pacis]. In Enarrationes in Psalmo, Augustine contrasts Jerusalem, the vision of peace, with Babylon, “the city of confusion.” These cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, serve as archetypes of the two forms of social life. This typological use comes from the Book of Revelation and recurs in Augustine’s sources and in his own work. Augustine applies the two-city model to a reading of history. He says that we must ask ourselves what we love and whether that makes us citizens of Jerusalem or Babylon. Different loves make different cities.

The city of God is formed by visio pacis, the vision of eternal peace: all of its actions originate in this vision. Augustine writes, “The whole use…of things temporal has a reference [refertur] to this result of earthly peace in the earthly community, while in the city of God it is connected with eternal peace.” Christian actions have a different goal from pagan actions, even if they look the same. Obeying Jesus’ commands to love God and neighbor leads Christians to aim for earthly concord that requires that one “in the first place, injure no one, and, in the second, do good to every one he can reach.”

The Christian household, though by temporal necessity similar in structure to the pagan household, subverts systems that presume the natural superiority of one group over another. Though the Christian father rules his family in much the same way as the pagan father, he does so “not from a love of power [domandi cupiditate]” but from a

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156 De civ., 19.11; Enarrationes in Psalmo, 65.2 (NPNF 8:268).
157 Enar., 65.2 (NPNF 8:268).
158 O’Daly, Augustine’s City of God, 53–66.
159 Ibid., 62.
160 Enar., 65/64.2.
161 O’Daly, Augustine’s City of God, 53–66.
sense of duty and a love of mercy. The concrete differences between the city of God and the earthly city are sometimes difficult to see. O’Donovan points out that a Christian household, like a Christian emperor, cannot transcend the limitations of the fallen world. The use of authority in the social realm will remain until the coming of the kingdom of God. This limitation, however, does not prevent citizens of the city of God from living differently in an observable, concrete way. There is, as O’Donovan says, a “transvaluation of the structures of society.” The Christian household, like the Christian emperor, is able to “to superimpose another meaning on the relationships within it.” Citizens of the city of God “serve one another in love” whereas those of the earthly city “are ruled by the love of ruling” (libido dominandi). Even actions that look the same can have completely opposite effects.

The city of God and the earthly city use the same goods in different ways. Augustine admits that temporal peace has value for both cities. The two cities have, O’Donovan explains, communis usus. They share the use of temporal goods. Citizens of the city of God need food and shelter just as much as citizens of the earthly city. They differ, says O’Donovan, in terms of utilitas, by which he means the end to which these goods are used. Augustine writes: “The things necessary for this life are used by both kinds of men and families alike, but each has its own peculiar and widely different aim in

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165 O’Donovan, “The Political Thought of City of God 19,” 68.
166 Ibid.
167 De civ., 14.28.
168 De civ., 19.13.
170 Ibid.
using them.”¹⁷¹ The earthly city only seeks to maintain earthly peace, which is “well-ordered concord of civic obedience and rule” but which limits the significance of actions to this life.¹⁷² The city of God, on the other hand, uses temporal peace in order to be lead into eternal peace.¹⁷³

The city of God accepts the parts of the earthly city that can lead toward eternal peace (because they tend toward earthly peace) and rejects the parts that do not (such as the worship of other gods or human glory). Moreover, the city of God can embrace a wide variety of peoples and cultures, “not scrupling about diversities in manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained.”¹⁷⁴ The city of God may cooperate with the laws of the earthly city so long as in doing so “no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced.”¹⁷⁵ This is the caveat that Ramsey omits in his interpretation.¹⁷⁶ Only the city of God uses temporal peace correctly; only with its vision of eternal peace can it employ the correct utilitas of temporal peace.¹⁷⁷ Though mingled in history, the two cities are as different as wheat and chaff. The citizens of the city of God are peregrina, “pilgrims,” “foreign aliens,” or “resident aliens” in the world.¹⁷⁸ They do not conform to the world even though they use its goods; the love of God “reorders” them so that they are led to eternal peace.¹⁷⁹

Citizens of the city of God strive for a peace that they will never achieve on earth. The city of God, Augustine explains, does not unreflectively enjoy the “peace of

¹⁷¹ De civ., 19.17.
¹⁷² De civ., 19.17.
¹⁷³ De civ., 19.13.
¹⁷⁴ De civ., 19.17.
¹⁷⁵ De civ., 19.17.
¹⁷⁸ De civ., 19.17.
Babylon.”\textsuperscript{180} Compared to life in eternal peace, even a blessed life now “is most wretched.”\textsuperscript{181} We make use of its temporal peace and enjoy the necessities of life that it provides, but we never forgot its wretchedness. We never forget that the earthly city will not enjoy peace in the end. Augustine explains that “if any man uses this life with a reference to that other which he ardently loves and confidently hopes for, he may well be called even now blessed, though not in reality so much as in hope.”\textsuperscript{182} Happiness on earth lies only in the hope of eternal peace; it lies in the promise of eternal peace we see in the peace on earth. Our struggle for peace is more “the solace of our misery than the positive enjoyment of felicity” and our righteousness, though shaped in light of the good, “consists rather in the remission of sins than in the perfecting of virtues.”\textsuperscript{183} We cannot measure the success of the city of God by the presence of temporal peace. Instead, it is the struggle for eternal peace that reveals citizenship in the city of God. To put it in terms of theo-dramatic ethics: we can only appreciate the city of God’s struggle for peace in terms of the transethical. By an earthly measure, it fails, but the city of God strives for a peace beyond the temporal tranquility of order.

\textit{e. Grieving Over War: Violence and the City of God}

Considering the emphasis he puts on peace, it is strange that Augustine is often dubbed the father of Christian just war theory.\textsuperscript{184} In one sense, he is: later just war theorists do make use of Augustine’s writings. For instance, Thomas Aquinas formulates

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{De civ.}, 19.26.
  \item \textit{De civ.}, 19.20.
  \item \textit{De civ.}, 19.20.
  \item \textit{De civ.}, 19.27.
\end{itemize}
his three criteria directly from Augustine.\textsuperscript{185} Gratian cites Augustine repeatedly when discussing the conduct of war in \textit{Decretum}.\textsuperscript{186} We push the title of “father” too far, however, if we claim that Augustine himself offers a just war theory. In order to understand the role of violence and war in the city of God, we must read Augustine’s comments on violence in light of the city of God’s orientation toward eternal peace.

On the one hand, Augustine regards the occasional use of violence as a necessary tool in the fallen world. In \textit{De civitate} he lists two exceptions to the fifth commandment’s prohibition against killing: 1) following a general law, acting as the sword for one who has authority to take up the sword; and, 2) receiving a special commission from God, such as Abraham, Jephthah and Samson received.\textsuperscript{187} In \textit{Contra Faustam} he remarks that “natural order” grants the monarch the authority to wage necessary wars and compels soldiers to “perform their military duties in behalf of the peace and safety of the community.”\textsuperscript{188} Christians face the special possibility of being required to wage war “in obedience to God.”\textsuperscript{189} In both cases, war is a tool that can lead to and maintain temporal peace. After all, all wars seek peace.\textsuperscript{190}

On the other hand, Augustine says that we should grieve over war. Phillip Wynn argues that “abhorrence” best sums up Augustine’s opinion of war.\textsuperscript{191} Augustine lists war as an evil alongside famine, pestilence, pillage, captivity and massacre.\textsuperscript{192} His justifications of war (such as those waged in obedience to God or those performed for the

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Summa theologiae} 2-2.40.1.resp.
\textsuperscript{186} Phillip Gerald Wynn, \textit{Augustine on War and Military Service} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 9.
\textsuperscript{187} \textit{De civ.}, 1.21.
\textsuperscript{188} \textit{Contra Faustam}, 22.75 (\textit{NPNF} 4:301).
\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Contra Faustam}, 22.75 (\textit{NPNF} 4:301).
\textsuperscript{190} \textit{De civ.}, 19.12.
\textsuperscript{191} Wynn, \textit{Augustine on War and Military Service}, 214.
\textsuperscript{192} \textit{De civ.}, 3.1.
safety of a community) are exceptions. Wynn contends that Augustine always regards war as evil, even in those instances in which it leads to earthly peace.\textsuperscript{193} For instance, though Augustine praises the ability of a common language to unite the Roman Empire, he also reminds the reader of the price of that common tongue: “How many great wars, how much slaughter and bloodshed, have provided this unity!”\textsuperscript{194} The wise man always laments war, even if it is “just.” Compared to eternal peace, even the most just and most successful wars testify to the miseries of the finite world. The very need for war shows that human morality has once again gone wrong, broken down, or failed.\textsuperscript{195} How can we respond, Augustine asks, with anything but grief? He states:

Let every one, then, who thinks with pain on all these great evils, so horrible, so ruthless, acknowledge that this is misery. And if any one either endures or thinks of them without mental pain, this is a more miserable plight still, for he thinks himself happy because he has lost human feeling.\textsuperscript{196}

No justification should ever ease the discomfort, the agonizing spiritual pain, of war.

The promise of eternal peace lays bare the limited value of war. Augustine writes, “There may be peace without war, but there cannot be war without some kind of peace.”\textsuperscript{197} He describes eternal misery as a state of eternal war between passion and the will.\textsuperscript{198} Conflict, not peace, forms the foundation of the earthly city. Both Romulus and Cain committed fratricide. The wicked war with the wicked and the good, but the good only war with the good because they are still imperfect; they are “good but not yet

\textsuperscript{193} Wynn, \textit{Augustine on War and Military Service}, 335.
\textsuperscript{194} \textit{De civ.}, 19.7.
\textsuperscript{195} \textit{De civ.}, 19.7.
\textsuperscript{196} \textit{De civ.}, 19.7.
\textsuperscript{197} \textit{De civ.}, 19.13.
\textsuperscript{198} \textit{De civ.}, 19.28.
perfect”.\textsuperscript{199} Conflict and war has no place in the city of God; its presence only reveals the imperfection of the city of God in history.

Even just war has no place in the city of God. We should not confuse Augustine’s impact on the just war tradition with what he says about war.\textsuperscript{200} Ronald G. Musto notes, “Augustine did not present a developed theory but only a series of observations on the conduct of just war inherited from Roman theory.”\textsuperscript{201} Likewise, Daniel Bell writes, “One looks in vain” in Augustine for a just war theory because he only offers “bits and pieces of commentary on just war in the midst of his writings on a host of other matters.”\textsuperscript{202} Michael Hanby criticizes those who invoke Augustine’s acceptance of just war while ignoring his condemnation of imperial power.\textsuperscript{203} Admittedly, Augustine does not reject just war. He accepts the use of violence; grudgingly, yes, but he accepts it nonetheless. This acceptance, however, shows us that an orientation to eternal peace can even influence violent actions.

The city of God’s orientation to eternal peace does not exempt it from the lamentable practices of the world. For instance, Augustine relates the dilemma of a judge.\textsuperscript{204} A judge can never know the heart of the accused and so will often be required to use violence in order to determine whether the accused is innocent or guilty. It is possible, even likely, that this torture will lead to death or a false confession. The judge, Augustine explains, is willing to risk these evils because “human society, which he thinks

\textsuperscript{199} De civ., 15.5.
\textsuperscript{200} For an overview of Augustine’s role in the development of Christian just war theory and the dubious claim of Augustinian paternity, see Wynn, Augustine on War and Military Service, 9–31.
\textsuperscript{202} Bell, Just War as Christian Discipleship, 28.
\textsuperscript{203} Hanby, “Democracy and Its Demons.”
\textsuperscript{204} Wynn considers the judge example to be “our best glimpse of Augustine’s most heartfelt view of war and military” Wynn, Augustine on War and Military Service, 335–336.
Duty does not make the judge’s task easier. Seeing the “misery of these necessities…had he any piety about him, he would cry to God ‘From my necessities deliver Thou me.” The necessity of violence does nothing to diminish its wretchedness. The same logic holds for other positions of authority, which Augustine considers to be a result of the fall.

Imperfect methods and structures do not undermine the city of God’s ultimate orientation to eternal peace. It lives righteously by faith when it “refers to the attainment of that [eternal] peace every good action towards God and man.” Imperfection on earth is a given. Temporal peace is imperfect but not evil. It provides the conditions under which Christians are more easily led to eternal peace. Helping to secure temporal peace, consequently, is part of the city of God’s struggle for eternal peace. Levering explains that for Augustine the role of the church “consists not in undermining authority but in using earthly peace, upheld by authority, for the purpose of guiding humans to eternal peace.” This ultimate goal compels the judge to sit on the bench, despite the possibility of causing misery. The struggle for eternal peace does not occur apart from participation in human society. Augustine does not promise that the judge will reform the bench. He points to the judge because the judge’s willingness to risk torturing innocent people only makes sense if sitting on the bench somehow leads to eternal peace.

Christians act differently because they see the world differently. Regarding participation in public life Augustine writes, “We should aim at using our position and influence, if these have been honorably attained, for the welfare of those who are under

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205 De civ., 19.6.
206 De civ., 19.6.
207 De civ., 19.15.
208 De civ., 19.17.
209 Levering, The Theology of Augustine, 140.
us.” Dodaro points out that as a bishop Augustine used the Roman legal system to free slaves and to advocate for the lenient treatment of criminals, preferring nonviolent solutions. He was, Dodaro concludes, “respectful, but not complacent or passive, toward the existing political order.” Intervening with public officials was also Augustine’s way of inviting those officials into a “conversation about God, Christ, and the nature of the public good.” The impossibility of perfection does not, for Augustine, require Christians to opt out of human society, but neither does it grant them carte blanche to embrace the methods of the earthly city.

Since the city of God is formed by a vision of eternal peace, its citizens only use violence in exceptional circumstances. “Exceptions” (exceptiones) is how Augustine describes the two instances in which the prohibition against killing does not apply. The paterfamilias, the judge, and other worldly authorities all wield coercive power. Augustine considers these uses lamentable but necessary, insisting that the use of violence does not preclude Christian participation in human society or citizenship in the city of God. Soldiers can live the gospel as soldiers. The Christian father and judge use the structures of the fallen world—including violence—in order to maintain temporal peace. At the same time, actions formed according to love of God are better than those formed according to love of self; just men rule “not from a love of power [dominandi
cupiditate], but from a sense of the duty they owe to others.” These uses of earthly structures aim at eternal peace by way of temporal peace.

Christians can use violence without setting aside their desire for eternal peace. Violence exists because of sin. The impossibility of eternal peace on earth is why Augustine speaks of our vision of eternal peace as a “solace” and our righteousness as “a remission of sins.” The city of God mingles with violence, but only while it resides in the realm of violence. Fundamentally, violence has no place in the city of God. The judge’s plea and the wise man’s grief reveal that an orientation to eternal peace carries with it a powerful, even visceral, awareness of the evils of violence. Augustine’s own abhorrence testifies to the fundamental incompatibility of violence with the city of God, which is not defined by the use of violence, the prevention of violence, or even the refusal to use violence. The city of God takes its form from the vision of eternal peace—a vision of the perfect tranquility of order.

John Milbank argues that Augustine’s ontology of peace is at the core of his critique of the earthly city. Augustine’s peace is not an island of tranquility in a sea of chaos; it is “coterminous with Being.” To exist is to express peace. This ontology, says Milbank, does not prevent Christians from using coercive action. Sometimes coercion is necessary. Milbank writes:

[Augustine] increasingly saw the necessity for the Church as well as the imperium to use coercive methods, and that he distinguishes the two not in terms of pure

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217 De civ., 19.15
218 De civ., 19.27.
219 De civ., 19.20: “The supreme good of the city of God is perfect and eternal peace…the peace of freedom from all evil, in which immortals ever abide.”
220 “It is in fact the ontological priority of peace over conflict (which is arguably the key theme of his entire thought) that is the principle undergirding Augustine’s critique” John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, Signposts in Theology (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 390.
221 Ibid., 262.
presence or absence of coercion, but according to the purpose that coercion has in mind.\textsuperscript{222}

The difference between the city of God and the earthly city is that the earthly city uses coercion without “the true final peace in view.”\textsuperscript{223} At the same time, Milbank criticizes Augustine’s positive view of punishment as a violation of this ontology. Punishment cannot be positive; it must be a denial of freedom, equality, or physical integrity. Even when we punish in order to prompt spiritual reform, punishment is always “a tragic risk.”\textsuperscript{224} If evil is the privation of good, then violence is privative: “The denial of Being both as infinite plenitude and as harmonious ordering of difference.”\textsuperscript{225} We need to do more than recognize peace as our final goal; we must also follow the path that leads to it.\textsuperscript{226}

The permissibility or impermissibility of violent acts follows secondarily from the city of God’s primary orientation to peace. Just war does not express peace; it only makes a more perfect expression of peace possible.\textsuperscript{227} Citizens of the city of God use violence (e.g. the judge who resorts to torture) as a means of seeking eternal peace. This use is not unrestrained or unlimited. The Christian embodies eternal peace by following the precepts to love God and to love one’s neighbor. This embodiment leads the Christian to “in the first place, injure no one, and, in the second, do good to every one he can reach.”\textsuperscript{228} The life of the city of God, Augustine says, “is a social life.”\textsuperscript{229}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 424.
\item \textsuperscript{223} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 420.
\item \textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 432.
\item \textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 431.
\item \textsuperscript{227} De civ., 19.12: “Peace is the end sought by war;” 19.13: “There may be peace without war, but there cannot be war without some kind of peace.”
\item \textsuperscript{228} De civ., 19.14. Elshtain refers to this direction as “Augustine’s basic rule of thumb for human earthly life,” Elshtain, “Augustine,” 40.
\item \textsuperscript{229} De civ., 19.17.
\end{itemize}
neighbor is part of its performance. He accepts violence in service to this goal. In a letter to Publicola, Augustine rejects the possibility of killing in self-defense but accepts killing in defense of others as “a soldier or public functionary.” In a letter to Marcellinus, Augustine explains that the command to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39; Luke 6:29) pertains to “the inward disposition of the heart” and so compels us “to do that which seems most likely to benefit those whose good we ought to seek.” Loving one’s neighbor is the primary motivation behind an action; its violent form is accidental.

Nonetheless, we do not seek the peace of Babylon for the sake of Babylon. The love of neighbor motivates this act, not self-love or even the rejection of self-love. The judge would prefer to sit on the bench without resorting to violence. The just ruler who declares a just war would rather not declare war at all. These uses of violence do not embrace the moral orientation of the earthly city. They do concede the impossibility of realizing eternal peace on earth. Augustine accepts violence as a potential necessity and so acknowledges that citizens of the city of God may benefit from the sword. Violence can be a corrective. If Christian benevolence cannot eliminate war, it should at least alter its conduct for the better. Violence, however, is not part of the city of God as a moral formation.

Augustine, in sum, offers us political theology as a moral formation. The city of God draws its shape from the form of eternal peace. We must judge its actions in light of

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233 “Even its wars themselves will not be carried on without the benevolent design that, after the resisting nations have been conquered, provision may be more easily made for enjoying in peace the mutual bond of piety and justice.” Letters, 138.2.14.
this orientation. Violence, though not absolutely and unconditionally forbidden, has no place within the city of God itself. The use of violence is more than an exception. Every violent act should lead to lamentation and grief because we hold the vision of eternal peace always before our gaze. Aiming at eternal peace will only make these feelings more acute. Augustine forms us to see that politics is not inherently or necessarily violent. The proper form of politics is peace.

Augustine’s primary emphasis is eternal peace. The city of God rests on a foundation of peace, while the earthly sits on a foundation of violence. Though it may benefit from the earthly city’s violent institutions, the city of God does not accept those institutions as necessary parts of its performance. By basing the performance of the city of God on a vision of peace, Augustine offers us a moral formation shaped by peace. Augustine’s city of God is thus conducive to pacifism as the constructive making of peace. It is not constrained to pacifism as the uncompromising rejection of force. Taking into account the tranethical, we might say that peace remains the proper form of all of the city of God’s actions, even in cases in which circumstances do not allow Christians to practice it perfectly.

III. Modern Circumstances: The Idolatry of the Nation-State

The two cities are not temporal institutions, but two moral formations guided by two different visions. These formations are always—and can only be—expressed in particular historical circumstances. Consequently, we must understand our (theo) political milieu in order to embody the visio pacis within it. William T. Cavanaugh offers a theological account of the circumstances facing modern western Christians. He argues
that the modern liberal nation-state forms us to exclude religion from politics, ultimately demanding idolatry. While claiming to be a religiously neutral institution, the nation-state has actually absorbed the loyalty its citizens once gave to religion. The state has taken the place of God. Cavanaugh’s critique allows us to engage modern politics in aesthetic terms: the nation-state distorts and limits our theo-political vision by taking the place of the Christ-form. Theo-dramatic ethics, in turn, provides us with the tools to construct Cavanaugh’s solution of performing the city of God as “overacceptance.”

Augustine’s political theology forms us to focus our vision upon eternal peace. In so doing we recognize that the nation-state limits our political vision to an earthly measure. We then orient (or reorient) our politics toward the transcendent. Applying beauty lets us articulate the city of God as a politics qualitatively different than earthly politics.

a. Cavanaugh’s Critique: The Nation-State as an Idol

The nation-state defines the modern vision of politics. Cavanaugh summarizes the concept of the “nation-station” as the notion of a shared culture combined with total political sovereignty (namely a monopoly on the use of violence) in a specific geographic region. The nation-state that Cavanaugh opposes is not the actual institution so much as the myth that justifies its existence. According to this account, the nation-state arose as a sort of religious demilitarized zone in response to the sixteenth and seventeenth century “wars of religion” between Catholics and Protestants. By excluding religion from politics and claiming a monopoly on violence, the nation-state provides social cohesion and

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235 Cavanaugh, Migrations of the Holy, 9–11.
prevents the outbreak of future religious wars. The goal of the nation-state, consequently, is “to secure the noninterference of individuals within each other’s affairs.” A secular state can achieve this noninterference because it is free of any particular religious convictions.

In *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Cavanaugh dismantles this account. He points out, first of all, that historical research does not support the nation-state’s supposed origin. Cavanaugh neither denies that wars occurred, nor does he shift the blame from religion to politics or economics: Catholics fought Protestants. They also fought other Catholics, and Protestants fought other Protestants. Disagreements about doctrine undoubtedly played a role in some conflicts but not a role meaningfully different from any other disagreement. Cavanaugh notes that identifying “religion,” “politics,” or “economics” as the sole or even primary cause of these conflicts assumes that these concepts were distinguishable in Reformation Europe. They were not. What we now call “religion” permeated the whole culture; it was not a distinct sphere of activity. “Religion,” as we apply the term to “the wars of religion,” did not exist in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cavanaugh contends that the creation of the nation-state was the cause of, not the solution to, the so-called “wars of religion.” This narrative says more about the presumptions guiding modern politics. It serves as the “creation myth for modernity” because it explains why modern politics separates the “religious” from the

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236 Ibid., 23.
“secular.”\textsuperscript{238} Indeed, the division of “secular” from “religious,” makes the nation-state possible.\textsuperscript{239}

The bigger myth that Cavanaugh challenges justifies the secular-religious division: the “myth of religious violence.” Cavanaugh defines this myth as “the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from ‘secular’ features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence.”\textsuperscript{240} Cavanaugh disputes the assumption that “religion” is more prone to violence than “secular” ideologies and institutions.\textsuperscript{241} Secular ideologies can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as religious ones, but the state relies on the specter of religious violence to legitimize its monopoly on violence.\textsuperscript{242} The myth of religious violence creates the modern concept of “religion” so that the nation-state can marginalize it.

The marginalization of religion, in fact, was a necessary step in transferring devotion from the church to the nation-state. Cavanaugh re-narrates the “secularization” of the West as a (borrowing John Bossy’s phrase) “migration of the holy.”\textsuperscript{243} He says that the “wars of religion” are better described as “the birth pangs of the state” because they heralded “the transfer of power from church to state.”\textsuperscript{244} With this transfer came the simplification of political space. Over and against medieval society’s web of “complex overlapping loyalties” the nation-state demands total and singular devotion.\textsuperscript{245}

Allegiances to things other than the state (e.g. religions, clans, guilds) are now relegated

\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{243} Cavanaugh, \textit{Migrations of the Holy}, 4.
\textsuperscript{244} Cavanaugh, \textit{The Myth of Religious Violence}, 166.
\textsuperscript{245} Cavanaugh, \textit{Migrations of the Holy}, 19.
to civil society. These groups can lobby for their interests, but the very act of “lobbying” presumes that the state has final authority. Groups within civil society can be “political,” but then they implicitly affirm the absolute authority of the nation-state. In order to fulfill its sole goal, “to secure the noninterference of individuals with each other’s affairs,” the nation-state must possess absolute authority.

Noninterference, however, cannot hold a society together. If the nation-state truly desires to maintain noninterference, then it cannot promote any particular good. And if it cannot promote any particular good, then it certainly cannot promote a common good. “Noninterference” is a negative, privative goal. It is not the presence of anything; it is the absence of something. So what holds the nation-state together? Cavanaugh argues that the nation-state can only produce unity by enforcing noninterference, and the only tool it has to enforce anything is violence. He describes this action as “sacrifice to false gods in war.” Participation in this sacrifice reveals how completely the holy has migrated. Cavanaugh notes that Americans (even those who identify as Christian) are far more willing to kill for their country than for Christ. In other words, the nation-state which supposedly exists in order to restrain inherently violent institutions has made violence into a common good.

Some have questioned Cavanaugh’s critique of the nation-state. Christopher Insole, though supportive of Cavanaugh’s demythologization, thinks he goes too far in criticizing liberalism. In seeing the “liberal state as centralizing, nationalistic, absolutist and violent,” Cavanaugh denies it the right to rule, but Insole asks with what we should

246 Ibid., 31.  
247 Ibid., 23.  
248 Ibid., 42.  
Christopher J. Insole thinks that liberal states do more good than harm. The solution to absolutist, centralized states is more liberalism, not less. Jeffrey Stout, in *Democracy and Tradition*, says that Cavanaugh, like Hauerwas and proponents of radical orthodoxy focuses too much on ideology. Cavanaugh may be right to reject secularist ideology, but the state as it exists in history bears little resemblance to this abstract, intellectual conception. Stout thinks that the secular democratic state does indeed offer a place in which religious pluralism can thrive. Cavanaugh contends, in turn, that Stout’s ambiguous notion of “democracy” cannot account for the evils of American militarism, capitalism, or nationalism the same way that Hauerwas’ critique of “liberalism” can. Ephraim Radner, though having recanted most of his critique of Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence*, still insists that the church needs the nation-state, especially in light of atrocities like the Rwandan genocide. These critics worry that Cavanaugh ignores the goods that liberalism produces, tearing down the nation-state before he has drawn up any plans to replace it.

Cavanaugh, for his part, points out that he is not trying to topple the liberal state. In *The Myth of Religious Violent*, he writes, “I do not wish either to deny the virtues of liberalism nor to excuse the vices of other kinds of social orders” and “I think that the

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251 Ibid., 325.
252 Cavanaugh as a “proponent of radical orthodoxy” is Stout’s characterization, not mine.
254 Ibid., 296–297.
separation of church and state is generally a good thing.”\textsuperscript{257} In \textit{Migrations of the Holy} he writes, “This is not necessarily to say that the nation-state cannot and does not promote and protect some goods, or that any nation-state is entirely devoid of civic virtue, or that some forms of ad hoc cooperation cannot be useful.”\textsuperscript{258} Cavanaugh wants to reorient our vision and our imagination in order to recognize the nation-state for what it truly is: “At its most benign, the nation-state is most realistically likened, as in MacIntyre’s apt metaphor, to the telephone company.”\textsuperscript{259} The nation-state’s denigration of religion is not its greatest sin. More problematic is its tendency to demand more devotion than it deserves.

More often than not we give the nation-state undue devotion. We want it to be a savior, the “keeper of the common good and repository of sacred values.”\textsuperscript{260} But the nation-state is not a savior. Like any worldly tool, it can be used for good or for ill. Mail delivery, Cavanaugh says, is a good thing.\textsuperscript{261} Still, we must “demystify” the nation-state; we must treat it like a telephone company, a mundane bureaucratic structure.\textsuperscript{262} As an institution the nation-state provides goods and services. As a moral formation, on the other hand, the nation-state perverts our theo-political vision.

Idolatry is the real problem and it is idolatry rather then secularization, that describes the current political order.\textsuperscript{263} When we treat the nation-state as a moral formation, we turn it into an idol. The separation of church and state is not inherently idolatrous. Cavanaugh explains that idolatry occurs when the nation-state takes the place

\textsuperscript{257} Cavanaugh, \textit{The Myth of Religious Violence}, 14.
\textsuperscript{258} Cavanaugh, \textit{Migrations of the Holy}, 41–42.
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid., 2.
of religion: “The substitution of the religion of the state for the religion of the church.”

This substitution may not even occur consciously. Cavanaugh remarks that human beings have a weakness for idolatry: “People have a tendency to treat all sorts of things as absolutes.” The nation-state becomes an idol because we grant it the reverence owed to God.

Cavanaugh criticizes American exceptionalism for divinizing the state. He cites, in particular, Michael Novak’s image of the “empty shrine.” According to this picture, America has taken a radically different path than nations of the past by foregoing a state religion. There is no temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus in our capitol. Instead, America has an imaginary empty shrine. Each citizen has the freedom to fill that space with whatever one thinks deserves reverence. The empty shrine symbolizes the state’s goal of noninterference. American democracy is “exceptional” because it has space for every belief and so is the single “key to happiness and peace for the whole world.”

The lack of a common good makes it the ideal system in which people can obtain whatever particular good they desire. This belief imparts a missionary zeal on America to share this “key” by any means necessary. Cavanaugh worries that it makes the state itself a god:

When the shrine is emptied of the biblical God and replaced with a generic principle of transcendence, the danger is that we will not come to worship God but will worship our freedom to worship God. The empty shrine is surreptitiously filled. Our freedom itself becomes an idol, the one thing we will kill and die for.

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265 Ibid., 55–56.
267 Ibid., 93.
268 Ibid.
269 Ibid., 96, my emphasis.
Even if we combine the freedom of the empty shrine with the biblical God, the problem of idolatry remains. Exceptionalism makes the state the vehicle through which we encounter God. The state, knowingly or unknowingly, removes God from the equation: “The state, which represents both the will of God and the will of the people, will come to identify the two.” The nation-state, as the protector and keeper of freedom, takes the place of God. Cavanaugh says the problem is performance: “The problem of idolatry is not one of belief but of behavior…not so much a metaphysical error as misplaced loyalty.” We might not consciously forsake God, but in our willingness to kill and die for the nation-state we treat it as if it were a god. We implicitly pledge loyalty to a different absolute.

We live by a vision of politics in which the nation-state, rather than God, is absolute. In the Foreword to Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen’s *Between the Icon and the Idol*, Cavanaugh explains that the idolatry of modern politics (both Eastern and Western) is the deification of the human self, whether that self be the will, the individual, or the collective self of the state. Marx was wrong in thinking that the state would wither away: “Humans cannot replace God. Once God has been banished, God will necessarily reappear in idolatrous form, a colossal active and personal agent of providence in history.” The root problem, then, is the attempt to separate politics from the “inescapable questions of human nature.” Idolatrous politics, Cavanaugh says, try to deny the theological nature of these questions. Politics become idolatrous by attempting

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270 Ibid., 104.
273 Cavanaugh, “Foreword to.”, x.
to deny this reality “in search of a god without God”\textsuperscript{274} Instead of performing the city of God, we have performed the nation-state. We have made the nation-state into an idol.

The new problem is really the old problem: the nation-state has deified the self. In other words, it is formed by the love of self.

\textit{b. Political Idolatry: Letting the Nation-State Define Our Vision of Politics}

Cavanaugh’s critique leads us to see modern politics as a form of idolatry.

Idolatry, moreover, allows us to address its politics in terms of aesthetics. The nation-state becomes an idol when we make it the primary architect of our moral formation. We do not need to divinize it literally in order to make it such. Diving a little deeper into the concept of idolatry will allow us to apply theo-dramatic ethics more directly to our modern political circumstances.

First of all, idolatry is a fluid concept. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit describe the rejection of idolatry as “an attempt to dictate exclusivity, to map the unique territory of the one God.”\textsuperscript{275} Identifying the idol allows a people to distinguish between God and not-God, non-pagan and pagan, self and other. There are, of course, many ways to talk about God. Halbertal and Margalit, accordingly, examine four biblical views of idolatry: idolatry as betrayal (worshipping alien gods); idolatry as a metaphysical error (a mistaken conception of the true God); idolatry as a worship of an aspect or intermediary (worshiping merely a part of God); and idolatry as alien worship (worshiping the true

\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.

God incorrectly). Whether or not a belief or practice constitutes idolatry depends upon how, why, and where it is performed. Even the golden calf, the classic example of idolatry, epitomizes this ambiguity: was the sin worshipping the wrong god or worshipping the right God incorrectly? In either case, idolatry is more than a negative concept. Idolatry attempts to draw a boundary, and drawing that boundary requires a sense of what lies on either side. Our vision of God determines our definition of idolatry and vice versa.

Concern over idolatry pairs naturally with theological aesthetics. In many ways the distrust of beauty that led to aesthetic theology stems from a legitimate worry about the potential for idolatry. There is something beautiful about every idol, or else idols would not be attractive. The golden calf must have gleamed wonderfully in the sun. Yet aesthetic language helps us to parse out the border between transcendent and idolatrous beauty.

Jean Luc Marion describes idolatry in explicitly aesthetic terms. Though theodramatic ethics does not share his distrust of metaphysics, we can make use of his distinction between idol and icon to articulate the proper performance of visio pacis. In God Without Being, Marion uses idolatry to illustrate how Being confines God to human limits, arguing that we must resituate theology on God’s giving of God’s self. We create an idol, he explains, when we confine our image of God to the limits of human perception--we create an idol at the point at which our gaze stops. No matter what its

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276 Halbertal and Margalit describe capturing this mutuality as the “central aim” of their book Ibid., 241.
277 Ibid., 3.
278 Ibid., 236.
279 Marion is, however, in many ways an inheritor of Balthasar’s approach. For a more detailed account of Balthasar’s influence on Marion, see Tamsin Jones, “Dionysius in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion,” Modern Theology 24, no. 4 (2008): 743–54.
specific form (gilded bovine or abstract idea), the idol is nothing more than the reflection of our gaze.\textsuperscript{280} The idol does not reveal God but our own limits. We do not encounter God in the idol because it \textquotedblleft consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze\textquotedblright.;\textsuperscript{281} The icon, on the other hand, \textquotedblleft provokes\textquotedblright vision.\textsuperscript{282} Instead of setting limits, it \textquotedblleft summons the gaze to surpass itself\textquotedblright.;\textsuperscript{283} An icon still has earthly form—it is the \textquotedblleft visibility of the invisible\textquotedblright—but what makes it an icon rather than an idol is that God’s infinite gaze shines through it.\textsuperscript{284} The icon and the idol, Marion explains, are not two types of things, but two types of behavior, \textquotedblleft two modes of apprehension of the divine in visibility\textquotedblright.;\textsuperscript{285} Whereas the idol only offers us a reflection of ourselves, the icon draws us beyond ourselves.

Marion’s distinction between icon and idol provides a helpful way to distinguish between the nation-state and city of God. If we apply these ideas to Cavanaugh’s critique, we find that the nation-state is the idol to the city of God’s icon. The problem lies, as Marion explains, not in the object itself but in the mode of our apprehension. In Cavanaugh’s argument the nation-state restricts our political vision to an earthly measure: the nation-state itself. Institutions are not the problem. The problem is the mythology that the nation-state uses to justify its own existence. This myth acts as an idol, freezing our political vision rather than provoking it. The performance of the city of God, on the other hand, is an icon. When we contemplate an icon we \textquoteleft become a visible mirror of an invisible gaze that subverts us in the measure of its glory\textquoteright; It transforms us in its glory by

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid., 9.
allowing this glory to shine on our face as its mirror.  

Cavanaugh promotes Augustine’s two-city model in order to draw Christian politics beyond the earthly nation-state measure, in which violence in politics is a given. The city of God does not limit its vision of the political to an earthly measure; as Christians we “belong to a body that is not only international…but is also eternal.” We are part of a transcendent polity. Martyrdom, for example, is victorious because it affirms that “Christ’s victory over death is the only reality.” Martyrdom is iconic, we might say, because we recognize that martyr’s glory is really God’s glory.

c. Christian Politics without Beauty: David Bentley Hart’s Critique of Pacifism

David Bentley Hart’s comments on beauty and Christian politics in The Beauty of the Infinite shows why simply removing beauty from consideration does not safeguard against idolatry. The icon is God’s gaze towards us, which we encounter on earth. Hart, though critical of Marion for diminishing the importance of aesthetic particularity, praises his account of the icon for “beautifully” expressing how the infinite and the finite relate: “The icon is an instance of an infinite regard that is also openly seen—that acts and reveals itself—within the finite; the icon is an aesthetic instance that is also still—and in a sense, for that very reason—infinite.” When we perform the city of God, we become mirrors shining with the reflected glory of God’s infinite gaze. Recognizing the city of God as an icon, therefore, unveils the idolatry of the nation-state and reinforces our political task.

286 Ibid., 22.
287 Cavanaugh, Migrations of the Holy, 65.
288 Ibid., 45.
289 Ibid., 62–63.
Christian political expression cannot limit itself to earthly measures without succumbing to idolatry. Hart argues that Christians cannot strip beauty from their politics without sliding into gnosticism. Christ does not offer us facts or principles “but a way of being in the world.”\textsuperscript{291} Though we may speak of “Christian ethics” as a distinct activity, we cannot excise it from its Christian context. It is an expression, a performance, an “imaginative reappropriation” of our encounter with God’s glory.\textsuperscript{292} Consequently, the church must recognize itself as more than another social institution. Hart describes it as “a new pattern of communal being,” and “an intrusion” upon the secular world.\textsuperscript{293} The church judges the social order as good or ill because it looks upon the world “from the vantage of the kingdom.”\textsuperscript{294} Hart clarifies that he does not envision the church floating above history, directing but never touching. That the church occupies a different vantage point testifies to the fact that a different vision guides it. Whereas the “normal politics of power,” aims to inhibit chaos by means of violent justice, the church rejects justice \textit{qua} reciprocal violence in favor of justice \textit{qua} gift.\textsuperscript{295} Beauty reorients our vision of the world.

Christian politics fail, says Hart, which sever the connection between Christ and the world. He points to realists like Reinhold Niebuhr who presume “the impossibility of justice in human affairs” and so embrace “prudential acts of violence.”\textsuperscript{296} In denying justice, realists deny God’s revelation. Hart wants to dispel the notion that including beauty in politics leads to a naïve politics. “Christian morality is a labor of vision,” he

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{291} Ibid., 338.
\bibitem{292} Ibid., 339.
\bibitem{293} Ibid., 340.
\bibitem{294} Ibid.
\bibitem{295} Ibid.
\bibitem{296} Ibid., 341.
\end{thebibliography}
writes, “to see in all other persons the possibility of discerning and adoring Christ’s form in a new fashion.” It has nothing to do with wishful thinking or utopian fantasies. If the world has been recapitulated in Christ, then the church cannot practice a politics “confined within the canons of taste prescribed by myths of power and eminence.” We encounter Christ in the world and we reflect Christ to the world. Realists’ prudential acts of violence only make sense if prudence has a greater claim on the world than Christ.

Hart levels the same critique against pacifism. Calling it a “passive collaboration with evil that only flatters itself with the name of ‘pacifism,’” Hart contends:

Where the justice of the kingdom is not present, and cannot be made present without any exercise of force, the self-adoring inaction of those who would meet the reality of, say, black smoke billowing from the chimneys of death camps with songs of protest is simply violence by other means, and does not speak of God’s kingdom, and does not grant its practitioners the privilege of viewing themselves as more faithful members of Christ’s body than those who struggle against evil in the world of flesh and blood where evil works.

Both realists and pacifists remove Christ from history. They presume that history is too sinful or too broken for Christ to gain even a toehold. Both, says Hart, are “gnostic” in that both refuse to see any interaction between infinite and finite; neither has room for beauty. The church, on the other hand, strives for a “concrete” and “tangible” peace.

We could dispute Hart’s quick dismissal of pacifism, but his point remains salient: Christian politics, whether nonviolent or violent, succumbs to idolatry if it does not attempt to embody an iconic vision of Christ.

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297 Ibid., 342.  
298 Ibid., 344.  
299 Ibid., 341.  
300 Ibid., 341–342.  
301 David Aers, for instance, takes umbrage with Hart’s castigation of Christian pacifists. For one thing, he thinks Hart so vaguely defines the target of his barbs as to produce a fantasy, a “strikingly univocal homogenization of Christian pacifists,” that itself constitutes an act of rhetorical violence (91). He then points out that Hart does not explain what Christians ought to do. What counts as a “song of protest”? Aers points out that writing “massive metaphysical works on the ontology of violence” in a world marked
d. Conclusion

The value of Cavanaugh’s critique for theo-dramatic ethics lies not in his condemnation of particular institutions but in his recognition that the nation-state distorts our theo-political vision. Christians are commissioned to perform the city of God—to form our society around the love of God—regardless of our circumstances. Cavanaugh concludes his critique of American exceptionalism by noting that in order to resist the lure of the nation-state we need a church whose very presence serves “to test loyalty to any nation-state against loyalty to God.” We cannot see the idolatry of the nation-state without a vision (or at least a sense) of Christian politics. Seeing what makes the nation-state idolatrous helps us to carry out a faithful performance of the city of God. The nation-state threatens this performance not as an institution but as a moral formation. We might even say that the nation-state is the newest manifestation of the earthly city. It is formed, after all, by self-love. When we perform the nation-state, we become the nation-state. Cavanaugh’s picture allows us to better understand its idolatrous lure. Augustine’s conception of the city of God as a moral formation shaped by eternal peace enables us to recognize this misdirected vision. Moreover, it grants us the flexibility to embody that visio pacis in the midst of the nation-state.

by violence is just as fruitless and irresponsible as literally singing (91). Aers acknowledges that Hart seems to have in mind “benevolent military power” (93). Even this action, though, includes a number of implications that Hart does not address: the culture necessary to train people to kill effectively, the probability of collateral damage, etc. In the end, Aers thinks that Hart so glibly rejects a host of positions that his own remarks on the ontology of peace should lead him to support (95). David Aers, “The Beauty of the Infinite: A Question from the Margin,” Theology Today 64, no. 1 (2007): 89–95.

302 Cavanaugh, Migrations of the Holy, 108.
IV. Performing visio pacis

What performing *visio pacis* looks like, especially in the midst of the nation-state, is not clear without some concrete examples. Peace, like beauty, exists only in particular embodiments. The city of God, though imperfect on earth, is not an abstraction or a vague ideal. Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* is a history of the two cities. The city of God has always been and continues to be performed in history. Considering a few ways modern communities have attempted to perform visions of peace will help us to see the possibilities of theo-dramatic ethics. Though we recognize the idolatry of the nation-state, we may still feel powerless in the face of its dominance. Stripped of context, peace as the “tranquility of order” means nothing. There is more than one way to perform *visio pacis*.

The following three illustrations suggest different ways to perform *visio pacis* in a nation-state context and show that we can embody peace through “pacifist” actions—even in the context of the nation-state—in a variety of ways. Theo-dramatic ethics embraces performances of *visio pacis* beside, within/for, and against the nation-state. Le Chambon’s sheltering of Jews during WWII, Martin Luther King’s practically-minded nonviolence, and liberation theology’s attack on structurally evil political systems illustrate these actions respectively. I chose these three examples in particular because their political expressions are not formed by the nation-state idol. Here are three different types of pacifism as “peace making” that are shaped and performed according to a vision of the ideal community. Whether a performance of *visio pacis* ignores the structures of the nation-state (Le Chambon), participates in them (as King did), or opposes them outright (liberation theology), we can still regard it as an embodiment of eternal peace.
a. Beside the Nation-State: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon

During World War II the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in the Haute-Loire department of France saved the lives of approximately five thousand Jews. While the Vichy government cooperated with the Nazi subjugation and deportation of the Jews, these people took in refugees, fed them, sheltered them, taught them, and helped them to flee the country. They did not proselytize; they did not betray. They welcomed and respected those they considered to be the People of God. The degree to which the whole community cooperated in this effort is remarkable. In the historically Huguenot community, says Mordecai Paldiel, “Jews could be found in almost every house.” In fact, the whole Vivarais-Lignon plateau, upon which Le Chambon sits, took part in this rescue. Protestants worked together with Catholics, Darbyites, Swiss Protestants, American Quakers, Evangelicals and Jews. Of this struggle, Patrick Henry says, “No similar ecumenical endeavor has ever been undertaken on French soil.” Not only did they save the lives of thousands, they did so nonviolently.

André Trocmé, the pastor of Le Chambon, was one of the main leaders and primary motivators behind the use of nonviolence. For Trocmé, Jesus’ nonviolence does not make his actions less political or revolutionary. “Nonviolence,” he writes, is not a prohibition, but a commission: “[It is] less a matter of ‘not killing’ and more a matter of

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305 Ibid., 83.
307 Ibid., 11.
showing compassion, of saving and redeeming, of being a healing community.”

Trocmé takes seriously the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the command to love one’s neighbor, and the Old Testament texts on cities of refuge (Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 4 and 19). In a 1940 sermon, Trocmé exhorts his parishioners to respond to violence with “weapons of the spirit,” by which he means that we should “resist whenever our adversaries demand of us compliance contrary to the orders of the Gospels.” Trocmé’s convictions explain both how and why the Chambonnais opened their doors to Jewish refugees. They did so to express a particular vision of what Christians should look like. Philip Hallie, in Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed, says they simply followed their consciences.

Le Chambon illustrates how a community within a nation-state can shape its life toward peace without relying on confrontation. The actions of the Chambonnais expressed their character. They acted the way they did, even at great personal risk, because they had been formed to treat human beings with dignity. This was so much a part of their character that it was almost unconscious. Hallie writes:

If we would understand the goodness that happened in Le Chambon, we must see how easy it was for them to refuse to give up their consciences, to refuse to participate in hatred, betrayal, and murder, and to help the desperate adults and the terrified children who knocked on their doors in Le Chambon…We fail to understand what happened in Le Chambon if we think that for them their actions were complex and difficult.

The people of Le Chambon did not agonize over ethical dilemmas; they had no dilemmas. Hallie recalls that when he interviewed the villagers and praised them for their

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309 Paldiel, Churches and the Holocaust, 114.
310 Quoted in Ibid.
311 Hallie, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed, 10.
312 Ibid., 284.
goodness they often responded with some variation of “How can you call us ‘good’? We were doing what had to be done…And what has all this to do with goodness? Things had to be done, that’s all…It was the most natural thing in the world to help these people.”

The people of Le Chambon did not change. The Occupation did not shock them into recognizing the value of human life; they always valued human life. The only thing that changed was that expressing this value become dangerous. It is this refusal to separate their actions from their characters that is instructive for theo-dramatic ethics.

Their nonviolence, in fact, preceded any confrontation with or rejection of the Vichy. Their politics were confrontational and perhaps even revolutionary, but the Chambonnais were not revolutionaries. They “judged the laws of Vichy in their own ethical courts, their consciences, and found them wrong.” When Vichy officials visited Le Chambon, a group of students told them explicitly that they would not help to identify or to deport Jews. In these actions the people of Le Chambon disobeyed Vichy authority. It is more accurate, however, to say that they obeyed their consciences.

Le Chambon illustrates how a community might embody *visio pacis* in a faithful and political way “beside” the earthly city—without concern for what the nation-state demands or prohibits. The Chambonnais were primarily concerned about obeying their convictions. They were willing to oppose the Vichy, but their goal was not opposition. Certainly they would have liked the Vichy to change their policies. The important point is this: the people of Le Chambon performed their convictions without concern for the state’s response. These actions express a moral formation grounded on a set of beliefs wholly beside (i.e. wholly undetermined) by the Vichy. Their actions, as Hallie admits,

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313 Ibid., 20–21.
314 Ibid., 271.
are not historically significant in a geo-political sense. Le Chambon did not win or lose the war for either side. Yet, for Hallie, Le Chambon represents humankind at its best.

Le Chambon is a performance of peace. Hallie explicitly states that he does not want to make Le Chambon an “‘example’ of goodness or moral nobility.” That is, Hallie does not want to turn Le Chambon into an abstraction. What the people did was unquestionably praiseworthy, but Hallie worries that by focusing too much on their actions, we lose sight of how goodness happened. Le Chambon is not a “good example” in the sense that it provides us with a set of ready-made “ethical” actions. Le Chambon demonstrates that nonviolence does not follow from prohibitions. Nonviolence is not about trying to be political with both hands tied behind your back. With Le Chambon, we see a community guided by and toward peace. Belief leads to moral formation. Le Chambon shows us that nonviolence is a lifestyle, rather than an activity. We do not need to worry about crafting the perfect nonviolent strategies ahead of time. The Chambonnais allowed their beliefs to form their character, which led to courageous actions when extraordinary circumstances arose. If we direct our whole lives toward visio pacis, the right peaceful actions will follow.

b. Within/For the Nation-State: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. regards nonviolence as a strategy for achieving racial integration in the United States. He explains that the oppressed can react to oppression in

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316 Hallie, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed.
317 Ibid., 4.
three ways: acquiescence, violence, and nonviolence. Violence perhaps seems the more heroic approach: whenever we rise up against our oppressors, we follow in the path of epic heroes. Realistically, King says, the enemies of integration would prefer a small group of armed dissidents, for though violent, they are much more easily squashed than a “huge, unarmed but resolute mass of people.” A “persistent and unyielding” mass of people can do far more to shift social mores than a few skirmishes.

Though practically minded, King also sees nonviolence as more than a strategy for social reform. For King, nonviolence is a way of life. Nonviolence attracts devotees because of the “sheer morality of its claim.” King rejects the belief that the ends justify the means, insisting that “the end is preexistent in the means.” Violent means cannot produce a nonviolent end. King is thinking long term, seeking a “positive peace” of justice and brotherhood rather than the “negative peace,” which is merely the “absence of tension.” If our goal is an integrated, positive, constructive community, then we cannot appeal to strategies that only breed tension: “The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness,” whereas the “aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community.” Nonviolence is not a prohibition, but a promoting of a positive vision of community.

319 Ibid., 33.
320 Ibid.
323 Ibid., 50.
The “beloved community” is the guiding vision behind King’s theology of nonviolence. Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr. describe it as “the organizing principle of all of King’s thought and activity.”\textsuperscript{325} Bryan Massingale calls it “the normative ethical vision that guided his movement.”\textsuperscript{326} According to Massingale, this vision plays an indispensable role in guiding King’s praxis. The beloved community is much more than a “lofty utopian ideal;” it is a mandate for justice in the world.\textsuperscript{327} Luther D. Ivory characterizes King’s theology as a theology of “radical involvement” in which theology and ethics are inseparable.\textsuperscript{328} This radical involvement, argues Ivory, follows necessarily from the centrality of the beloved community in King’s thought. It serves as both “ideal vision” and “pragmatic norm,” uniting an eschatological hope and a pragmatic program of action.\textsuperscript{329} When King talks about the coherence of means and ends, the beloved community is the end he has in mind. It is also, then, the means.

King’s ideal community strives for a transcendent vision of peace not only within the nation-state but also for the sake of the nation-state. Practicing the beloved community necessitates reforming the nation-state. King could not “envision the Beloved Community apart from the alleviation of economic inequity and the achievement of economic justice.”\textsuperscript{330}

\textsuperscript{325} Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, \textit{Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.} (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 119.
\textsuperscript{326} Bryan N. Massingale, \textit{Racial Justice and the Catholic Church} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 140.
\textsuperscript{327} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{328} Luther D. Ivory, \textit{Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 133–134.
\textsuperscript{329} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{330} Smith and Zepp, \textit{Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.}, 125.
we must oppose a “morally diseased culture,” that hinders human development by embracing the triple evils of racism, poverty, and war.\footnote{Ivory, Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement, 135.}

Once we recognize that the beloved community is the goal, then our actions must follow suit. King is no less dramatic than Augustine when he describes the end of the earthly city as the hell of eternal conflict: “The choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence; it is either nonviolence or nonexistence.”\footnote{Martin Luther King, Jr., “The American Dream,” in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., Reprint edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003), 215.} Reforming the nation-state follows as a matter of course. In some circumstances this will take the form of “non-cooperation with evil.” Smith and Zepp argue that King views the civil rights movement as a “microcosm” of the beloved community.\footnote{Smith and Zepp, Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr., 121.} Its specific tactics, “the mass boycott, sit-down protests and strikes, sit-ins—refusal to pay fines and bail for unjust arrests—mass marches—mass meetings—prayer pilgrimages,” are attempts to embody the beloved community.\footnote{King, Jr., “The Social Organization of Nonviolence,” 33.} These tactics were shrewdly devised to bear witness to the beloved community.

King’s nonviolence is political ju-jitsu; it redirects the nation-state’s energy to a different goal. The nation-state does not limit King’s vision or his promotion of nonviolence. The nonviolent tactics he promotes do not further its goals—goals like racism, poverty, and war—but facilitate the realization of a cooperative, just, and inclusive community. We can, in other words, use the structures of the nation-state to perform \textit{visio pacis} without letting the nation-state distort our theo-political vision. The actions that King lists are not exhaustive but indicative of the creativity that a community
must foster in order to embody a community grounded on peace within and for the nation-state.335

c. Against the Nation-State: Liberation Theology

Liberation theology points to a community formed against the nation-state. Admittedly, the term “liberation theology” describes a vast and diverse field of theology. Rather than attempt to generalize about the practices of a monolithic entity called “liberation theology,” I will appeal to a single example: Roberto Goizueta’s Christ Our Companion: Towards a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation. Goizueta argues that, despite Balthasar’s criticisms, liberation theology and theological aesthetics are not only complementary, but two sides of the same coin. Both emphasize the “foundational importance of Christian praxis,” and both see belief in Jesus Christ as a “personal conversion and practical conviction.”336 The Cristo Compañero of U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism, the “Christ who is encountered as the most profound reality at the heart of everyday existence,” is the lived practice of what Balthasar calls “seeing the form.”337 Theological aesthetics protects liberation theology from reducing faith to social action and liberation theology protects theological aesthetics from equating God’s transcendence with the “regnant social order.”338 Most importantly for our purposes, Goizueta contends that liberation theology bases its praxis upon the particularity of Christ’s form, most clearly seen “in the lived faith of the poor.”339

335 Ibid.
336 Goizueta, Christ Our Companion, 6.
337 Ibid., 109.
338 Ibid., 148.
339 Ibid., 118.
The praxis of liberation theology stands against the dominant political forms of the modern world. Goizueta explains that the crucified and risen Christ reorients our approach to social justice. We cannot “coerce justice or impose the truth” through violence or political domination.\(^\text{340}\) To force the Christ-form upon someone would obscure its gratuitous quality. Drawing from the work of David Bentley Hart, Goizueta explains that *Cristo Compañero* expresses the difference between Christ and the world in positive rather than negative terms. Whereas modern politics connects difference with violence and struggle, a community rooted in Christ affirms difference: “Not in order to assert the inevitability of conflict or power struggles, but, on the contrary, in order to insist on the possibility (and imperative) of a reconciliation that recognizes the beauty of that difference.”\(^\text{341}\) The appropriate response to the crucified and risen Christ is solidarity, not as the romanticization of victimization, but as communion with the victim.

Goizueta’s theological aesthetics of liberation posits a church in solidarity with the poor as an alternative to political systems that rely on domination. Latino/a popular Catholicism embraces the image of the battered, bleeding Christ.\(^\text{342}\) Indeed, the church as the body of Christ has often been “the only viable political counterbalance to military and economic elites.”\(^\text{343}\) It does this by recognizing the Christ-form at the margins of society.\(^\text{344}\) The preferential option for the poor turns a politics based on domination on its head. The notion of the border, the frontier is “the foundational myth of modernity” says Goizueta.\(^\text{345}\) Frontiers demand to be conquered, and borders plead to be expanded, but

\(^\text{340}\) Ibid., 34.  
\(^\text{341}\) Ibid., 119–120.  
\(^\text{342}\) Ibid., 81.  
\(^\text{343}\) Ibid., 116.  
\(^\text{344}\) Ibid., 126.  
\(^\text{345}\) Ibid., 130.
when we recognize that the margins and the marginalized most closely reflect Christ, the border no longer call us to conquest. Goizueta writes:

A transmodern Christianity will privilege one particular social location—the borderland—whose residents, as *excluidos*, most fully reveal the “absolutely absolute Other,” thereby safeguarding the transcendence of God over against the ever-present tendency to identify God with historical success and conquest.  

Domination has no place in this “transmodern Christianity.” Liberation theology does not categorically reject violence. It does, in this reorientation, enable us to see more clearly the violent underpinnings of particular social structures. For Goizueta, Latino/a popular Catholicism stands against a politics of domination as an alternative politics, one based upon solidarity with the marginalized. Liberation theology illustrates that a community can stand against the nation-state, not as an opponent in battle, but as an alternative concrete community.

V. Conclusion

Christians ought to approach pacifism as working toward something positive rather than as avoiding something negative. It is important, consequently, to note that the above three illustrations cannot be generalized or universalized. Each community expresses its moral formation through its particularity. My point in appealing to these illustrations is to show that a community based upon *visio pacis* can perform peace in a variety of ways, even in the midst of a nation-state based upon violence. Moreover, it shows that a theo-dramatic ethics, though striving towards Augustine’s articulation of *visio pacis*, does not necessarily need to predict what specific actions will follow outside of the concrete, particular circumstances of its performance. The variety of performances

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346 Ibid., 155.
seen here illustrates just that; even under the same general circumstances (idolatrous nation-state) communities can express peace in a variety of ways. They may all have a similar prohibition against violence, but they only converge in the *visio pacis*. 
CHAPTER IV: PERFORMING RECEPTIVITY TO CREATION

I. Introduction

Theo-dramatic ethics does not wallow in abstraction. While the Christ-form is absolute, we only learn it and perform it in the particular. Theo-dramatic ethics does not—and cannot—offer the world an abstract Christ-form. Chapter three contemplated how Christians might embody the Christ-form in their interactions with the nation-state. I argued that appealing to Augustine as an archetype helps Christians to embody the Christ-form these interactions. In this chapter I turn to the interaction between human beings and the natural world.

II. Formed by Bonaventure: Receptivity to Christ is Receptivity to Creation

a. Bonaventure as an Archetype

How do Christians formed by beauty act toward non-human animals? I suggest that we start by looking to a Christian who has already answered this question. Bonaventure has always been influential. He has also been misused and misunderstood.1 His style is not easily accessible to the modern reader.2 I will not offer a comprehensive account of his theology nor will I chart how this theology developed over the course of his career. Though worthwhile endeavors, they are not the ones I will pursue here.

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1 Hughes, “Bonaventure Contra Mundum?” One notices attempts to fit Bonaventure into a single category, e.g. “conservative” or “Neo-Platonist” or “Augustinian.”
2 Dominic Monti, in the preface to his translation, notes some of these difficulties: “The [Breviloquium] is packed with technical medieval terms that seem like meaningless jargon to many contemporary readers unfamiliar with Scholastic categories,” Bonaventure, Breviloquium, ed. Robert J. Karris, trans. Dominic Monti (Franciscan Institute, 2005), x.
Rather, I will make the case that Bonaventure forms Christians to respond to the beauty of creation.

Using Bonaventure as an archetype allows us to follow his example without constraining our theology to his corpus. “Archetype” is not a license to ignore all historical considerations. Hughes shows that we cannot uphold the tradition’s plurality if we do not engage historical figures on their own terms. I look to Bonaventure as an “archetype” in order to draw attention to his place in that tradition. As part of the tradition—indeed, as part of the body of Christ—Bonaventure’s theology has formational value for all Christians. He expresses exceptionally well what Christians believe about the natural world. Drawing primarily on the *Breviloquium*, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, and *Legenda maior*, I argue that Bonaventure’s theology encourages receptivity and beneficence to non-human animals. First, I show that receptivity to beauty is central to Bonaventure’s theology. Second, I demonstrate that this receptivity includes receptivity to the natural world. Third, I conclude that moral formation—actual, earthly beneficence to animals—follows as the embodiment of this receptivity. I will not attempt to offer a comprehensive account of his theological aesthetics or his theology of creation, but will touch briefly on the way Bonaventure’s vision of creation follows from the centrality he grants to beauty and then consider how this connection shapes Christian moral formation. Receptivity to the Christ-form forms Christians to be receptive to animals, which entails treating them with love and embracing modern insights into their biology and behavior. I will conclude the chapter by offering a picture of how Christians formed in this manner might offer the Christ-form to the modern world, in light of a practice definable by its lack of receptivity: factory farming.
b. Balthasar Finds Beauty in Bonaventure

Theology must have a place for beauty. Balthasar states: “Only beautiful theology, that is, only theology which, grasped by the glory of God, is able to transmit its rays, has the chance of making any impact in human history by conviction and transformation.”\(^3\) Theology can express the beauty of God’s revelation without using aesthetic terminology and without articulating a specific aesthetics.\(^4\) For instance, Balthasar thinks Shakespeare and Bernanos understand and express God’s glory through theatre and literature. The pertinent concern, therefore, in choosing a “beautiful” archetype is knowing what makes a theology beautiful. For Balthasar, the way a theology expresses beauty has more to do with its fundamental orientation to revelation than with its technical appraisal of aesthetics. Balthasar’s own commentary on Bonaventure reveals that he is much more concerned with how beauty—implicitly or explicitly recognized as a transcendental—orients Seraphic Doctor’s whole theological enterprise than with whether he defines beauty. Bonaventure’s theology illustrates how placing beauty at the center of theology—how applying beauty to formation—affects the way we engage the natural world (both in the way we find the Christ-form in it and in the way we offer the Christ-form to it). Bonaventure’s appreciation of creation follows directly from the central place he grants to beauty.

We must begin, then, by explaining the role of beauty in Bonaventure’s theology. Excluding Balthasar’s commentary in GL2, few studies have proposed anything close to

\(^{4}\) “While often in Christian world-views great aesthetic values are certainly incorporated, they do not always crystallize into an original, theological aesthetics,” Ibid., 21.
a unified theory of beauty in Bonaventure’s theology. Balthasar even admits, “Bonaventure nowhere offers a developed treatise on the beautiful.” Understanding the role of beauty in Bonaventure’s theology requires more than cataloguing his use of aesthetic terms. As Emma Spargo points out, although Bonaventure frequently uses aesthetic vocabulary, this use “is no justification for proposing that his entire frame of thought was of an aesthetic trend.” The role of beauty extends deeper than Bonaventure’s use of the word “beauty.”

What makes Bonaventure’s theology beautiful is not the presence or absence of a treatise on beauty, but his approach to the practice and the content of theology. Among the scholastics, Balthasar explains, Bonaventure “offers the widest scope to the beautiful…because he clearly [in his frequent use of aesthetic concepts] gives expression to his innermost experience and does this in new concepts that are his own.” Balthasar may or may not have identified beauty as the fourth transcendental.

Balthasar follows Karl Peter in claiming, “The beautiful can effectively be shown to be a transcendental property of all being [in Bonaventure], both inductively through its...
presence in all categories of being and deductively from some occasional remarks.”

Bonaventure’s theology is a theological aesthetics because it recognizes that God is beauty.

Balthasar explains that Bonaventure’s “fundamental experience” is one of ecstasy. Bonaventure offers a theological aesthetics because his theology conveys humility before the overpowering experience of God’s beauty. It is “an experience of overpowering by the fullness of reality, like a sea that emanates gloriously from the depths of God, eternally flowing and not to be restrained.”

Oleg Bychkov describes this experience as humility in the face of the superabundance of reality. Balthasar remarks that for Bonaventure, “There is something defeated from the very start; theology is an imposing upon that which is not to be imposed upon.”

The goal of theology is ecstatic in the root sense of that word: being drawn out of oneself. We experience the same thing when confronting an artistic masterpiece: “The message of a work of art will be truly grasped only by the one who is delighted and carried out of himself by it.” Bonaventure offers various schemata and categories to help his readers understand the theological significance of reality, but he does not offer them as absolutes. The superabundance of revelation necessitates that we eventually transcend theological categories. Only in being overpowered by God’s expression do we understand that expression. We do not grasp beauty; beauty grasps us.

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12 Ibid., 263.
13 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 270.
17 Balthasar writes, “The dizzying pyramids of concepts frequently lack a final necessity: that is to say, they do not satisfy the need for fullness, and it is often the case that a lower degree leads itself to the last stage in a way which is not really surpassed in the subsequent higher degrees.” Ibid., 266.
According to Balthasar, Bonaventure puts a Franciscan spin on traditional theological aesthetics. He explains that “at a superficial level” Bonaventure’s “beautiful” theology appears to be nothing more than “a mere interweaving of the threads of tradition.”

We can easily see the influence of Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, the Victorines, Anselm, Bernard, and Joachim of Fiore. At the same time, Bonaventure’s perspective is uniquely Franciscan. Balthasar explains:

His world is Franciscan, and so is his theology, however many stones he may use to erect his spiritual cathedral over the mystery of humility and poverty…And yet, when we have established that the Franciscan mystery is the centre that crystallizes all, we have not yet uncovered the ethos that is peculiar to Bonaventure. For Bonaventure does not only take Francis as his centre: he is his own sun and his mission.  

Francis is the “organising centre” that ties all these influences together and makes Bonaventure’s contribution more than the sum of their parts.

Balthasar sums up Bonaventure’s Franciscan theological aesthetics with the terms expressio and impressio. In these two terms “the relationship between object and subject is made clear, and here we find the basic concepts that characterise the whole of Bonaventure’s aesthetics, distinguishing him from the tradition.” Bonaventure uses expressio and impressio to describe the crucified seraph and the stigmata of Francis. The seraph, the object of Francis’ contemplation, “expresses himself by impressing himself.” Francis, the subject, then expresses God’s revelation through his stigmata only after God’s expression (the seraph) has impressed himself onto Francis. Francis,

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19 “Of all the great scholastics, Bonaventure is the one who offers the widest scope to the beautiful in his theology: not merely because he speaks of it most frequently, but because he clearly thereby gives expression to his innermost experience and does this in new concepts that are his own,” Ibid., 260–261.  
20 Ibid., 263.  
21 Ibid.  
22 Ibid., 271.  
23 Ibid.
though, has already made himself receptive to this impression. His “inflamed love” makes him like “soft wax” ready to receive God’s impressing seal. That seal, the clearest expression of God in Francis, is the stigmata.

Balthasar concludes that we can see Bonaventure’s recognition of beauty most clearly in his treatment of the cross, where he explains that there is a beautiful ugliness about the cross; in the most wretched form, the greatest beauty—which is to say the greatest expression of God—is disclosed. On the cross we see the expression of humility, poverty, and love. Humility, in that Christ surrenders everything for the sake of love, is the perfect expression of God’s love. It expresses poverty in the sense of simplicity. Franciscan poverty is not lack for the sake of lack, but simplicity for the sake of love. Poverty, in other words, “is a making room, so that the descending ray of God’s love as beauty…may find no hindrance.” In the poverty that love inspires, we open ourselves up to God’s impressio by making ourselves into the soft wax to receive God’s impressio. We imitate Christ’s poverty out of love so that the expression of God’s love might make us into expressions of God’s expression. Balthasar concludes, “[Bonaventure’s] sole concern is with the movement of love in the nuptial kiss of the cross between the God who has become poor and the man who has become poor.”

Before we receive God’s impression we must be receptive to God’s expression. In highlighting the concepts of expressio and impressio, Balthasar makes the case that beauty sits at the center of Bonaventure’s theology because receptivity to the “overpowering experience” is the foundation of Christian life.

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24 Ibid., 271–272.
25 Ibid., 354.
26 Ibid., 356–357.
27 Ibid., 356.
28 Ibid., 357.
Oleg Bychkov supports Balthasar’s reading of Bonaventure. In *Aesthetic Revelation*, he asks whether or not Balthasar imposes a modern conception of beauty onto ancient and medieval theology. Ancient and medieval aesthetics, he explains, are often “strictly analogical.” They use aesthetic language to refer to abstract concepts—the perfect equality of the trinity, Christ’s *species* as the Son, or the fittingness of salvation—with “no reference to actual [i.e. sensible] aesthetic experience.” Modern aesthetics, on the other hand, deal primarily with sensible experiences. It is the modern sense that Balthasar seems to have in mind when he talks about aesthetics. Bychkov points out, however, that medieval theologians do not reject the revelatory quality of sense experience. They hold that our appreciation of earthly beauty depends upon our prior appreciation of metaphysical beauty. In Bonaventure we see a “deeper interest in sensible and aesthetic experience.” This interest is part of what Balthasar thinks makes Bonaventure so unique. Bychkov adds that we should not think of Bonaventure as an oddity. He is part of a “unified, continuous tradition in aesthetics” stretching from Plato and Cicero though Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and the Victorines. Beauty, for Bonaventure, refers to “the capacity of reality to manifest and reveal the beyond.” His aesthetics includes the same concern for the sensible and the revelatory as modern aesthetics.

Bychkov concludes that Balthasar’s reading of ancient and medieval sources is “essentially correct.” The differences between his aesthetics and theirs amount to

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30 Ibid., 270–271.  
31 Ibid., 46–47.  
32 Ibid., 310.  
33 Ibid., 278.  
34 Ibid., 311.  
35 Ibid., 323.
“transformations and changes in terms of terminology, precision, and the understanding
of such foundational categories as ‘transcendental.’”36 Bychkov finds that “revelatory
aesthetics can therefore be considered a fundamental feature of Western European
thought.”37 We can only deny that Bonaventure has a theological aesthetics if we hold to
a very narrow definition of “aesthetics.” If we regard “aesthetics” as using sensible
experiences or aesthetic analogies to make a theological point, then Balthasar’s reading is
correct.

Bonaventure’s theology is “beautiful” in that it lets revelation shape its form; it is
first and foremost receptive. Receptivity, I proffer, sums up the attitude underlying
Balthasar’s preferred categories to describe Bonaventure’s aesthetics, expressio and
impressio. Receptivity explains how beauty is central to his theology. Bonaventure’s
receptivity to the natural world points out why and how we must be rigorously receptive
to God through God’s works; even the smallest particle of creation demands our
attention. We must, as Balthasar says, be overpowered “by the fullness of reality.”38

c. Receptivity to Creation in Bonaventure

Bonaventure’s doctrine of creation explains this receptivity. Balthasar focuses on
Francis as the pinnacle of expressio-impressio, but this theme infuses all of
Bonaventure’s theology. In regard to creation (both God’s act and the product of that act)
expression is a vital concept. Bonaventure describes the “sum total of our metaphysics”

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid. Bychkov specifies that one must accept a broad definition of “aesthetics”: “If one
understands ‘aesthetics’ as theology, philosophy, or hermeneutics that uses aesthetic experience (in its
modern understanding) or analogies with aesthetic phenomena in order to make philosophical or
theological points, then aesthetics is certainly present in both Antiquity and the Middle Ages.”
as “emanation, exemplarity, and consummation.” All things emanate from God as their source. In emanating, all things are modeled after the divine exemplar. Zachary Hayes explains that “all things are analogies” because they all “bear the mark of their divine origin.” Since all things emanate from the divine exemplar, all things find consummation in their return to God. Although these three are inseparable (e.g. consummation implies exemplarity implies emanation), Hayes contends that exemplarity plays the most important role in Bonaventure’s metaphysics. After all, exemplarity allows us to follow all things back to God. The Word is the perfect expression of the Father, which is to say that the Word is God as expression. The Word, then, as the exemplar is the pattern of every expression, which is to say that all created things are expressions of God. To be receptive to God, in this schema, we must be receptive to all of creation.

Bonaventure’s use of reductio, the technique of tracing all things back to God, demonstrates his receptivity. J. Guy Bougerol, for instance, stresses that the reductio “is not merely a technique—it is the soul of the return to God…To reduce, then, the truth of any judgment amounts to bring back this judgment, from condition to condition, to the eternal reasons upon which it is established.” The reductio is the ascent to God. It includes “God’s immediate collaboration,” since God is the source of the truths that one seeks to retrace. To fail to trace something all the way back to God would be to repeat

43 Ibid.
Lucifer’s sin.\textsuperscript{44} Lucifer was not receptive to the fullness of God’s revelation, Bonaventure says, because he was not “led back from the knowledge of creatures to the unity of the Father.”\textsuperscript{45} Receptivity to creation is receptivity to God. We cannot cut off our receptivity too soon. No matter how much we may think we embrace physical forms of beauty, we do not understand creation unless we understand it as God’s expression. \textit{Reductio} leads us to this understanding. If we do not see creation as God’s expression, then we do not see it for what it truly is and cannot be formed by it. Tracing all things back to God is a contingent part of embodying the Christ-form.

\textit{Reductio} acknowledges the power of God’s \textit{expressio} to leave God’s \textit{impressio} on us. Though we seem to be the ones doing the work of the retracing, we are simply expressing God’s impression on us. The fact that we can retrace at all is made possible by God’s impression (as the example of Francis makes clear).\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Reductio} signifies our receptivity to created things. Appropriately then, we can use \textit{reductio} in a variety of ways. Though every \textit{reductio} ends at the same conclusion—God—each use takes a unique path back to God since each thing is a unique expression of God. Dominic Monti, for instance, explains that Bonaventure uses \textit{reductio} in two ways: in the \textit{Breviloquium} he uses it deductively, whereas in the \textit{Itinerarium mentis in Deum} he uses it inductively.\textsuperscript{47} The \textit{Breviloquium} begins by affirming that God is the First Principle and then goes on to explain how we can deduce the truths of the Christian faith from this foundation. The \textit{Itinerarium}, in contrast, begins with sense experience and then traces those experiences

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\item \textsuperscript{44} Hughes explains that Bonaventure rejected curiosity that failed to follow an object of study back to God: “To linger in the knowledge of passing things is to end prematurely, to turn off the path and be beguiled,” Hughes, “Bonaventure Contra Mundum?,” 388.
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{Hexaë}. 1.17
\item \textsuperscript{47} Dominic Monti, “Introduction,” in \textit{Breviloquium}, ed. Robert J. Karris (Franciscan Institute, 2005), xxxv.
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back to God. While the *Breviloquium* interprets our experiences of creation through our faith in God, the *Itinerarium* interprets God through our experiences of creation. Monti, building on an observation from Jean Gerson, notes: “These two works present different but complementary ways of coming to know God.”

Receptivity defines the way Bonaventure thinks humans ought to interact with the natural world. This position is not an anomaly in Bonaventure’s thought. Receptivity to creation is part of his overarching receptivity to God’s *expressio-*impressio. Bychkov explains that according to Balthasar, Bonaventure’s theology is “aesthetic” because “it is based on seeing and wonder at the sight of the vastness of reality, or God’s revelation.” Bonaventure’s use of *reductio* is a contingent part of this receptivity. In regard to creation itself, the revelatory power that Bonaventure grants sense experience follows from his metaphysics; all creation reflects the creator.

Whereas the *Breviloquium* explains how our faith shapes our receptivity to the natural world, the *Itinerarium* teaches us how to be receptive to God’s expression in creation. Finally, Bonaventure’s biography of Saint Francis, the *Legenda maior*, offers us a portrait of a man whose reverence and beneficence towards animals embodies this formational receptivity to creation. Bonaventure’s theology shows us how to embody the Christ-form in relation to the natural world by demonstrating formational receptivity to God’s expression in creation.

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48 Ibid.
i. Breviloquium: Faith Shapes Receptivity to Creation

The *Breviloquium* is a textbook for beginning theologians. It covers the most important topics of Christian theology and its structure roughly follows the narrative of salvation history (God, creation, fall, incarnation, salvation, final judgment). In this regard it also follows Bonaventure’s Neoplatonic metaphysics of *exitus* and *reditus*. As noted above, Bonaventure employs the *reductio* in a deductive manner in the *Breviloquium*, explaining how the truths of the Christian faith follow rationally from the belief that God is the First Principle. Admittedly, the power of this argument turns on whether or not one has faith in God. Bonaventure plainly states:

> Scripture does not take its starting point in human inquiry; rather it flows from divine revelation…Hence, no one can begin to comprehend it, unless that person has first been infused with faith in Christ.

Moreover:

> The procedure of Sacred Scripture—unlike the other sciences—is not confined by the laws of reasoning, defining, or making distinctions, nor is it limited to only one aspect of the universe. Rather, it proceeds, by supernatural inspiration, to give us human wayfarers as much knowledge as we need to achieve salvation.

We must understand Bonaventure’s account of creation with this condition in mind. The *Breviloquium* gives the budding theologian a rational and scientific picture of the natural world, but one that presumes belief in God as the First Principle. The deductive *reductio*

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50 Regarding his motivation for writing the *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure notes, “Beginning theologians often dread Sacred Scripture itself, feeling it to be as confusing, disordered, and uncharted as some impenetrable forest…I will summarize not all the truths of our faith, but some things that are more opportune [for such students] to hold” (*Brev*. Prol.6.5).
51 Monti, “Introduction.”
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid., Prol.3.
in the *Breviloquium* demonstrates why we must be receptive to creation as God’s expression if we believe in a God who creates.\(^{55}\)

Bonaventure begins by explaining the relationship between God and creation. All created things are expressions of God because God is the creator. Bonaventure writes, “The entire world machine was brought into existence in time and from nothing by one First Principle, unique and supreme, whose power, though immeasurable, has arranged all things in measure, number, and weight.”\(^{56}\) Since God is the sole creator, all creatures relate to God as their efficient, exemplary, and final cause.\(^{57}\) All creatures, by virtue of being created, are *vestigia* or “footprints” of God.\(^{58}\) These vestiges express God in that every creature is “one, true, and good; limited, beautiful, and well ordered; and has measure, distinct existence [number], and weight.”\(^{59}\) Though the degree of resemblance to God will differ, everything is a footprint. Bonaventure writes:

Even though the first principle is immense and without limits, incorporeal and invisible, eternal and changeless, it is nevertheless the principle of things spiritual and corporeal, natural and gratuitous, and thus also of all things mutable, sentient, and limited. Through these things it reveals itself and makes itself known, even though in itself it is immutable, immaterial, and infinite. In a general way it manifests itself and makes itself known through all of the effects that emanate from it, so that we say that it exists through essence, power, and presence, extending itself to all created thing.\(^{60}\)

If even the smallest part of creation lacked a trace of God, then God would not be the First Principle, the origin from which all things emanate. If we believe that God is the creator, then we must affirm every part of creation as an expression of God.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., xlviii-xlx.

\(^{56}\) *Brev.*, 2.1.1.

\(^{57}\) *Brev.*, 2.1.4.

\(^{58}\) *Brev.*, 2.1.2.

\(^{59}\) *Brev.*, 2.1.4. These three triads refer respectively to efficient, exemplary, and final cause.

\(^{60}\) *Brev.*, 1.5.2.
Bonaventure’s deductions in the *Breviloquium* rely on the belief that creatures express God. Concerning the manner of creation, Bonaventure explains, “It was *most fitting* that [all things] should come into being in such a way that their very production might *reflect* these same attributes or perfections.”  

Bonaventure refers to power, wisdom, and goodness. If God possesses these perfectly, then the manner in which God produces creation must express them. Why, for instance, did God create the world over seven days instead of one, or a single moment? Bonaventure offers three reasons:  

Now God could have done all of these things simultaneously, but preferred to accomplish them over a succession of times. First of all, this would serve as a clear and distinct manifestation of God’s power, wisdom, and goodness. Secondly, there was a fitting correspondence between these operations and having various ‘days’ or times. Finally, the primal production of the world ought to contain the seeds of all things that would later be accomplished, as a prefiguration of future ages.  

Bonaventure does not place any limitations upon God. God could have created the world in a single instant. The fact that God created the world over seven days indicates that a seven-day creation must better express God’s power, wisdom, and goodness. The seven-day creation, after all, is what God “preferred.” Bonaventure accepts the world as he finds it because the world is God’s expression. To some degree, Bonaventure’s specific conclusions matter less than the way he goes about making those conclusions. Bonaventure does not trouble himself with possible worlds, but asks how *this* world expresses God.  

Bonaventure’s approach to the world has greater value for us than his specific conclusions regarding the physical universe, though we should by no means ignore those conclusions. We must always be careful to give primacy to Bonaventure’s faith. For

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61 *Brev.*, 2.2.2., my emphasis.
62 *Brev.*, 2.2.5.
instance, Hugh Feiss advises modern readers not to stumble over the ways Hugh of St. Victor’s cosmology contradicts our scientific understanding of the world, noting in the introduction to his translation of Hugh’s *De tribus diebus*: “[Hugh] marvels in a systematic way at the immensity, beauty and utility of the natural world.”63 Hugh describes the world using the prevailing science of his day. Similarly, Bonaventure applies the prevailing cosmology of his time (Platonic-Aristotelian, Ptolemaic) in order to describe the world as accurately as possible. Although he presumes things about the universe that we now know to be inaccurate—three heavens, seven spheres of planets, four elemental natures—his presumptions reveal the desire to discover the theological significance of the actual, physical universe. He writes, “If physical nature was to be complete in itself, reflecting the manifold wisdom of the First Principle, there had to be a multiplicity of forms.”64 Whether or not there are seven spheres of planets is secondary to the fact that creation reflects the “manifold wisdom” of God. Bonaventure may have been wrong about the seven spheres, but the universe still contains a multiplicity of forms.

I do not, by any means, discount the importance of modern scientific inquiry for theology. Neither, I would contend, does Bonaventure. On the contrary, his doctrine of creation offers a lens through which to discern the theological significance of scientific data. Hayes, addressing the compatibility of Bonaventure with modern science, affirms the importance of modern science for providing empirical data. He also cautions us that whatever worldview this information implies must remain open to “a framework of value and of ultimate meaning which is not accessible to the sciences as such but is crucial for

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64 *Brev.*, 2.3.2.
the successful living out of human life.\textsuperscript{65} Physical data cannot comment on the significance of the world.

Bonaventure provides just such a “framework of value” in the \textit{Breviloquium}. He explains the theological significance of physical reality, as he understands it, in terms of faith. His explanation does not dictate the way physical processes must occur. Rather, it elucidates how the world, as it actually exists, expresses God. Bonaventure starts from faith then asks what light this framework sheds on the world. He writes:

In order that there be perfect order and repose in things, all of them must be led back to one principle, which has to be first so that it might grant rest to other things, and which must be most perfect so that it might perfect all the others.\textsuperscript{66}

What, Bonaventure asks, does our belief in God as First Principle tell us about the true significance of every last speck of creation? We cannot understand creation unless we understand it in these terms, but we must let the content of God’s expression (creation itself) guide our apprehension of it.

On the other hand, Bonaventure also specifies that God created the world for the sake of human beings. He describes human beings as the “consummation” of creation.\textsuperscript{67} In the prologue to the \textit{Breviloquium}, he describes human beings as the “microcosm...for whose sake the larger world was created.”\textsuperscript{68} As the microcosm we stand at the midpoint of creation; in the human the corporeal and the spiritual unite and so sum up the whole scope of creation.\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, in the final consummation all creation will be carried up with human beings into God (albeit as “ideas”).\textsuperscript{70} This privileged position might seem to

\textsuperscript{66} Bonaventure, \textit{Breviloquium}, 2.1.3.
\textsuperscript{67} Brev., 2.10.2.
\textsuperscript{68} Brev., Prol.2.2.
\textsuperscript{69} Brev., 2.10.3.
\textsuperscript{70} Brev., 7.4.7.
counter the notion that we must be receptive to the rest of creation. Indeed, we seem to possess the kind of self-evident supremacy that lends itself to control.

Nevertheless, Bonaventure makes plain the necessity that we be receptive to creation in his description of creation as a “book.” At the end of his discussion of creation in the Breviloquium, he concludes, “The created world is a kind of book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity.” The book metaphor Bonaventure adopted from earlier theologians like Hugh. Here we have the clearest indication of how Bonaventure thinks human beings ought to be receptive to creation as God’s expression. The book image makes it clear that God did not create the world for our despoliation. Bonaventure elaborates, “The First Principle made this sensible world in order to make itself known, so that the world might serve as a footprint and mirror to lead humankind to love and praise God.” The primary “value” of creation for human beings lies in its ability to reveal God. Before the fall humans could read the “book of creation” with ease. Now, however, we must re-learn to read. Creation reveals the Trinity “at three different levels of expression: as a vestige, as an image, and as a likeness.” These three levels refer to creatures’ proximity to God. A vestige indicates by the fact of its existence the presence of the one, true, and good God. An image, however, possesses memory, understanding, and will (rational creatures are images) and so reflects God more accurately than vestiges. A likeness, finally, possesses God “within itself as an infused gift” and so reflects God in its faith, hope, and love. These three levels are not arbitrary: “Through these successive levels, comparable to steps, the human intellect is designed to

71 Brev., 2.12.1.
72 Brev., 2.11.2.
73 Brev., 2.12.4.
74 Brev., 2.12.1.
75 Brev., 2.12.3.
ascend gradually to the supreme Principle, which is God.” Bonaventure elaborates, must look for God outside the self, inside the self, and above the self, yet we cannot do anything without faith. For although “endowed with a triple eye” (another image from Hugh) to see these three levels, that which allows us to see what is above (the eye of contemplation) does not function except “through grace and faith and the understanding of Scriptures.” Though we must be receptive, God must first enable our receptivity. We are blind without faith.

Creation is always God’s expression, but we only recognize it as such when we have received faith. Creation is the expression of the triune God. Whether a creature reflects God as a vestige, image, or likeness depends upon the degree to which that creature reflects the Trinity. Bychkov notes that one must share Bonaventure’s trinitarian and Christological principles in order even to recognize his theological aesthetics.

Indeed, Jay Hammond argues that knowledge of the Trinity affects the way we understand sense experience. We can recognize creation’s beauty without faith (without the eye of contemplation), but we do not see its depths. Denys Turner says this experience is like a person with no paleographical skills trying to read an illuminated manuscript: “The beauty itself says something to them, but they cannot decipher the words.” Bonaventure considers the Christian faith, which he spells out in the Breviloquium, essential for seeing God in creation. He refers to the need for “grace and

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76 Brev., 2.12.1.
77 Brev., 2.12.5.
78 Brev., 2.12.5.
79 Bychkov, Aesthetic Revelation, 268.
faith and the understanding of the Scriptures.” Faith allows us to be truly receptive to creation because it enables us to retrace every bit of creation back to God. We can only consciously recognize that creation has the power to reveal God from a standpoint of faith. Not only do we thereby recognize creation as God’s expression, we learn from it by letting it speak for itself.

**ii. Itinerarium mentis in Deum: Receptivity to Creation Shapes Formation**

The *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* is one of Bonaventure’s “spiritual” or “mystical” works. (Bonaventure’s theology is typically divided into three categories corresponding to the early, middle, and late periods of his career: scholastic works such as the *Breviloquium*, spiritual works such as the *Itinerarium*, and lectures such as the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*.) While these categories are useful in some respects, they suggest greater differences between Bonaventure’s works than actually exist. For instance, although the *Itinerarium* employs a more meditative, mystical style than the *Breviloquium*, its theology does not deviate significantly from the earlier, scholastic work. In fact the *Itinerarium* outlines in detail the ascent Bonaventure only alludes to in *Breviloquium* II.12.1. Bonaventure models the *Itinerarium* after Francis’ ascent, specifically his vision of the seraph. The six-stages consist of learning to see God “through” and “in” (*per* and *in*) vestiges, images, and likenesses. Since vestiges refer to

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82 Brev., 2.12.5.
85 Itin., Prol.2-3.
86 Beyond the first three steps, which explain how we see God through and in vestiges and at least through images, the exact organization of the *Itinerarium* is somewhat unclear. While most agree that Bonaventure discusses vestiges, images, and likenesses, scholars disagree regarding where this discussion falls in the text. The ambiguity revolves around the fact that Bonaventure does not always clearly
the external created world, I limit my discussion here to the first two steps: seeing God through and in vestiges. The *Itinerarium*, as a result, helps to flesh out what receptivity to creation entails.

The *Itinerarium* is not an apologetic text; Bonaventure does not argue that seeing God through and in vestiges will lead a non-believer to faith. Even though he employs the *reductio* inductively, tracing our experiences back to God, he does not start from nothing. Philotheus Boehner, in his introduction to the text, suggests that Bonaventure’s intended audience was probably learned men and women of a Franciscan bent. Yet Bonaventure presumes a faithful reader for reasons deeper than theological literacy. We must be ready, he warns, to form our whole lives toward contemplation: “Do not think that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion,” because, “to have the mirror of the external world placed before [you] is of little significance unless the mirror of the mind is cleansed and polished.” While in the *Breviloquium* Bonaventure explains why the Christian must view creation as God’s expression, in the *Itinerarium* he demonstrates how this faithful receptivity ought to transform the Christian.

He begins by noting the foundational importance of receptivity. Chapter one opens with a reference to Psalm 83:6-7 (Vg): “Blessed are those whose help comes from you.” He then reiterates the necessity of grace: “No matter how well-ordered the steps of our interior life may be, nothing will happen if the divine aid does not accompany us.”


*Itin.*, Prol.4.

*Itin.*, 1.1.
Divine aid will come to those who pray “humbly and devoutly.” We do not ascend to God through sheer force of will. We cannot force ourselves to see God in vestiges. Rather, to find God in vestiges is “to be led in the way of God” [*hoc est deduci in via Dei*]. We remain open and God leads the way. Human beings, after all, are “blind and bent over” because of original sin and so are unable to read the book of creation or to experience contemplation without Christ. Those who wish to contemplate God in external things must make themselves receptive through prayer, a holy life, and meditation. Receptivity shapes the entire life of the one who desires contemplation.

The *Itinerarium* demonstrates the manner in which we must be receptive to creation in order to be impressed by it as God’s expression. In the *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure uses *reductio* deductively, beginning with faith in God and then deducing the truths of the Christian faith from this starting point. Here he uses *reductio* inductively, starting with creatures and then inferring truths about God from them. He also presumes that the reader starts with the kind of faith that he articulates in the *Breviloquium*. Without grace, a human being is incapable of seeing God through or in vestiges. Seeing God through and in vestiges deepens rather than establishes faith. The point of the *Itinerarium*, accordingly, is not faith but perfection. Through this ascent we progress from being Hebrews in Egypt to becoming the “true Hebrews” who pass into the promised land. After all, creation has always been God’s expression; we were simply blind to this fact before our redemption.

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90 *Itin.*, 1.1.
91 *Itin.*, 1.2.
92 *Itin.*, 1.7.
93 *Itin.*, 1.8.
Bonaventure begins the ascent by looking at the most basic form of God’s expression: vestiges. Bonaventure writes, “Let us place the first step of our ascent at the bottom, putting the whole world of sense-objects before us as a mirror.” Once again he appeals to hierarchical schema of creatures: vestiges, images, likenesses. While not all creatures are images or likenesses, all are vestiges. Bonaventure further divides the examination of vestiges in two: on the first rung we see God “as through a mirror” \([ut \ per \ speculum]\) and on the second “as in a mirror” \([ut \ in \ speculo]\). The first four steps of the ascent follow this \(per-in-per-in\) pattern. How \(in\) differs from \(per\) remains ambiguous, though \(in\) most likely refers to a higher form of contemplation given its placement on the second step of the ladder. Turner notes that the \(Itinerarium\) does not offer any explicit explanation of the difference between \(per\) and \(in\). Citing Bonaventure’s \(Commentary \ on \ the \ Sentences\), however, he suggests that the difference might be similar to a distinction Hugh makes between simulacra which “reveal God merely \((per \ vestigia, \ per \ imaginem)\) and those which not only reveal God but make God present in some way in what they reveal \((in \ vestigiis, \ in \ imagine)\).” In this sense, “through” refers to the way vestiges point to God, while “in” refers to the actual connection between vestiges and God.

The first step on the ladder, seeing God through vestiges, calls attention to the revelatory power of sense experience. He presents two forms of speculation on this step. First, Bonaventure explains that the “power, wisdom and benevolence of the Creator shines forth in created things,” which the “bodily senses” reveal to the intellect in a threefold way: “When it investigates rationally, or believes faithfully, or contemplates

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95 \(Itin.,\) 1.9.
96 \(Itin.,\) 1.5.
97 Turner, \(The \ Darkness \ of \ God,\) 109.
intellectually.” Second, Bonaventure says that we can also see God through vestiges by attending to the “seven-fold properties of creatures.” Like the threefold way, the seven properties reveal the power, wisdom and goodness of God. These two ways are complementary but also overlapping.

Bonaventure can give two different forms of speculation because he believes that God’s expression in vestiges surpasses all descriptive categories. Seeing God “through” vestiges is not shallow, superficial, or merely symbolic. On the contrary, it requires attention to every aspect of God’s vestiges. The depth to which Bonaventure categorizes vestiges—even to the point of offering two different, overlapping forms of speculation—exhibits this seriousness. He offers these categories as investigative tools, but they are still only tools. To be receptive we must let vestiges guide our ascent. The impetus behind our investigations always remains a fundamental receptivity to God’s expression. In fact, Bonaventure makes this point explicitly in the prologue to the text, asking the reader to “give more attention to the intent of the writer than to the work itself…more to the stimulation of affect than to the instruction of the intellect.”

Bonaventure does not eschew a coherent method, nor does he play fast and loose with the content of God’s expression. Rather, he admits that the work of theology is always less than the experience of God’s revelation. Balthasar observes that for Bonaventure theology was “an imposing upon that which is not to be imposed upon.” The Itinerarium is a guide—a literal itinerary—to aid in our ascent, not a complete

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98 *Itin.*, 1.10.
99 *Itin.*, 1.14. The sevenfold properties are the origin, greatness, multitude, beauty, fullness, activity, and order of things.
100 Boehner, “Introduction,” 12. In this seriousness, Boehner explains, Bonaventure follows the example of Francis.
101 *Itin.*, Prol.5.
account of the ascent. We cannot limit our receptivity to creation to a single set of categories. Even after detailing the threefold way bodily senses inform the intellect and the way the sevenfold properties of creatures reveal God’s power, wisdom, and goodness, Bonaventure admits:

Therefore, any person who is not illumined by such great splendors in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outcries is deaf. Anyone who is not led from such effects to give praise to God is mute. Anyone who does not turn to the First Principle as a result of such signs is a fool. Therefore open your eyes, alert your spiritual ears, unlock your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creation you may see, hear, praise, love and adore, magnify and honor your God lest the entire world rise up against you.¹⁰³

In the end, these tools provide no guarantees. We might investigate the origin, the beauty or the order of vestiges, and still fail to be illuminated. This possibility is why Bonaventure stresses the importance of the affect over the intellect. We cannot force our way up the ladder; we can only remain receptive to God’s expression. We categorize creatures and use various methods of speculation to examine them because these activities help us to remain receptive, but we cannot place limits on our receptivity. Behind Bonaventure’s description of the way bodily senses inform the intellect and the sevenfold properties of creatures lies this more basic instruction: “Open your eyes, alert your spiritual ears, unlock your lips, and apply your heart.” If we do not respond to creation with awe, wonder, or reverence—if creation produces no stirring of the affect, if it does not strike us the way that a masterpiece does—then we are not truly receptive to it and so we cannot comprehend it.

The second step of the ascent, seeing God “in” vestiges, reveals the formational quality of unlimited receptivity to creation. Bonaventure clarifies that God is “in”

¹⁰³ Itin., 1.15.
vestiges “in as far as God is present in them by essence, power, and presence.” While “through” dealt with the vestiges themselves, “in” details the affect of creation on the human being. Seeing God “through” vestiges refers to seeing God through the basic physical existence of a thing. Seeing God “in” vestiges refers to the innate expressiveness that all things possess. All knowable things express themselves to human beings, the “microcosm” [minor mundus, “a little world”], in the same way that the Word expresses God to the world: through impression. Our awareness of a thing is nothing less than God’s impressio: “The species of which we become aware is a likeness generated in the medium and then impressed [impressa] on the organ itself; and through that impression [impressionem] it leads to its source as to the object to be known.” Our delight in sensible things points back to true delight and our judgment relies on an unchanging, objective truth. The apprehension of sensible things and the fact that these things generate likenesses is formational because it shows that creation qua creation expresses God by impressing itself onto our senses. Consequently, we cannot intentionally ignore any part of creation without also ignoring God.

The Itinerarium presents receptivity to creation as formational for Christian life. Receptivity to the beauty of plants and animals is how we begin our ascent to God. Bonaventure concludes his discussion of vestiges by exclaiming: “They are without excuse who do not wish to pay attention to these things, or to know, bless, and love God in all things, since such people do not wish to be lifted from darkness to the marvelous

104 Itin., 2.1.
105 Itin., 2.2-7.
106 Itin., 2.7.
107 Itin., 2.8-9.
light of God.” We cannot separate receptivity to God from receptivity to creation. We cannot ignore one without ignoring the other. Receptivity to God’s expression (whether it occurs outside, inside, or above) characterizes Christian life.

The depth of this receptivity requires that we make use of every tool at our disposal. For Bonaventure, receptivity to God demands attention to every last mote of creation. The ant expresses God by its ant-ness. Rocks, tress, and birds all express God too. Through faith we recognize creation as God’s expression. Our faith then forms us to be receptive to every facet of it. Bonaventure’s use of diverse, overlapping sets of categories to describe vestiges and his appeal to the prevailing cosmology of his age flows out of this formational receptivity. He wants to be as receptive as possible. We allow creation to form us, to direct our lives, to compel us to act in a specific way toward it. Consequently, we cannot settle for just one perspective. For the modern Christian, following Bonaventure’s lead, receptivity leads us to apply the insights of modern biology and cosmology. What do these offer if not descriptions of God’s expression? A formational receptivity to creation leads human beings back to God. The means by which we are led, however, are not set.

iii. Francis: Receptivity to Creation and Beneficence to Animals

Bonaventure’s portrait of Saint Francis in Legenda maior exemplifies formational receptivity to creation. The Breviloquium teaches us to see the natural world as God’s expression. The Itinerarium guides us to let this receptivity form our lives. In Legenda maior (in English often titled “The Life of Saint Francis”), Bonaventure’s biography of

Saint Francis, Francis embodies this formational receptivity to creation by showing reverence and beneficence to animals.

Bonaventure’s depiction of Francis has often been debated, especially with regard to the *Legenda*. The *Legenda* was commissioned in 1260 to be the official biography of Francis, but it was also intended to replace the earlier biographies of Thomas Celano and Julian Speyer. Bonaventure drew heavily from these works such that what he produced was, according to Ewert Cousins, “primarily a compilation of Celano and Julian Speyer, largely verbatim.”

Although some have criticized Bonaventure for diluting or even betraying the spirit of Francis in the *Legenda*, many recognize his attempt to maintain Francis’ radical spirit amidst the political and practical difficulties of running a religious order. Cousins notes that the highly derivative *Legenda* still contains original insights, in particular Bonaventure’s “organization” and “interpretation of it within the context of his highly developed spiritual theology.” Balthasar refers to Francis as Bonaventure’s “own sun and his mission.” Boehner characterizes the relationship this way: “What Saint Francis lived, the Seraphic Doctor transforms into thoughts and ideas, analyzing them, clarifying them, and formulating them into a system and method.”

Bonaventure is not Francis redux. The differences between the two are many. We must recognize that Bonaventure looks to Francis as the perfect embodiment of his theology. I contend that Francis’ reverence and beneficence toward animals in *Legenda* is a performance of the

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formational receptivity to creation that Bonaventure articulates in the *Breviloquium* and the *Itinerarium*.

After all, Bonaventure models the ascent of the *Itinerarium* on Francis’s own ascent. In commenting on the *Legenda*, E. Randolph Daniel points out that the *Itinerarium* identifies the stigmata as the key to Bonaventure’s interpretation of Francis.113 In the prologue he identifies the seraph and stigmata as the defining moment of Francis’ exemplary life: “As I reflected on this, I saw immediately that this vision pointed not only to the uplifting of our father himself in contemplation but also to the road by which one might arrive at this experience.”114 The six-wings of the seraph give the ascent its six-stage structure. Bonaventure again appeals to Francis explicitly in the final chapter: “He has been set forth as the example of perfect contemplation…So it is that God invites all truly spiritual persons through Francis to this sort of passing over, more by example than by words.”115 Francis was not a learned man, at least not compared to Bonaventure. Still, despite the theological sophistication behind the structure, style and method of the *Itinerarium*, its spirit and goals unquestionably channel Francis. Daniel urges the reader to keep this key in mind when reading the *Legenda maior*. Recall Bonaventure’s caveat in the *Iterinarium* that the reader focus more on affect and intention than on his “uncultivated language” [*sermo incultus*].116

In *Legenda*, Bonaventure depicts Francis as one who has already completed the ascent of the *Itinerarium*. He uses the same ladder imagery to describe the stages of Francis’ ascent: “In beautiful things he saw Beauty itself and through his vestiges

113 Daniel, “St Bonaventure a Faithful Disciple of Saint Francis,” 184.
114 *Itin.*, Prol. 2.
115 *Itin.*, 7.3.
116 *Itin.*, Prol. 5.
imprinted on creation he followed his Beloved everywhere, making from all things a
ladder."117 This connection illuminates what it means to live as one who sees God in and
through vestiges. Even though Francis ascends to God, he never leaves creation behind.
Bonaventure’s ladder refers to Jacob’s ladder, (Gen 28:12): “Since we must ascend
before we can descend on Jacob’s ladder,”118 and “Like the heavenly spirits on Jacob’s
ladder he either ascended to God or descended to his neighbor.”119 We ascend and
descend, and we bring the fruits of the ascent back with us in the descent.120 Turner
worries that the literal conception of a ladder might miss this nuance. He suggests
thinking of it as a “rope ladder” that one “pulls up with herself as she climbs.”121 When
we ascend, we never truly leave creation behind: “At every stage she has not only passed
through the preceding steps but has brought them along with her, for every higher step
contains within it all that is contained in the lower.”122 We ought to consider the picture
of Francis in Legenda, particularly his interactions with animals, as the actions of a
Christian who has completed the journey of the mind into God and whose receptivity
formed his entire life.

Francis’s interactions with animals are exemplary of formational receptivity.

Francis not only recognizes that all of creation is an expression of God, he also
understands its ability to lead us back to God. He has, in other words, relearned how to
read the book of creation. As Turner’s “rope ladder” image makes clear, Francis’s
receptivity continues to shape his actions towards animals even after he has progressed

117 Bonaventure, The Life of Saint Francis, in Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God, the Tree
of Life, the Life of St. Francis, trans. Cousins, Ewert, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York:
Paulist Press, 1978), 9.1. See also: 1.3; 6; 2.8; 13.10.
118 Itin., 1.9.
119 Life, 13.1.
120 Hugh says much the same thing in De tribus diebus.
121 Turner, The Darkness of God, 113.
122 Ibid.
beyond the first two steps. Bonaventure notes that Francis taught his companions to “praise God in all creatures and from all creatures.” In fact, Bonaventure regards Francis’ receptivity as one of the most marvelous indicators of his piety: “When he considered the primordial source of all things he was filled with even more abundant piety, calling creatures, no matter how small, by the name of brother or sister, because he knew they had the same source as himself.” His receptivity leads him to recognize the full significance of creatures—they are expressions of God. Francis, moreover, is so blindingly aware of this fact that he cannot help but accord all things their proper reverence. Francis praises birds for their song and he even takes delight in a cricket’s chirping, which he recognizes as praise for God, “For he had learned to marvel at the Creator’s magnificence even in insignificant creatures.”

Francis’s receptivity leads him to show beneficence to animals. Bonaventure points out that Francis “often paid to ransom lambs” being led to slaughter. Once, when offered a hare as a potential meal, Francis “fondled it with warm affection and seemed to pity it like a mother” but “warning it gently not to let itself be caught again, he let it go free.” This capture-release-command pattern is repeated several times. In each case, the animal will only accept freedom after Francis gives it a firm command to leave. He teaches a sheep to praise God. The sheep then begins attending mass and even genuflects when the celebrant consecrates the host. Birds stop and start singing at his command. These stories illustrate how recognizing that animals share the same

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123 Life, 4.3.  
124 Life, 8.6.  
125 Life, 8.9-10.  
126 Life, 8.6.  
127 Life, 8.8.  
128 Life, 8.8.  
129 Life, 8.9.
“primordial source” forms Francis’s actions. His reverence and beneficence to animals demonstrate the proper embodiment of receptivity.

Indeed the fantastic elements of these stories should not dissuade us from imitating Francis. Bonaventure attributes this ability to Francis’s piety, “which had such remarkable sweetness and power that it subdued ferocious beasts, tamed the wild, trained the tame and bent to his obedience the brute beasts that had rebelled against fallen mankind.”

Hagiographical literature frequently depicts saints commanding animals. An animal’s obedience is a marker of the saint’s holiness. However, this motif in no way lessens the exemplary value of the saint. Joseph Ratzinger, in *The Theology of History According to Saint Bonaventure*, explains that Francis occupies a dual role for Bonaventure. He is the imitable, historical founder of the Franciscans as well as the inimitable, eschatological revelation of life in the final age. Francis’s actions manifest the ideal realization of the gospel, even if many of them exceed our abilities. His reverence and beneficence represent the ideal human-animal relationship, but not necessarily one that we will necessarily be able to achieve.

Francis has normative value as an eschatological exemplar. At the beginning of *Legenda*, Bonaventure connects Francis with the angel from Revelation: “In these last days the grace of God our Savior has appeared in his servant Francis to all who are truly humble and lovers of holy poverty.” Francis’ eschatological life does not excuse the reader from imitating him. In fact it extends his significance beyond his own historical circumstances. In the same prologue Bonaventure explains that Francis is “an example for those who would be perfect followers of Christ” and that his life is “worthy of

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130 *Life*, 8.11.
imitation.” When others chastised him for his excessive poverty, Francis would respond that “he was given as an example for others.” Bonaventure cites a knight, who had a vision of Francis embracing the Christ-child, explaining that “Francis’s example when considered by the world is capable of arousing the hearts of those who are sluggish in the faith of Christ.” For Bonaventure the fantastic elements of Francis’s interactions with animals only add to his exemplary significance. The fact that animals miraculously obey and revere Francis proves the rightness of his actions. In showing reverence and beneficence Francis expresses his receptivity. Moreover, as a revelation of life in the final age, Bonaventure thinks we ought to regard Francis’s actions as normative for the way Christians should treat animals. His reverence and beneficence, after all, are not abstract. We ought to take joy in the songs of birds and crickets. We ought to pity animals who are trapped and in pain. We ought to recognize that they share with us the same “primordial source.”

iv. Conclusion

Bonaventure’s theology forms Christians to be receptive to God’s expression in the natural world. In the *Breviloquium* he explains that if we affirm God as the creator, then we must also view the natural world with eyes of faith. Recognizing creation as God’s expression, we trace all things back to God. The *Itinerarium* demonstrates how this receptivity forms the very structure of Christian life. In short, receptivity to creation has no limits. We must be receptive to the fact that every last mote of creation is God’s

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133 *Life*, Prol.2-3.
134 *Life*, 9.4.
135 *Life*, 10.7.
136 *Life*, 5.12; 8.7-10.
expression. We must engage creation systematically and rigorously. At the same time, our engagement must be open to the affective power of God’s expression. Reacting with wonder and awe to God’s marvelous expressions is part of receptivity because only in being drawn out of ourselves can we recognize God’s expression. Bonaventure forms us to let the content of revelation (God in and through vestiges) guide our method (tracing all things, in their particularities, back to God). In the *Itinerarium* and *Legenda*, this unlimited receptivity shapes our interactions with animals. We see the fruits of Francis’s formational receptivity in his reverence and beneficence to animals. Bonaventure’s picture of Francis gives us as a model to follow. Francis’s life and actions exemplify how we should treat animals when basing our actions on the way animals express God.

III. Circumstances of Modern Christian Receptivity: Factory Farming

Bonaventure’s theology forms us to be receptive to animals, but we must still bring this receptivity to fruition in our actions. In *Tragedy Under Grace*, Balthasar describes this kind of formation in terms of knighthood. Spiritual knights shape their lives into embodiments of the Christ-form “in order to give the world the form of Christ on the basis of this lived form.”137 While all Christians share the same ultimate exemplar, each performance must be tailored to one’s circumstances. In chapter one I discussed this particularity in terms of mission, and we can apply that same term here. Our receptivity to creation takes the form of a mission. Bonaventure helps us to articulate what it means to embody the Christ-form in relation to animals. If we are receptive to creation, then we let it shape the form of our lives: we respond to it with feelings of wonder and awe, we investigate its every aspect with our most stringent methodological processes, and we act

with kindness toward creatures who are, after all, our brothers and sisters. Receptivity is nothing if it is not practiced.

To offer the world the Christ-form we must perform the Christ-form for the world, and each performance must be tuned to a specific key. Balthasar explains that the “soul” of knighthood never changes, but its “form” changes “depending on whether Christians and the world are willing or unwilling to receive the imprint of its spirit.”

So we must first understand the world in order to offer the Christ-form to it. The “soul” of our actions remains the same formational receptivity we see in Bonaventure and Francis, but the “form,” the specific shape of our lives, must speak to our particular circumstances. Bonaventure teaches us how the beauty of creation forms our lives. Having been formed by beauty we can see how factory farming rejects the formational receptivity that defines our understanding of creation. Our subsequent actions will emphasize the Christ-form in the ways that factory farms fail.

**a. Factory Farms: History and Practices**

The term “factory farm” refers to industrial food animal production. More technical names are “concentrated (or confined) animal feeding operations” (CAFOs), “animal feeding operations” (AFOs), and “industrial farm animal production” (IFAPs).

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138 Ibid.
140 The EPA defines AFOs as facilities where “(1) Animals have been, are, or will be stabled or confined and fed or maintained for a total of 45 days or more in a 12-month period; and (2) crops, vegetation, forage growth, or postharvest residues are not sustained in the normal growing season over any portion of the lot or facility.” Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, *Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America* (United States: Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, 2008), 6. Under the EPA’s guideline, CAFOs have more animals than AFOs, but the term “CAFO” is often generally to refer to any facility that utilized intensive animal production practices. Here I will use the less antiseptic and more affectively accurate term “factory farm.”
The “factory farm” is a strange chimera, occupying the role that farms have filled since the beginning of human civilization: raising food for the community. However, it eschews traditional farming and husbandry methods in favor of the techniques of the industrial factory. The “factory farm” embodies both the foundation of human society and the zeitgeist of industrialization.

In order to understand the factory farm, then, we must understand a little about the factory. The historian Deborah Fitzgerald lists five components of a successful industrial factory: 1) large-scale production; 2) specialized machines; 3) standardization of processes and products; 4) a shift in emphasis from artisanal to managerial experience; and, 5) “efficiency” as the production mandate. Factory farms apply these industrial components to the raising of food animals. The shift to this industrial logic occurred in the early twentieth century. The industrialization of agriculture led to enormous increases in grain and cereal yields. Prior to this point in time, farmers had to grow the food that their animals consumed. As a result of industrialization farmers could buy cheap corn as feed and devote their land and time exclusively to animal production. New technologies and the advent of antibiotics then made large-scale confinement possible. Chicken and egg producers were the first to embrace the industrial model, followed by pig, veal, cattle and most other livestock. The Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production in America notes, “The current trend in animal agriculture is to grow more in less space, use cost-efficient feed, and replace labor with

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142 Ibid., 3.
143 Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, *Putting Meat on the Table*, 3.
technology to the extent possible.”

Today factory farms overwhelmingly dominate food animal agriculture. Many, however, decry its practices as a source of animal suffering.

Concerns revolve around the ways factory farms impose industrial ideals on animals. For example, factory farms have dramatically decreased the time it takes to raise animals. In 1950, it took 84 days to raise a chicken; today it takes 45. This improvement in large scale, standardized production is not without consequences. Broiler chickens have been bred to grow so fast so quickly that they often suffer crippling leg deformities. Factory farm pigs suffer from a similar ailment. Cattle are finished on corn because corn is cheap and because corn-fed cattle reach slaughter weight more quickly. Since cattle naturally forage, however, this diet causes liver abscesses, so cattle must receive antibiotics to stave off the inevitable infection just to stay alive long enough to reach slaughter weight. Veal calves are kept restrained and anemic in order to offer a

145 Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, Putting Meat on the Table, 5.
148 Rollin, Farm Animal Welfare, 133.
uniform product desirable to consumers, and bulls are castrated in order to produce better
tasting meat.\textsuperscript{150}

Other problems arise from the extreme confinement in which many animals spend
their lives. Broiler chickens have about 8½ x 11 inches of space each, while egg laying
hens (who have a wingspan of thirty inches) are kept five to a 17½ x 19½ inch battery
cage.\textsuperscript{151} Sows, ranging in weight from 500-600 pounds, spend most of their time in
gestation crates 2½ feet wide.\textsuperscript{152} Bernard Rollin explains that pigs do not respond well to
this confinement: “Unable to perform any of her natural behaviors, the sow goes mad and
exhibits compulsive, neurotic, ‘stereotypical’ behaviors such as bar biting and
purposeless chewing.”\textsuperscript{153} The farmer as manager—as opposed to the farmer as artisan—
does not have the time or the ability to address behavioral problems. The large scale of
these facilities prohibits giving too much attention to an individual animal. The obvious
solution—providing animals with more space—contradicts the industrial ideals of
efficiency. Factory farms instead resort to physically altering animals. Broiler and egg-
laying chickens are “debeaked” (the beak is clipped with a hot blade) to prevent pecking
and cannibalism. Pigs have their tails docked to discourage biting. These practices are
performed without pain relief “even though it is widely accepted that such alteration
causes pain.”\textsuperscript{154} Pain relief costs time and money.

\textsuperscript{150} Wennberg, \textit{God, Humans, and Animals}, 238; Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal
Production, \textit{Putting Meat on the Table}, 35.
\textsuperscript{151} Wennberg, \textit{God, Humans, and Animals}, 233.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{154} Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, \textit{Putting Meat on the Table}, 33.
b. Factory Farms: Lacking in All Receptivity

Being formed by Bonaventure to be receptive to creation allows us to recognize that the problems of factory farms result from their lack of receptivity. The presence of animal suffering is the evidence of this lack. It is, admittedly, difficult to prove the presence of suffering in non-human animals, but Marian Stamp Dawkins argues that though we may not be able to prove that animals suffer or that their suffering is the same as ours, we can show the likelihood of suffering. Dawkins suggests that we ask two questions: “Are the animals healthy?” and “Do the animals have what they want?” Answering these questions puts the focus on the animals. Dawkins warns, for instance, against equating our conceptions of “naturalness” with welfare. It is “natural” for most animals to be chased by a predator, but that does not make it healthy or desirable for the prey. What animals find positively or negatively reinforcing can be quite different from what we would expect. Dawkins cites a study that found that though the health of broiler chickens suffers in extremely crowded confinement because of the dirty air and wet litter, the crowding itself did not seem to bother them.

Industrial logic tends to override concerns over the animals’ wants, needs, and overall well-being. Robert Wennberg points out that practices like debeaking and tail-docking address behavioral problems that do not occur outside of intense confinement. These solutions do nothing to address the abnormal behaviors but only serve to lessen the physical impact of those behaviors. Erik Marcus points out: “It’s far cheaper to dock

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156 Ibid.
157 Ibid., 943.
pigs’ tails than it is to solve the tail-biting by giving the animals adequate space. That animals continue to suffer does not matter so long as they continue to produce.

Most suffering is an indirect effect of factory farming. Rollin blames the industrial ideals of efficiency and productivity. Farmers are not sadistic; the suffering of confinement, Rollin says, is simply “the unanticipated by-product of changes in the nature of agriculture.” Wendell Berry argues that the agricultural ideal and the industrial ideal are incommensurate. The natural world is a “webwork of dependencies and influences probably more intricate than we will ever understand” and so cannot fit within the “reductionist science and determinist economics” that guide industrial factories. Both Rollin and Berry conclude that factory farms ignore reality. To farm well, according to Berry, is to husband: to balance the needs and desires of humans with the needs and desires of animals. This balancing requires the kind of intimate, artisanal touch that does not lend itself to the standardization and efficiency of the factory. Rather than enter into this give-and-take relationship, factory farms choose to treat animals like interchangeable cogs in a machine. The resultant suffering is never desired but neither does its presence call industrial logic into question.

Factory farm ideology rejects receptivity to animals. Andrew Kimbrell suggests that factory farms reflect our commitment to scientific objectivity, mechanistic efficiency, and economic competition in service to an almost salvific vision of “progress.” Kimbrell explains that suffering follows inevitably from “the impassive

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application of the ‘laws’ of science, efficiency, and the market to living beings.”\textsuperscript{163} We cannot recognize—or admit—animal suffering if we want to abide by these cold laws of progress. Drew Leder identifies the “big MAC” (mechanism, anthropocentrism, capitalism) as the paradigm guiding factory farms.\textsuperscript{164} Each of these ideologies places the factory farm above consideration of the actual animal. Mechanism allows us to think of animals as unfeeling machines. Factory farms fix problems the way one fixes a machine: removing the broken components (tails, beaks) or adding others (antibiotics) but never questioning the existence of the machine. Anthropocentrism allows us to hold an instrumental view of animals. Capitalism, specifically Marx’s notion of the alienation of labor, allows us to subordinate animal health and wants in service to the final product. Leder concludes that “What these logics all have in common is that they do not allow the animal to be an animal…Instead, the animal is reduced to something other than him or herself.”\textsuperscript{165} The specific practices are the immediate cause of animal suffering, but the root problem of factory farms is their industrial vision of animals.

In principle and in practice factory farms reject receptivity to animals. The suffering of their animals bears witness to this lack of receptivity. Bonaventure’s theology, however, does not give the Christian a unique awareness of this suffering. We can recognize the absence of receptivity from a secular perspective. Marian Dawkins, for instance, describes the lack of receptivity in terms of ethology and biology, but her perspective does not make our theological position superfluous. What Bonaventure provides is a lens through which to see the transcendent significance of animal suffering.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 83–84.
It enables us to comprehend why we ought to address it. As bearers of the Christ-form we recognize that the systematic suffering of animals in factory farms is an incarnation of idolatry. The factory farm repeats Lucifer’s sin; it does not see beyond itself. Animals are nothing more than what the factory farms wants them to be. As a practice, therefore, factory farms occlude God’s expression. In order to offer the Christ-form to the modern world, then, Christians must form their lives to respond to this institutional rejection of receptivity to animals. Bonaventure’s theology enables us to recognize this rejection. Like Balthasar’s spiritual knights, our receptivity to the Christ-form precedes our expression of the form, but that expression speaks to the needs of our day.

IV. Receptivity to Creation in Action

Receptivity to creation allows us to see how factory farms fail, but it also enables us to recognize actions that embody receptivity. We can adopt any number of actions related to animals so long as they flow from a humble receptivity to creation. In putting our formation into action, therefore, theo-dramatic ethics can appeal to a wide variety of preexistent practices even if they are not explicitly Christian. Here I will discuss how modern animal studies, humane farming practices, and community organization provide theo-dramatic ethics with actions that embody receptivity to creation.

a. Modern Animal Studies

If our receptivity is grounded on the belief that animals express God, then we should strive to understand their expression as accurately and as fully as possible. In short, these studies help us to understand animals. More specifically, they help us to
identify when and how animals suffer. They help us to put our focus on animals. Gary Steiner states that anthropocentrism defines most of western thought. Cruelty to animals is often justified on the basis of a theological or philosophical distinction between humans and animals. The presumption of human superiority gives human beings license to use animals in whatever way we deem fit. For the most part, though, philosophers and theologians have simply had little interest in exploring the moral status of animals. Even those sympathetic to animals, Steiner explains, tend to talk about them in terms of the similarity to or difference from human beings. Arguments based on animal capacities or on animals’ kinship with human beings implicitly enshrine humans as the source of a non-human animal’s moral value. The problem with focusing too much on the distinction between humans and animals—whether it is based on the possession of reason, the image of God, or language—is that we ignore animals’ actual abilities and activities.

In Beast and Man, Mary Midgley rejects making sharp distinctions between humans and animals in favor of a more receptive approach. If we want to understand human nature, she charges, we must start by admitting that we are animals too. She notes that although we tend to think of our species as the lone “island of order in a sea of

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168 Clark explains that Augustine’s few discussions of animals have little to do with the animals themselves and everything to do with their relation (direct or illustrative) to human beings. Gillian Clark, “The Fathers and the Animals: The Rule of Reason?,” in Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics, ed. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 78–79.
169 Steiner, Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents, 2–5.
170 MacIntyre discusses this neglect in relation to some philosopher’s desire to draw a sharp line between humans and all other animals on the basis of the possession of language. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues (London: Duckworth, 2009), 12–13.
chaos,” modern ethology reveals that the “supposed contrast between man and 
animals…was formed by seeing animals not as they were, but as projections of our own 
fears and desires.”171 Real wolves, for instance, are not nearly so vicious as storybook 
wolves; they are loyal to their packs and attentive to their cubs. Moreover, is it fair to call 
a carnivore “vicious” for simply doing what carnivores must do to survive?172 Midgley 
says that ethology, the study of animal behavior, does for the “beast myth” what 
anthropology did for the myth of the noble savage.173 The ethologist observes, studies, 
and records an animal’s activities “like a surveyor mapping a valley,” in order to offer a 
rough sketch of “the general character of the species.”174 The ethologist draws 
conclusions from what animals do rather than from a priori assumptions about what they 
should be.175

Alasdair MacIntyre appeals to animal behavior studies for a similar reason in 
Dependent Rational Animals. He argues that traditional attempts to differentiate humans 
and other animals (usually based on language) fail to engage animals (including human 
beings) as they actually live. “Prelinguistic” animals, as MacIntyre calls them, exhibit the 
beliefs, thoughts, desires, and emotions that we associate with intelligence.176 Dolphins, 
for instance, exhibit curiosity, cooperation, goal-oriented actions, and sophisticated 
communication.177 MacIntyre stresses that our knowledge of prelinguistic creatures must 
draw from actual experiences with those creatures. Philosophy only provides “a way of 
characterizing the kinds of interactive interpretive experience without which we would be

171 Mary Midgley, Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature, Routledge Classics (New York: 
173 Ibid., 38.
174 Ibid., 55–56.
175 Ibid., 54.
176 MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals, 15.
177 Ibid., 21–28.
unable to ascribe thoughts and feelings to others, whether human infants or dogs or whatever."178 MacIntyre looks to animals in order to better understand humans as they are, not as philosophy thinks they should be.179 While both Midgley and MacIntyre ultimately want to understand human beings better, they also insist that the key to understanding any animal, humans included, is to let it speak for itself.

The ethologist Marc Bekoff, for example, regards receptivity to animals as his foundational methodological principle. He argues that we need a paradigm shift in the way we study animals; in addition to scientific data, animal studies should also take into account common sense, intuition, experience, anecdotes, anthropomorphism and spirituality.180 For Bekoff, these all come together under the umbrella of cognitive ethology. He calls his approach “minding animals,” which he describes as “caring for other animal beings, respecting them for who they are, appreciating their own worldviews, and wondering what and how they are feeling and why.”181 Interaction with animals, Bekoff maintains, is absolutely necessary if we want to understand them. Understanding behavior requires observation, categorization and imagination.182 He promotes anecdotes and individual experience as worthwhile sources of information, saying that “the plural of anecdote is data.”183 We should not discount the value of interacting with an animal. He notes that anyone who has seen an animal in pain knows

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178 Ibid., 17.
179 MacIntyre’s interest relates primarily to his desire to better understand human morality. By placing humans on a spectrum with these other animals, he shows that many of our own desires and virtues have prelinguistic foundations.
182 Ibid., 50–53.
183 Bekoff, “Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues,” 89.
that animals have emotions. The real question is not whether animals feel pain but why they feel pain. Likewise, he dismisses useless hand wringing over anthropomorphism: “Using anthropomorphic language does not force us to discount the animals’ point of view. Anthropomorphism allows other animals’ behavior and emotions to be accessible to us.” We must make peace with the fact that we are humans studying non-human animals. Everything we say, by virtue of the fact that we say it, is anthropomorphic. Bemoaning our unavoidable bias accomplishes nothing. Instead, we ought to be “biocentrically anthropomorphic,” keeping the focus on the animals without losing sight of the fact that we must put our observations in human terms.

Receptivity to animals as expressions of God demands that we be open to the insights and methods of modern science. Midgley and MacIntyre do so to help them understand the human animal, but there are some questions that science cannot answer. Even Dawkins admits that “Science cannot…tell us what we ought to do…But it can provide the scientific underpinning for the moral beliefs about [animals] that we do have.” We should not look to modern science as the answer to every question. Ethologists and biologists disagree with one another just as often as theologians, so we cannot accept every utterance as gospel. Still, modern animal studies provide us with another way to be receptive to animals. Their insights and methods give us another set of tools to add to the box, and receptivity to animals requires us to use every tool at our disposal.

184 Ibid., 76.
185 Bekoff, Minding Animals, 48.
186 Ibid.
b. Alternative Farming Methods

One way to offer the Christ-form to the modern world would be to raise animals in a way that embodies formational receptivity to creation. Joel Salatin’s Polyface Farm, in Swoope, Virginia offers a picture of what “receptive farming” might look like. On Polyface’s pastures, cows graze for a day or two. Salatin then rotates the cows to a different part of the pasture so they do not overgraze. He then rotates chickens (in a portable henhouse) into the area vacated by the cows. In the process of pecking for grubs and larvae the chickens break apart the cowpats, fertilizing on the pasture. Cows and chickens feed from the grass and in so doing help maintain the grass. Salatin developed this rotational method in an attempt to mimic a natural ecosystem: birds follow herbivores, dining on the insects that follow the herd and on the grubs that grow in the herd’s droppings.\footnote{188 Michael Pollan, \textit{The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals} (New York: Penguin, 2007), 211.} Michael Pollan, in his profile of Salatin and Polyface, describes this method as “an intensive rotational dance on the theme of symbiosis” in which “Salatin is the choreographer.”\footnote{189 Ibid., 126.} The success of his farm, Pollan explains, depends upon Salatin’s receptivity to the land and animals: “Grass farming done well depends almost entirely on a wealth of nuanced local knowledge.”\footnote{190 Ibid., 191.} Grass farming, that is, does not impose a single, unchangeable method onto the land. Rather, it takes its cues from the needs and eccentricities of this or that particular plot of land. This method does not attempt to fit animals into an industrial or any other logic; rather, Salatin lets the animals determine his logic.
Indeed, Salatin is upfront about his attempt to copy and respect the natural processes and behaviors of animals. He describes his ideal farming paradigm as one that “honors the pigness of the pig,” which it does by providing “a habitat that allows the pig to fully express its physiological distinctiveness.” Salatin exploits his animals, Pollan explains, but in a way fundamentally different than factory farms. Polyface is “designed around the natural predilections of the pig rather than around the requirements of a production system to which the pigs are then conformed.” Salatin imitates nature because he finds it to be the most effective and ultimately the most efficient (but “efficient” in a more holistic sense than industrial efficiency): “The chickens get to do, and eat, what they evolved to do and eat, and in the process the farmer and his cattle both profit.” For Salatin, this method also stands upon deep moral—even spiritual—convictions. We cannot, in his opinion, divorce how we farm from the reasons we farm. Nor can we avoid reaping the fruits of our treatment of animals: “A culture that views pigs as inanimate piles of protoplasmic structure…will view its citizens the same way…It is how we respect the least of these that creates an ethical, moral framework on which we respect the greatest of these.”

Salatin’s Polyface Farm gives us a rough idea of what a formationally receptive Christian farmer might look like. In The Laity and the Life of the Counsels, Balthasar explains that if the church wants to continue its mission to the world, then it needs to cultivate the imitation of Christ in all professions, not just in the lives of religious...

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192 Pollan, The Omnivore’s Dilemma, 219.
193 Ibid., 215.
professionals. While Salatin is not Catholic, and probably not a Bonaventuran (he describes himself as a “Christian libertarian environmentalist capitalist”), the religious motivation behind his receptivity to animals reveals just how much we need (Bonaventuran) Christian farmers. Animal scientists can help us to understand animals, and a theologically-literate Christian farmer can model the way to embody the Christ-form when we raise animals.

c. Individual and Community Actions

Most western Christians are not animal behaviorists or farmers. Besides pets, most of us hardly ever interact with animals. Animal scientists can show us how to be more receptive to animals as expressions and farmers can model how we might embody the Christ-form in raising animals, but it is not immediately clear how the non-specialist Christian can imitate these actions. I suggest that we do not need to privilege or imitate any single action. Theo-dramatic ethics allows Christians to weave this variety of lives together into a polychromatic web. It offers the kind of communal framework that Balthasar describes in *Laity*: “The indispensable background that makes it possible for gifted and responsible individuals to emerge.” This “background” is how Balthasar thought the Christian mission could transform the world. Here, it helps explain how the actions of Christian specialists converge with actions of other Christians.

There are, first of all, numerous ways in which the individual, non-specialist Christian can embody the Christ-form. Those who form the “indispensable background” Balthasar explains, “come from families in which they have been educated to take such a

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195 Ibid., 359.
responsible attitude by mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters and teachers.\footnote{Ibid.} This education can take a number of forms. Directly teaching our families or students about our call to receptivity is the most straightforward, but living out receptivity in our spiritual, contemplative lives is just as valuable. The Itinerarium promotes receptivity to God in and through creatures as an integral part of our ascent to God. The modern Christian can practice and express this receptivity through openness to the insights of modern science and humane farming practices. Performing this receptivity will help to build a background in which Christians of any profession may grow with an appreciation of God’s expression in other creatures. We embody the Christ-form as members of the body of Christ. Even if the individual, non-specialist Christian never directly interacts with animals like the scientist or the farmer, these actions may still contribute to this embodiment. For example, one could support the farms that are receptive to animals. The Pew Commission’s Putting Meat on the Table notes that consumers could wield a great deal of power over producers by only buying meat raised humanely.\footnote{Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, Putting Meat on the Table, 38.} Daniel Imhoff advises those concerned with animal welfare to “vote with your fork.”\footnote{Daniel Imhoff, “Vote with Your Fork: It’s Time for Citizens to Take Back the Food System,” in The CAFO Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Animal Factories, ed. Daniel Imhoff (Berkeley: Watershed Media, 2010), 366–73.} Farmers, after all, can only continue to farm if consumers buy what they produce. They exist as part of a community. By choosing to buy from a receptive (and humane) farmer, the individual Christian helps to create a community that embodies receptivity to animals.

Fortunately, resources already exist to help Christians create these communities. Food cooperatives have long striven to bring producers and consumers closer together. As the desire for small-scale, local food has become more widespread, food cooperatives...
have evolved. In community-supported agriculture (CSA), consumers support a local farm by buying shares in its crop. Members of a CSA then receive a share of the vegetables, fruit, eggs, and meat as they are produced. “Food hubs” follow cooperative principles (owned and controlled by users, for the benefit of users) but serve as distribution centers in order to connect local farmers with a wider consumer base (individuals, restaurants, buying clubs). Unlike the corporate, profit-driven factory farms, these practices are “public institutions for the common good.” CSAs and food hubs are two ways in which a Christian community could support a formationally receptive farm. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine a church serving as the locus of a CSA or a food hub. The individual non-specialist Christian, although not raising animals directly, participates in the communal embodiment of Christ that makes this humane farming possible and ensures that animals receive reverence and beneficence as expressions of God.

Some religious orders already serve as models for communities. In Green Sisters, Sarah McFarland Taylor explores the lives of various Roman Catholic women religious in the United States and Canada. These “green sisters” see a consonance between sustainable agriculture and faith in God. Taylor examines how every aspect of their lives, from liturgical practices to habits, diets, and architecture reflect their commitment to “greening” the world. The sisters, moreover, regard “greening” as an expression of their religious devotion. Taylor notes that they consider their greatest form of activism to

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201 Ibid., 5.
be “tangibly modeling for others an ecologically sustainable way of life,” which in Taylor’s view connects the sisters with the “traditional monastic charge to model the Kingdom of God.” Indeed, some practice vegetarianism as a devotion rather than as penance or fasting. Others only eat animals that they raise so as not to support practices that rely on suffering. According to the rule of the Green Mountain Monastery, sisters “do not eat the meat of animals, especially those who are raised in cruel and unnatural conditions or who are forced to produce in ways that violate the integrity of their being,” in order to avoid “complicity with companies and industries that seek profit over right relationship.” Whether or not individual sisters sometimes fall short in their devotions matters less than that they shape their diet towards a “right relationship” with creation. Michaela Farm, run by the Sisters of Saint Francis raises beefalo, for instance, as part of a larger effort to restore the prairie ecosystem.

These religious communities serve as models for Christian action. In *Laity*, Balthasar argues that married Christians, even though they do not follow the counsel to celibacy, can still learn from the lives of consecrated celibate Christians. The lay and/or non-specialist Christian, likewise, can imitate some, if not all, of the practices of the green sisters. In fact, the green sisters regard their role as exemplars as a part of their vocation.

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204 Ibid., 129.
205 Ibid., 161.
206 Quoted in Ibid., 165.
208 “Beefalo” are a hybrid of cattle and buffalo. Taylor, *Green Sisters*, 168.
209 Ibid., 167.
animals so that the rest of us can do so more easily. Green sisters have already done most of the creative legwork.

d. Converging in Theo-Dramatic Ethics

All of these practices converge in theo-dramatic ethics because they all embody formational receptivity to animals. They all let the content of God’s expression determine their form. Animal studies focus on animals (rather than on how animals and humans differ); Salatin lets animal behaviors determine how he farms; and CSAs support farmers and consumers who are receptive. We can, as a result, embrace their diversity. The Christian ethologist, the Christian farmer, and the Christian consumer all interact with animals in different ways but all converge in their performances of the Christ-form. The farmer better embodies the Christ-form because of the ethologist’s research and the consumer’s support. The consumer chooses a diet in light of the ethologist’s concerns, and is able to do so because of the work of the farmer. Coming together in community allows Christians in every state of life to embody receptivity to creation. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the finite, fallen world often hinder this embodiment.

Imagine a Christian formed to be receptive to animals. This Christian strives to embody the Christ-form for a world that predominantly practices cruel, idolatrous food production. This Christian studies the work of ethologists and ethicists and after much deliberation chooses a food hub or CSA most consonant with the Christ-form. This Christian either grows food humanely or purchases it from a local, humane, pasture-based farmer. We can imagine this embodiment without resorting to fantasy. Most of the green sisters practice this sort of lifestyle.
On the other hand, this ideal embodiment depends in large part upon a Christian’s circumstances. Perhaps the Christian formed to be receptive does not have access to a CSA or a food hub. Perhaps the Christian lacks the knowledge, physical ability, and cultivable land to grow or raise food. Perhaps this Christian lacks the financial means to buy the (more expensive) humanely raised food. Let us imagine any number of a host of impediments that would prevent a Christian from growing, purchasing, and consuming humanely raised food. Suppose in addition to these impediments, this particular Christian also has a responsibility to provide for others. The circumstances of many Christians make it functionally impossible for them to embody the Christ-form in the ideal way imagined above. Factory farms are so prevalent that some simply cannot extricate themselves without starving.

The transethical helps us to understand how embodiments that differ in both degree and type all still express Christ. Taking into account the transethical dimension affirms that Christians can and should follow the gospel regardless of their limitations. Every Christian, after all, should strive to embody the Christ-form. If we only consider the most obvious “Christian” actions to be the true embodiments of Christ, then we reject the polyphony that follows from basing moral formation on beauty. We reduce Christian life (something that should draw its form from the content of revelation) to a reaction against the formless world (and so limit our expression of the Christ-form to the boundaries of the world). If we measure our receptivity by whether or not we eat what factory farms produce, then we measure our embodiments of the Christ-form by a worldly measure. We do not embody Christ so much as we avoid not-Christ. Instead trying to embody the Christ-form, we embody non-cruelty. Indeed, if we refuse to see
Christ in any form of life except that which immediately and completely extricates itself from the factory farm system, then we forget the cross. Balthasar reminds us:

There is no more distinction made under the Cross between guilty and innocent, since the One who is most innocent of all pays the penalty for all guilt.\textsuperscript{210}

Rejecting anything that falls short of “guiltless” embodiment rejects the transformative power of the cross. Suppose, to offer an extreme example, a Christian’s limitations are so constricting that the only dietary choices available are starvation or eating the products of a factory farm. Some Christians, certainly, might be called to martyrdom in this situation, but we cannot impose martyrdom. Suppose these Christians embody the Christ-form through their reverence for natural beauty and their guilt at participating in the factory farm system (a gnawing, spiritual ulcer).\textsuperscript{211}

The transethical affirms that even this minimal embodiment of the Christ-form bears fruit. Even the smallest imaginable embodiment—reverence and guilt—can over time help to “form the indispensable background that makes it possible for gifted and responsible individuals to emerge.”\textsuperscript{212} This Christian makes it possible for other Christians to respond in a way that is closer to the ideal. Yet this Christian’s actions do more than seed the world for a future harvest. The transethical assures us that embodying the Christ-form has value beyond earthly measure. Both the more obviously ideal embodiment (alternative farmer and consumer) and the more minimal, constricted one (reverence and guilt) derive their form from Christ. Both are worthwhile because both share in Christ’s immeasurable achievement.

\textsuperscript{210} Balthasar, \textit{Tragedy Under Grace}, 126.

\textsuperscript{211} Balthasar describes the appropriate response to Christian’s using violence as ever-growing “ulcer,” Ibid., 214.

\textsuperscript{212} Balthasar, \textit{The Laity and the Life of the Counsels}, 263.
Privilege is not necessary for embodying the Christ-form. Actions that by any worldly measure look pointless may still “give the world the form of Christ on the basis of this lived form.”\textsuperscript{213} The transethical does not excuse unjust actions but rather acknowledges that we form all of our actions (no matter how constricting our circumstances) in light of the gospel. Taking into account the transethical encourages Christians to form the most Christ-like action possible in a given situation because even “insignificant” embodiments of the Christ-form have a transcendent orientation. We live in a finite world and so all of our actions will be limited in some way. The actions that express Christ, though, will all converge.

\textit{V. Conclusion}

This chapter demonstrates how theo-dramatic ethics can be both specific and unlimited. We can appeal to the tradition to learn what it means to embody the Christ-form in a particular sphere of activity. This embodiment, however, has implications for every aspect of our lives. In the \textit{Itinerarium}, seeing God in and through vestiges only constitutes the first two steps of our ascent. Receptivity to images and likenesses is not a different receptivity; that is why we can give so much attention to non-human animals. We do not separate our receptivity to animals from our receptivity to other human beings or to God. Our receptivity to transcendent beauty does not pull us out of the currents of time and history. The knights of faith show us that to embody the Christ-form is to be Christ for our world (whether it be the twelfth, thirteenth, or twenty-first century). We must shape our lives in such a way that we illuminate our world’s particular blindness.

\begin{footnote}\textsuperscript{213} Balthasar, \textit{Tragedy Under Grace}, 247–248.\end{footnote}
CONCLUSION

“*No doubt each in his own fashion, following his separate path, believes that he has once and for all solved the riddle of the world’s future. But the divergence between them is in reality neither complete nor final...Followed to their conclusion the two paths must certainly end by coming together: for in the nature of things everything that is faith must rise, and everything that rises must converge.*”

-Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Future of Man

This work set out to investigate the role of beauty in moral formation. My thesis is that recognizing beauty as the foundation of moral formation affirms the formational power of the Christian tradition as well as that of new experiences and practices because in both cases we are responding to beauty. Hans Urs von Balthasar has been our Virgil in this exploration. His retrieval of beauty and subsequent articulations of Christian life provided the initial guidance needed to articulate an account of moral formation that has beauty at its foundation. The “theo-dramatic ethics” I offer here is, accordingly, a Balthasarian vision of moral formation. Though I do not think that it differs substantially from Balthasar’s theology, it is purposely “Balthasarian” rather than “Balthasar’s.”

I began by outlining the moral theology implicit in Balthasar’s theology. His retrieval of beauty as a transcendental property of being necessarily implies that beauty is formational and moral. We respond to our encounters with beauty through our actions, and we respond in a specific way. At the same time, basing moral formation on beauty allows Christians to embrace an enormous variety of different forms of life. Balthasar’s concept of the “transethical” helps to explain how these formations all spring from transcendent beauty.
I then addressed some natural worries about basing moral formation on beauty. We might worry that beauty is too broad a concept upon which to build a morality. We might also worry that any method attempting to harness such an expansive category will resort to subsuming beauty. Considering the potential misuses of narrative helped us to see that a moral theology built upon beauty avoids these pitfalls. Indeed, Balthasar’s own articulation of lived theology in _Laity_ and _Tragedy_ makes it clear that his implicit morality is not a constraining system but consent to God. The polyphony and transethical significance that characterizes theo-dramatic ethics follows directly from its foundation on beauty.

Christian lives, like beautiful forms, do not occur in the abstract but in particular historical circumstances. We respond to beauty by embodying the Christ-form for the world, and not “the world” in the abstract sense but the world as we encounter it in our lives. We offer the Christ-form to particular people and particular communities who have their own histories, languages, and fears. At the same time, our formation must precede our reaction to a particular ethical problem. We need to be formed by Christ before we can recognize what is contrary to the Christ form. We need not, however, build new styles of life from scratch. The plural tradition provides us with “archetypes” that help us to see how the Christ-form applies to specific spheres of human life.

In the next two chapters I presented potential performances of theo-dramatic ethics. In chapter three I argued that Augustine’s theology shows us that Christian politics ought to be oriented toward a vision of eternal peace. Having been so formed, we can address the inherent violence of the nation-state through various forms of pacifism. These might differ markedly, and some may even resort to coercive actions. The organizing
center they all share, however, is not the prohibition of violence but the promotion of a peaceful community. In chapter four I argued that Bonaventure’s theology teaches us that embodying the Christ-form in relation to animals means adopting a formational receptivity to the natural world. Having been so formed, we can recognize the suffering of animals in factory farms as the result of a lack of receptivity. Performing the Christ-form, consequently, can include adopting knowledge and practices that reflect our receptivity even if these are not explicitly Christian. Moreover, the tranethical gives us the affirmation that even imperfect embodiments still have significance; they still participate in Christ’s transcendent achievement.

This theo-dramatic ethics contributes to moral theology in two ways. First, my theo-dramatic ethics contributes to Barrett’s desired “comprehensive treatment of Balthasar’s ethics.” As a “Balthasarian” ethic, it elucidates the moral implications of Balthasar’s theology. Moreover, it applies these implications to concrete moral problems. In so doing it serves as an extension of Balthasar’s work, or, to put it less dramatically, it follows the trajectory of Balthasar’s theology. This theology, moreover, is more flexible than Balthasar himself. For instance, I am much more hopeful toward pacifism than Balthasar. Like Goizueta, who thinks Balthasar’s theology agrees with liberation theology despite Balthasar’s misgivings, I think we can follow Balthasar’s theology to destinations that Balthasar did not foresee and perhaps even avoided.

The Balthasarian approach to moral formation that we have articulated here opens up numerous avenues for future research. We have only scratched the surface of practicing pacifism in the nation-state and of the treatment of non-human animals. Our

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interpretation of Augustine’s *visio pacis* forms Christian politics in more than the use (or avoidance) of violence. Likewise, I applied Bonaventure’s receptivity to the natural world specifically to the treatment of animals in factory farms, but we could easily have applied it to vegetarianism, climate change, environmental justice, as well as other “environmental” problems. We could apply theo-dramatic ethics to any sphere of human activity. Two areas which might especially benefit today are modern consumerism and health care. Both concern pervasive social structures and both include problems to which there is no obvious response. How, for instance, do we offer the Christ-form to an unjust economic system when the only way to obtain the necessities of life is to participate in that system? How do we decide what best embodies the Christ-form when faced with vital conflicts in pregnancy, in which one must choose between the life of the child and the life of mother and child? Theo-dramatic ethics provides flexibility, not to contravene the tradition but to embody the Christ-form in cases where the most Christ-like action is not forthcoming.

The second way that theo-dramatic ethics contributes to moral theology is in the possibility of convergence that it opens up. Theo-dramatic ethics identifies the center of gravity, or at least reminds us of where the center of gravity lies: Christ. The polyphony possible in theo-dramatic ethics allows us to embrace the whole scope of the Catholic moral theological tradition. We do not need to supplant anything. Everything counts. Every expression of the Christ-form has a place in our moral tradition, even the oft-derided manuals. New theories and lives converge with old theories and lives. We can embrace and utilize the insights of modern science, philosophy, even other religious
traditions so long as we understand that they converge in Christ. Theo-dramatic ethics teaches us to recognize convergence.

Theo-dramatic ethics is first a performance, not a system. Like a symphony, it must be performed. Performances converge, not in theo-dramatic ethical principles, but in Christ. Balthasar hoped retrieving beauty would re-center theology and Pinckaers hoped returning to the sources of Christian ethics would reintegrate moral theology with the rest of theology. What theo-dramatic ethics offers is one possibility of explaining this re-centering and reintegration. The convergence we see in the performances of theo-dramatic ethics is an affirmation that theology is ethics. Once we recognize that beauty is the foundation of moral formation, we must open ourselves up to the moral significance of all forms of beauty. Theo-dramatic ethics points to convergence because beauty is not only the foundation of moral formation; beauty is also its content and its end.
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